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DEFENSE: Military leader worries about impact of climate change on world trade

*Dina Fine Maron, E&E reporter*

It is not the job of the military to convince Congress about climate science, even though the threat of more extreme weather events is inextricably linked with security concerns, British and American national security experts said yesterday.

In a political environment where fault lines may be drawn along belief in climate change or the stance that government should regulate greenhouse gases, military personnel can still play a vital role in climate discussion -- it's just often beyond the Beltway, said Vice Adm. Dennis McGinn, a retired U.S. Navy officer who serves as vice chairman of the CNA Military Advisory Board.

His group has been producing reports on climate's role in national security discussions and traveling to visit communities across the country to speak on the topic during the past few years.

Speaking at a Pew Charitable Trusts event yesterday, McGinn said that the role of military leaders on Capitol Hill should only be to discuss how these issues relate to their mission and current and future capabilities. Its central job is not to discuss the science, he said.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom's climate and energy security envoy, Rear Adm. Neil Morisetti, said that defense personnel can also play a vital role on the international stage with climate discussions. When military personnel talk with their counterparts in different nations on these topics even when political leaders have stopped, that spurs international climate talks, he said.

Nothing is done in a vacuum, he said. When political debate over climate science gets rancorous in the United States, that impact is felt on the other side of the Atlantic, Morisetti said. "Those who believe that either the climate isn't changing or there isn't a human contribution will tend to congregate together whatever side of the pond they are on," he said.

There are certainly people in the United Kingdom and Europe who don't believe that climate change is happening or caused by human actions, and they will have an affinity with Americans with similar views, he said. The majority of people, however, believe in climate change, he said.

*Trade choke points, and 'bad actors'*

The key when having these discussions is to make the issue real for people and to frame it in a context which personalizes it, he said.

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For Morisetti, that issue is trade. The United Kingdom is heavily dependent on imports, he said, and mitigating climate change to safeguard key trade routes and ensure trade stability of food and fuel is a message that resonates, he said.

"My particular concern is to educate people who are dependent on international trade for the lifestyles we enjoy and ensuring that they recognize that that requires stability around the world." Around the world are key trade routes where the sea narrows or bodies of water connect, including the Panama Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar, he said. "If you look at the map, that's where the [climate] stresses are, and that's where we have to help the governments of those nations," he said.

Climate change will not cause wars in itself, said McGinn, but the added pressure of severe climate events that could wipe out crops or ocean acidification that could fuel the collapse of fisheries can cause fragile societies to fail, he said.

"That creates a vacuum of power into which will rush all manner of bad actors," he said.

Going beyond the Beltway to bring the message of how climate change is inextricably linked with energy security concerns and job creation works, said Phyllis Cuttino, director of Pew Environment Group's clean energy program. During the past two years, a collaborative group of retired three- and four-star military generals and people from the political and nonprofit sectors have traveled around the country on Pew-sponsored trips to talk about this issue with state politicians, journalists and communities, she said.

Later this week, McGinn, who is part of the group, will once again be on the road -- traveling to Arkansas and Virginia to spread that message.

"When real people hear presentations from admirals like this, it changes their perspectives," she said.

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