

Opinion: Climate isn't a distraction from the military's job of war fighting. It's front and center

April 25 2023, by Matt McDonald



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

It [was pitched](#) as the "most significant" shift in Australia's armed forces in decades. And among the headline announcements, climate change was

recognized as an issue of national security.

But the [strategic review](#) of Australia's military released yesterday doesn't go a lot further than that when it comes to the [climate crisis](#). The review devotes just over one of its 100 pages to what [climate change](#) means for defense.

And while overseas analysts and militaries seriously address the strategic effects of climate change and the role for defense, the Australian review focused more on climate change as a potential distraction from the military's core business of war fighting. As our armed forces are increasingly called to respond to natural disasters, the review reports, they are less ready to fight a war.

This focus is too narrow. It's also a long way from what the research is telling us, and a long way from what our allies are doing.

What's the link between climate change and national security?

At a fundamental level, security doesn't mean much if it doesn't extend to conditions of survival. The climate emergency has been described as a direct threat to both [human](#) and [ecological](#) security.

But climate change also hangs over the traditional security agenda, which is to defend against any attacks. Forward-thinking militaries around the world have begun to prepare for these effects.

Climate change could make armed conflict more likely by acting as a "[threat multiplier](#)".

Climate-driven droughts, desertification, changing rainfall patterns and

the loss of arable land could lead to the collapse of governments or a fleeing population.

Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and some analysts [have pointed](#) to the role of climate change in contributing to [armed conflict](#) in Sudan's Darfur region and Syria's civil war.

Unchecked climate change is likely to trigger more demand for armed forces to [respond to natural disasters](#), predicted to increase in intensity and frequency on a hotter planet.

Yesterday's strategic review focuses on this demand, and for good reason—it's already happening.

Increasingly, the army and [air force](#) are [being called on](#) to respond to Australia's tide of "unprecedented disasters" like the floods of the last three years, and the summer of fire in 2019–20. Navy ships [evacuated hundreds](#) from the beach at Mallacoota in Victoria, under eerie light.

And then there's the world. The demand for [army-backed humanitarian help](#) is rising. Our neighbors are among the most vulnerable [in the world](#) to the effects of natural disasters.

Beyond responses to refugees, conflict and natural disasters, there's the question of how militaries are equipped, trained and resourced.

Higher temperatures, rising seas and natural disasters could threaten defense infrastructure and bases. Australia's defense department is the [largest landholder in the country](#), much of it in exposed coastal areas.

Our military has a substantial "[carbon footprint](#)," given it relies heavily on machines which burn fossil fuels, from destroyers to tanks. Ensuring these have enough fuel in the future is a concern, especially if the

substantial [military contribution](#) to [greenhouse gas emissions](#) comes under more scrutiny.

In this sense it was good to see the review note the importance of the military accelerating a transition to clean energy. But the urgency of the climate crisis suggests our military should also be factoring climate change into procurement considerations and equipment management now. To date, there's little evidence Australia has done so.

What are other countries doing?

Key partners like America, the UK and many other countries are well ahead of us. In my ongoing research, I've analyzed climate responses and interviewed policymakers from other nations. This suggests we're lagging well behind.

The US military began analyzing what climate change would mean for it back [in the 1990s](#). Biden's government has given climate change greater priority in its National Security Council and firmly linked climate and security in what one interviewee told me was a "game changer."

The UK has an expert body within its defense ministry examining the security implications of climate change. In 2021, it produced a [strategic document](#) with emissions cut goals for its [armed forces](#), as well as investment to make the transition possible.

New Zealand has gone beyond reactive responses and embraced an active role for its military in responding to [natural disasters at home and in the region](#). One interviewee told me this was central to the military's "social license."

New Zealand's position has been strongly influenced by the concerns of its [Pacific neighbors](#). Wellington decision makers also decided defense

will not be exempt from government-mandated goals to get to net zero.

France has taken a [similar position](#) on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief focused on its overseas territories and the wider Francophone world. These operations are presented not as a distraction but as a core commitment.

Sweden and Germany used their time on the UN Security Council in recent years to [push for a resolution](#) on the organization's role in addressing the international security implications of climate change. And when Sweden [joins NATO](#), it's likely to push for more military preparation for climate change given recent [NATO commitments](#) on this front.

Can Australia catch up?

Yes. But the first step is to recognize where we are—and where the world is heading.

Australia's defense sector must seriously engage with what climate change will bring, not least given our region's acute vulnerabilities and the existential concerns of our Pacific neighbors.

Unfortunately, yesterday's review suggests our defense establishment does not wholly share these concerns.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Climate isn't a distraction from the military's job of war fighting. It's front and center (2023, April 25) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-opinion-climate-isnt-distraction-military.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.