



Military and Climate Change

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A few weeks ago, a Belgian old-ambassador for NATO, warned us to take climate change serious because humanity will not get a second chance. If humankind acts in the wrong way, the world as we know it will be no more. We should put all our efforts in getting it right, the first and only time. It almost sounds like a Clausewitzian introduction to Total War, but then against our current way of living and its consequences.

The call for global mobilization coming from a former NAC participant did trigger the question if there is a role for the military to play in climate change. The question landed in my mailbox where it collected dust until I watched, during a flight on the way back to the USA, the movie 'Living in the Future's Past' about climate change and what we should do about it. It was not the doomsday type of documentary because it offered a non-traditional, individualistic approach to solve the issue. One prominent speaker was US Gen Wesley Clark, SACEUR (July 1997 - May 2000), another high-level NATO figure and a military who gave voice to his concerns about climate change. Time to dust off the question.

Answering the question needs a structured approach if we do not want to fall for an emotions inspired reply. Let me be clear about my personal gut feeling: I believe that we, as military, have a role to play. However, I prefer not to write an emotional appeal for this cause unless I can support it by a logical argument. So, let us dissect the question and see where we end.

The first question that begs an answer is if we, as military, are impacted by climate change. This is an easy one. Of course we are! Think about new frontiers like the High North or the Antarctic that are opening. As the world is changing at lightning speed in geological terms, we are summoned to solve the crises following the ineptitude to cope with the consequences of the changes. Hunger, shortage of fresh water, natural disasters ... will not only strain our resources in the call to alleviate human suffering but also lead to more unrest and migrations urging military interventions. Three blocks fighting will not be the rule, not the exception.

However, there is another way in which we will be affected: we will have to operate in regions where there is lack of water, food and energy. We will need to transport everything, or be able to produce it locally without further depleting local resources. This will not only oblige us to enlarge our logistic chain but also underline, as a secondary effect, the rich-poor divide to the people we are to help. Why do we only help when

disaster strikes? Why are we not willing to share our riches with them before a catastrophe happens? Although well-intentioned, our (prolonged) presence could lead to more civil unrest.

Second question is about our impact on climate change . Again an easy answer. Again positive. We are an energy consuming organization and thus a big contributor to global warming and pollution. A live exercise is not only a burden on the budget, but also leaves a gigantic ecological footprint. We should be conscious about this and try to reduce our impact without sacrificing our effectiveness.

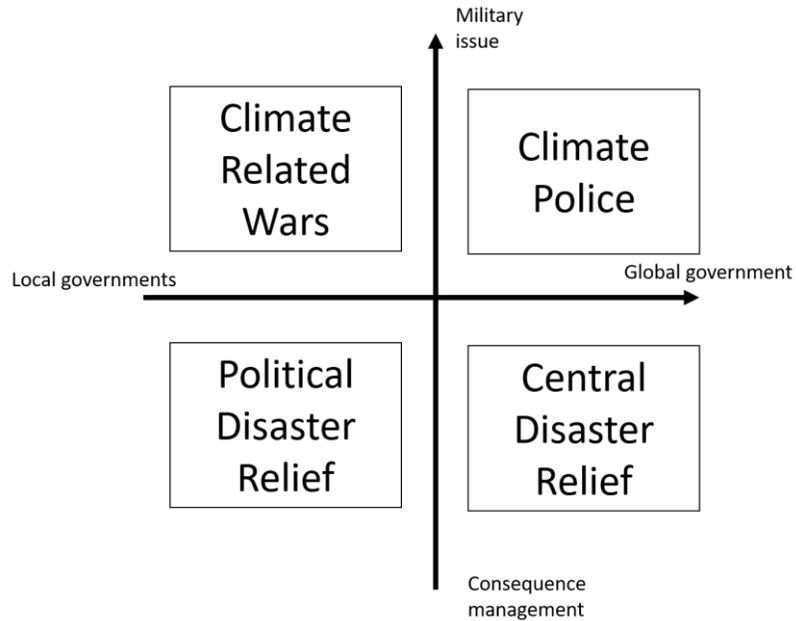
There is a secondary effect: money that flows towards the military cannot be used for combatting climate change. Every tank, ship or aircraft build is a missed opportunity to slow down the change or to alleviate its consequences. It is not an easy task to find the right balance.

Considering that, we are impacted by it and that we have an impact on it, are we involved? Yes, we are involved. There is no way denying it. Military operations are about using lethal force and destructive power to influence the will of the other side. That destruction must be just enough to create the desired change but not one bit more. There is no use in defending if winning means total destruction. You do not defend something by destroying it. In the end, we should make sure that what we have is worth fighting for.

Do we bare a responsibility then? Well, to that one I tend to answer no. As individuals, we have a responsibility, but as an organization, I do not think so. It is not up to us to take military actions to slow down climate change. We can point out the possible consequences and the related costs, but we cannot do more. It is up to our politicians to act. If we would be responsible for all things influencing us and that we affect, then we would become responsible for almost everything. Think about finance, pollution, crime ...

Maybe we could turn the question on its head: what could we do if we were responsible? Would we intervene militarily when a nation aims for economic growth by neglecting the ecological impact of its actions? Should we bomb a nation when it does not live up to its climate commitments? No, we cannot do that. We have to leave this to our politicians.

I am willing to take this what-if exercise a step further by considering a representation on a two axes graph. The x-axis represents the level of Global Governance while the y-axis is the level of that the politicians consider climate change a Military Issue.



The graph above shows that only in the case of operating within some sort of global government model, climate change can be a military task otherwise we risk using it as a reason to go to war. Not a very appealing prospect.

Although we have an impact and we will certainly be requested to alleviate its consequences in case of major disasters, we, as military, have no active role in climate change. Our politicians should direct any of our activity in that one-chance-only global concern. We can only hope that the world population, especially we who live in the prosperous part of the globe, takes up its responsibility to hold its representatives accountable to act in the right way, now.