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Defence Takes on 'Climate Change and Security'

In September 2009 Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti has taken a new cross government post as Climate and Energy Security Envoy for the Ministry of Defence and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The editors of the ECC-platform took the chance to talk with him about his new position.

***ECC:** Mr. Morisetti, from the German perspective, this is a quite innovative approach, so could you shortly explain the rationale behind the establishment of this new position and what your principle responsibilities and objectives are, please?*

Neil Morisetti (NM): In the debate on climate change, people looked for a long time only at the environmental consequences. I studied the subject in the 1970s and it was very much an environmental issue. I think that particularly in the past few years we have begun to realise that the consequences of climate change are more than just environmental impacts. There are socio-economic, political and security issues. In 2007, the UN Security Council held a UK-led debate on security implications. About the same time, a number of think tanks started to produce work. One paper, which probably launched the debate in a sense, was produced by the Center for Naval Analysis in Washington on the national security implications of climate change.



About the same time, in 2008, our UK national security strategy mentioned this issue for the first time. So, a document, endorsed by the Prime Minister, recognised climate change as the potentially greatest threat to global stability and security in the future and therefore to national security. And when you start talking about national security then Defence starts to get engaged in the process. In a revision of this strategy last year we talked about climate change as a threat multiplier. And I think this is increasingly how it is seen. That is to say, climate change in itself is unlikely to start a conflict. But it could well be the tipping point or the catalyst for conflict, particularly when you look at where the greatest impact from climate change is likely to be felt and that is coincidental with those regions already suffering from multiple threats. By that I mean resource issues such as shortages of food and water, health issues, and financial challenges. Often they

are also in areas with weak governments or low resilience. We have seen small or various sizes of conflicts in those regions in the past and it may well be that climate change will accelerate or accentuate that problem.

***ECC:** So, conflicts will not be a direct consequence of climatic changes?*

NM: What we are looking at really are not the physical changes of climate change but the implications of the second or third order consequences. Temperature rises, increased salinity in the sea, water shortages etc. lead to failed crops, failed harvests, loss of fish stocks, loss of land. What will people do? They have lost their livelihood, they have lost their home. How do they behave? Do they look towards alternative livelihoods, which may or may not be legal? Do they look to move, either within countries or between countries? This is the element that has a potential bearing on global security. Consequently, the UK established my position in September 2009. The decision was made to use a serving military officer, because much of this involves engagement with the military, internationally. If you have two people of the same profession, it is easier to talk and to engage than if you are used to different thought patterns.

But what we also came to was the run up to Copenhagen. It was important to encourage governments when they were forming their position for Copenhagen, not only to consider the environmental, economic and political perspective, but also to listen to the departments of defence and be aware that there are security implications: unless we can hold it to a less than 2 degree world, the risk to security will increase, and increase considerably, and become slightly unpredictable as well. So since then I have been engaging in the international community, not just with military and defence but also with foreign affairs, environment, the economic side, think tanks. I have been engaging in the UK defence community and also across government departments. Climate change doesn't necessarily recognise departmental boundaries any more. It doesn't recognise national boundaries. So, on the policy side it means broadening and deepening the understanding. What does it mean with regard to potential missions and tasks for defence? In a sense, it could be humanitarian activities in response to extreme weather events, which are not necessarily at the other side of the world but could well be in our own countries. I am thinking of the recent heavy rains in the UK in December, which in one county alone caused damages estimated at more than 100 million pounds. The military were there in a certain rescue role with helicopters, rebuilding bridges so that people could move around, restoring infrastructure.

***ECC:** Does that mean that climate security focuses mainly on disaster management?*

NM: At the other extreme is conflict resolution in cases of conflicts where climate change may be a factor. But perhaps more likely is engagement as one of a number of actors and probably performing quite a small role but nonetheless a key role in conflict prevention, in developing resilience and capacities. Especially in those countries I talked about, where the potential threats and multiple stresses—including climate change—are greatest. At the same time, there is the challenge of adaptation. Climate will continue to change because of what we have done in the past, regardless of what we do today. And we need to be sure that we have the ability to operate and deliver those missions and tasks in the second quarter of the 21st century. It might be a more rugged environment and we might find that we have to change our equipment because the temperatures are hotter.

But also, and this is where the energy element comes in, virtually all of our military equipment requires diesel or petrol. As we move further into the 21st century this energy is going to become increasingly rare or scarce, and likely to become much more expensive. And this makes us vulnerable. We need to try to reduce that vulnerability. We need to reduce our energy demands. We have to be more efficient in the way we use our energy. We must look for alternative energy and renewables. That brings advantages actually. All these things pose challenges but also offer opportunities. If we could reduce the amount of fuel we use at our operating base in Afghanistan, for example, we could reduce the number of convoys we need. That reduces the threats to life, it reduces our vulnerability, and brings financial savings as well. [...]

***ECC:** Mr. Morisetti, thank you very much for the interview.*

The interview was conducted by Dennis Taenzler and Christiane Roettger

In the second part of the interview Mr. Morisetti talks about regions at risk and the role of climate change and security in national security strategy planning. For the complete interview, please see [here](#).

Further information on the "4-Degree-Map" of the Met Office Hadley Centre is available at <http://www.actoncopenhagen.decc.gov.uk/content/en/embeds/flash/4-degrees-large-map-final>

For the Green Book of Defence and the study of the Defence Concept and Doctrine Centre, please see [here](#).

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