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Opinion

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After Sandy, environmentalists, military find common cause

By [Juliette Kayyem](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST NOVEMBER 05, 2012

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US Air Force crews in New York offload power grid repair equipment from Southern California Thursday. The Defense Department initiated the airlift operation.

It doesn't make sense to cast all public policy challenges as “wars on (fill in the blank).” The combative language can seem way too harsh when applied to, say, drug dependency; military terms can't really convey the deeply personal implications of cancer treatment and research.

But war might be an entirely accurate — and now even more appropriate — word to describe the urgency of the effort to curb climate change. As Hurricane Sandy swept through this country, environmental activists found an unexpected ally: the military, a group not usually known for its liberal leanings.

Military personnel have been directly involved in hurricane relief. The Navy deployed carriers to assist in air rescues. The Army and National Guard are moving essential commodities to hurricane-ravaged places. The Coast Guard has reopened the Port of New York to help tugs and barges bring in desperately needed petroleum products.

But the military’s interest in climate change isn’t primarily because its own resources are being drawn into a domestic rescue effort. It is because climate change poses a continuing and unpredictable threat to national and global security.

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Take the Arab Spring, which people tend to view as having been motivated solely by political ideology. There is a growing body of evidence that the uprisings were aided by the Russian wildfires of July 2010.

Close to 56,000 Russians died in the heat wave and resulting fires caused by extreme temperatures and draught.

Russia was forced to impose a temporary export ban on grain. The price of food in global markets skyrocketed; in the Middle East, prices of staples such as bread rose 40 percent by December 2010. That month, in Tunisia, the Arab Spring began when a food stand owner set himself on fire.

Today, one hurricane (or tornado or fire or drought) does not constitute proof of climate change, but to deny the cumulative impact of extreme weather on geopolitics is no longer tenable. Changes in the environment will exacerbate destabilization in areas of deep strategic importance to the United States, including Asia, the Middle East, the Arctic, and Latin America. Facing

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increased temperatures, people will have to move to avoid rising sea water, tidal infiltrations, or arid soil; they will be searching for water, food, and space. The movement of people, and the fights between them over commodities, have been the causes of many wars.

In [the Climate Security Report](#), a new study by the bipartisan American Security Project, climate control isn't promoted as a way to help starving African children, or whales mating in the Pacific. In the cold language of military planning, the organization, which has close ties to the Pentagon, provides assessments of how each global environmental hot spot is connected to US interests. A major worry is figuring out under which circumstances combatant commanders — the military leaders overseeing geographic zones — will be required to utilize their troops and equipment to address the consequences of climate change.

And then there are the military's own bases. As the American Security Project highlights, the changing environment puts certain installations at risk. Diego Garcia, the logistics center for all US and British military efforts in the Middle East, is an island in the Indian Ocean whose mean height is just 4 feet above sea level; coastal erosion and flooding are already threatening its perimeter. The same is true at installations in Bahrain near the Strait of Hormuz, and Guam, a key strategic gateway to East Asia.

In the US mainland, Florida's Eglin Air Force Base (the largest in the world) and Virginia's Norfolk Naval Air Station (which houses the US Atlantic Fleet) are vulnerable to hurricanes and storm surges.

The victims of Hurricane Sandy are civilians, and the primary responsibility for reconstruction of the hardest-hit areas will fall on state and local governments. Better care for the environment now seems essential to protect our homefront. But Sandy also exposed the common interests between domestic and foreign policy, between homeland security and national security.

Like it or not, we're in a war against climate change. Even the warriors think so.

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