

Testimony of Ms. Erin Sikorsky
Director, Center for Climate & Security
Director, International Military Council on Climate & Security
Former Deputy Director, Strategic Futures Group, US National Intelligence Council
Member, Munich Security Conference Food Security Task Force

Before the United States Senate
Committee on the Budget
Hearing: “Budgeting for the Storm: Climate Change and the Costs to National Security”
May 15, 2024

Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Erin Sikorsky and I direct the Center for Climate and Security (CCS), a think tank with an advisory board of distinguished retired military and security leaders, focused on the challenges posed by climate change to US national security. CCS is an institute of the Council on Strategic Risks, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to anticipating, analyzing, and addressing core systemic risks to security in the 21st Century.

When I served as a US intelligence officer, I spent many years analyzing threats of terrorism and insurgency in the Middle East and Africa, and I regularly saw climate-related hazards such as drought, extreme precipitation, and heatwaves contribute to food and water insecurity. I watched such dynamics strain governments and provide terrorist and insurgent groups opportunities to gain a foothold among vulnerable populations in countries of key national security concern for the United States. My last role in the IC was on the US National Intelligence Council where I co-authored the quadrennial Global Trends Report and led climate and environmental security analysis across the IC.

As climate-driven hazards grow more frequent and intense, militaries are regularly on the front line of response. To better understand these deployments, CCS launched the Military Response to Climate Hazards Tracker, or MiRCH.¹ In the past 22 months, we have identified nearly 300 deployments by militaries in 74 countries to fight fires, rescue citizens from floods, deliver water, or participate in other hazard-related activities. Here in the United States, troops have deployed 70 times since June 2022. The US military also responds to such hazards globally – between June 2022 to April 2024, it supported HA/DR efforts in Pakistan, the Philippines, Libya, and Canada. This demand is almost certain to grow as temperatures rise.

As I saw in my intelligence career, climate change also increasingly contributes to food and water insecurity that threatens livelihoods and contributes to irregular migration. Take Central America as a case in point. Research from the University of Texas at Austin has shown that

¹ <https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/ccs/mirch/>

drier than normal periods in the region are associated with increased emigration to the United States.² Climate models project that Central America is a global hotspot for future decreases in precipitation due to climate change. This is the bad news. The good news is that this is a problem the US can get ahead of by investing in upstream adaptation and resilience programs aimed at addressing food insecurity and climate hazards. In Honduras, for example, people who received USAID agriculture investments in recent years reported an intention to migrate that was 78 percent lower than the country overall.³

I'd like to end by turning to the Indo-Pacific, where the United States' global network of allies and partners is one of its primary comparative advantages in competition with China. More and more, the number one issue facing many of those allies and partners is climate change. As the Defense Minister from Fiji noted at the Shangri-La Dialogues in 2022, "In our blue Pacific continent, machine guns, fighter jets, gray ships and green battalions are not our primary security concern. The single greatest threat to our very existence is climate change. It threatens our very hopes and dreams of prosperity."⁴ Similarly, in a 2024 survey of political and civil society elites in ASEAN member nations about the greatest challenges facing the region, the threat of climate change outranked the threat from military tensions over key flashpoints by more than ten points.⁵

Given these dynamics, competing with China and investing in climate resilience for US allies and partners are not contradictory goals. In fact, they are complementary. As retired Admiral Sam Locklear, former head of US INDOPACOM, and I wrote last year, "Helping allies and partners manage climate risks not only shows them the United States is attentive to their needs, it can also build their resilience so that they are available when the United States needs them. It's a win-win."⁶

One example we pointed to is Papua New Guinea (PNG), a target of intense Chinese attention in recent years. PNG faces high risks of climate-driven sea level rise, strengthened typhoons and a lack of fresh water. In June 2023 the United States signed a new security pact with the country, gaining exclusive access to develop and operate out of PNG bases.⁷ To sustain this presence, the United States will need access to reliable energy sources, clean, fresh water, and an economically vibrant, healthy local population. For this reason, investments in climate

² <https://lbj.utexas.edu/unusually-dry-growing-seasons-central-america-associated-migration-us>

³ <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/congressional-testimony/apr-14-2021-peter-natiello-daa-lac-root-causes-migration>

⁴ "Fiji Says Asia's Biggest Security Threat Is Climate Change, Not Conflict," *CNN* June 13, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/12/asia/fiji-climate-change-shangri-la-dialogue-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁵ Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024)

⁶ <https://www.justsecurity.org/87502/friends-dont-let-friends-succumb-to-climate-change-competing-with-china-by-helping-our-partners-and-allies-adapt/>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-pacific-security-china-papua-new-guinea-blinken-a4a052e05ff3f03f9e392e66cca74018>

resilience and adaptation in such a country are investments in US national security and should be prioritized.

For many years now, Congress has shown bipartisan leadership toward addressing the security risks of climate change I have discussed today, particularly through provisions in the National Defense Authorization Bill. As climate hazards intensify in the coming decades, continued Congressional leadership will be critical to ensure the United States makes the investments needed to manage the security risks of a warming world.