POLICY BRIEF

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Climate Change and Security:
Policy Recommendations from
the 4th NTS-Asia Annual Convention 2010

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The Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies that serves as the Secretariat of the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia) held its 4th Annual Convention on 24–26 November 2010 in Singapore. The Convention included a high-level panel session on the potential security implications of climate change. This policy brief reviews key outcomes and presents actionable recommendations emerging from the presentations, discussions and reviews of this session.

I. Themes of the Climate Change and Security High-Level Panel

Contributors from differing backgrounds offered a wide range of perspectives at the Climate Change and Security Panel. Such breadth was a reflection of the reality that, climate challenges, by their very nature, extend to multiple sectors and require multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral responses. Out of this range of perspectives, several contributions emerged that can be divided into three primary categories:

- Reducing the anthropogenic causes of climate change.

- Building resilience to predicted climatic effects.

- Preparing responses to climate-driven phenomena.

The recommendations put forth at the NTS-Asia Annual Convention focus primarily upon the national and regional policy structures of South and Southeast Asia. This two-fold focus reflects the assessment that some climate security challenges require attention at the highest echelons of state government, while others, by virtue of their intrinsic characteristics, require inter-state cooperation at the regional level. The following recommendations therefore target both state- and regional-level decision-making forums throughout these two regions.

II. Outcomes and Policy Recommendations

Reducing the anthropogenic causes of climate change

Evaluating the anthropogenic causes of climate change requires critically assessing the myriad economic systems that concurrently spur growth and contribute to profound environmental changes. While contemporary cycles of production, consumption and economic development are essential for the perpetuation of social progress, it is increasingly clear that myopic profit-driven production strategies and ever-increasing consumption levels are not sustainable

in the long term. Climate change is an arena in which, because of atmospheric vulnerability, the untenable nature of many current economic production modes is becoming increasingly apparent. Therefore, in order to address the anthropogenic causes of climate change, policies must reconsider foundational elements of many global, state and local economic systems. Specifically, policies should attempt to achieve the following:

- Create measurements of political, social and economic progress beyond the monetary terms that have long dominated the development discourse.

- Institutionalise 'triple bottom line' economic statutes that combine profit assessments with environmental realities and community impacts when quantifying the relative worth of actions and strategies.

- Create and promote policies that will shift economic trends steadily, but with a sense of urgency, towards a normative area in which growth strategies will integrate environmental considerations and realities more fully into their planning and outlook.

- Consult with business interests and other development drivers when constructing and implementing these policies, ensuring that development and environmental responsibility are pursued symbiotically rather than in mutual exclusion.

Building resilience to predicted climatic effects

Regardless of the relative success of mitigation attempts, a significant level of climatic change will continue to result from the effects of past and present human activities. While current emissions trends mean that some of these changes may be abrupt and difficult to predict, the effects of other climatic changes are relatively foreseeable, potentially compounding, and in some cases already apparent. For these more linear and progressive effects of climate change,

building resilience is a key objective. Developing social resilience to climate change requires targeting socially important vulnerable systems and creating forward-looking strategies to address predicted problems. Primary examples of such vulnerable systems, upon which the NTS-Asia Annual Convention focused, are the freshwater rivers that traverse much of South and Southeast Asia. In response to the vulnerabilities in these freshwater ecosystems, specific policies should be developed:

- Policies should attempt to re-assess both existing and planned structures that alter freshwater systems in light of the predicted climatic impacts. While the structures managing freshwater (such as dams and levees) can have significant utility, they also disrupt natural freshwater patterns and, under conditions of climatic change, may contribute to intractable water management problems.

- Where the greatest potential problems exist, policies should endeavour to allocate resources to alter or remove existing freshwater management structures and find alternatives to planned projects, those that might undermine the utility and/or sustainability of particular freshwater systems.

Preparing responses to climate-driven phenomena

In addition to building resilience, it is also vital to prepare for the social impacts that may accompany a changing climate. The first step in such preparations is to assess and target the areas in which significant impacts will likely occur. The NTS-Asia Annual Convention focused upon two of these areas: growing migration trends and shifts in the character and modus operandi of military organisations. Several policy recommendations were put forth relating to these two sectors:

Migration

- Create policies that are informed by the push and pull factors leading to migration. Migration is often listed as a 'challenge' and 'threat' throughout the climate change discourse, which is potentially problematic in that such an outlook risks understating the reasons for which migrants view relocation as necessary. Such conceptions of migration also risk diverting resources away from the need to ensure the welfare of both migrant and receiving communities.

- Prepare for migration to be viewed by vulnerable populations in many locations as the best climate adaptation strategy available. Use foresight to prepare for this reality in ways that will reduce social challenges for both migrant and receiving communities.

Military

- Recognise climatic assessments emerging from both the natural and social science communities and plan accordingly. Militaries that continue to focus upon traditional doctrines and modi operandi risk being caught unprepared for the challenges that will likely accompany climate change.

- Specifically pinpoint areas in which social grievances and group-identity fractures might be exacerbated by climate change, and prepare to move quickly to ensure that instability and violence are effectively curtailed.

- Extend military roles and capacities to respond to environmental threats to individuals, most notably quickly occurring phenomena such as storms and flooding, and promote lift capacities, quick-response capabilities and disciplined organisational structures that are well-placed to respond to disaster trends that are likely to become more acute with climatic changes.

III. Conclusion

These differentiated policy contributions of the 4th NTS-Asia Annual Convention are complementary, but far from exhaustive. The challenges of climate change will affect societies around the world in different ways, and effective policies must always be formed with the particular vulnerabilities and needs of constituent populations in mind. However, the growing body of knowledge on both the natural and social effects of climate change provide guidance in such policy formation, and the work of the Consortium of NTS-Asia offers one such knowledge resource.

About the Author

J. Jackson Ewing is Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where he coordinates the Climate Change and Environmental Security Programme. His research interests include both traditional and non-traditional security issues throughout Asia, and his past work has focused on the capacity for environmental factors and processes to contribute to the causes of instability and civil conflicts. To extend these foundations, Dr Ewing's current work on climate change explores the risks faced by vulnerable individuals, communities, sub-regions and states throughout Southeast Asia.

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About the Centre

The RSIS Centre for NTS Studies, NTU, was inaugurated by the ASEAN Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan in May 2008. The Centre maintains research in the fields of Food Security, Climate Change, Energy Security, Health Security, as well as Internal and Cross-Border Conflict. It produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building capacity to address NTS issues and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The Centre also provides a platform for scholars and policymakers within and outside Asia to discuss and analyse NTS issues in the region.

In 2009, the Centre was chosen by the MacArthur Foundation as a lead institution for the MacArthur Asia Security Initiative, to develop policy research capacity and recommend policies on the critical security challenges facing the Asia-Pacific.

The Centre is also a founding member and the Secretariat for the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia). More information on the Centre can be found at www.rsis.edu.sg/nts.