The National Research Council (NRC) has recently released a study called Climate and Social Stress: Implications for Security Analysis. The security implications of climate change have been discussed in other, similar studies in the past, and this one is largely consistent with what has come before. The central message is that the changing climate will affect the United States, not only through weather and climate-related events in this country, but also through events in other parts of the world. When droughts, floods, storms, or rising seas undermine social structures and stability of a society, the consequences can have security implications for the United States and, indeed, many other countries.

The chain of events here is relatively simple. Climate change is already affecting societies around the world and those impacts will only get larger over time. The developments intersect with security concerns because they tend to destabilize social structures, put pressure on resources (e.g., water, energy, etc), and exacerbate existing tensions among groups. This is why climate change is often called a "risk multiplier." It is not likely to create security threats where none previously existed, but it is virtually certain to make existing threats more severe. Put differently, if you think of a national security issue that concerns the United States, climate change is probably making it a larger, rather than smaller, problem. This is true of the Middle East, where a warming world will magnify stress related to water issues; it is true of South Asia where melting glaciers will challenge the ability of India and Pakistan, both armed with nuclear weapons, to share water from the Indus River; and it is true in Africa where drought and rising temperatures will make it more difficult to prevent the rise of extremist groups, some of which threaten the United States.

The NRC report stops short of proposing policies aimed at preventing climate change because its authors do not view it as their task to engage in that form of policy recommendation. The report is, instead, an attempt to "better assess [risks related to climate change] and to anticipate changes in them." Anyone interested in broader policy questions, however, cannot help but draw from this report the lesson that reducing the speed and extent of climate change needs to be viewed as a real national security imperative.

When it became clear to the United States that Al Qaeda posed a threat to the country, resources were devoted to meeting this threat. Nobody argued that efforts to disrupt and defeat terrorist groups should be delayed until we learned more about their plans or until the specifics of the threat became clearer. Nobody argues that we should ignore the rise extremist elements or efforts by terrorist groups to

recruit supporters. Whatever disagreements we have with respect to our response to terrorism, nobody believes that simply ignoring the issue is the correct strategy. We should have these same attitudes toward climate change. Just because the threat to our security comes from changes in the environment rather than from human enemies does not make it any less real. The United States needs to acknowledge the very real danger that climate change poses to our security, and it needs to react not only by preparing for that threat, but also by reducing the speed with which the world is warming.