

# Obama Presidential Memorandum Sought to Embed Climate Change Impacts into National Security Planning

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With the end of President Obama’s term, the outgoing president sought to ensure that climate change action would be incorporated into the next administration’s national security policies. On September 21, 2016, Obama released a presidential memorandum to address the imminent and significant effects of climate change on national security by establishing a Climate and National Security Working Group (“Working Group”). The Working Group’s purpose is to “ensure that climate change-related impacts are fully considered in the development of national security doctrine, policies, and plans” by coordinating “the development of a strategic approach to identify, assess, and share information on current and projected climate-related impacts on national security interests.”<sup>1</sup> Building on prior presidential directives and policies regarding the impacts of climate change, the presidential memorandum takes significant steps to ensure that the impacts of climate change are identified and incorporated into national security planning.

## I. CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Prior to this presidential memorandum, President Obama emphasized the threat of climate change and the need for federal action to address this imminent concern. The presidential memorandum notes the most recent presidential directives and policies relating to the impacts of climate change, including the following: (1) the President’s June 2013 Climate Action Plan; (2) Executive Order 13,653 in 2013 (Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change); (3) Executive Order 13,677 in 2014 (Climate Resilient International Development); (4) Executive

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1. Memorandum on Climate Change and National Security, 1 PUB. PAPERS 621 (Sept. 21, 2016).

Order 13,693 in 2015 (Planning for Federal Sustainability in the Next Decade); and (5) the 2015 National Security Strategy.

Notably, the 2015 National Security Strategy identified climate change as an “urgent and growing threat to our national security, contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources like food and water.”<sup>2</sup> This report not only warned of the potential impacts of climate change that are likely to result in the near future, but also outlined the present effects of climate change, including “increased sea levels and storm surges [which] threaten coastal regions, infrastructure, and property.”<sup>3</sup>

Expanding on findings from the 2015 National Security Strategy, the presidential memorandum reaffirms that climate change poses a significant threat and identifies some of the current impacts of climate change. Specifically, the memorandum points to “extended drought, more frequent and severe weather events, heat waves, warming and acidifying ocean waters, catastrophic wildfires, and rising sea levels,”<sup>4</sup> all of which negatively affect the health and well-being of American citizens. Further, the negative health impacts of climate change on national security include the potential for “pest outbreaks and the spread of invasive species as well as plant, animal, and human disease, including emerging infectious disease.”<sup>5</sup> All of these effects of climate change have implications for national security and could contribute to “population migration within and across international borders, spur crises, and amplify or accelerate conflict in countries or regions already facing instability and fragility.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the memorandum touches on the impacts that climate change has on the United States military and other national security-related missions and operations, stating that these impacts “could adversely affect readiness, negatively affect military facilities and training, increase demands for Federal support to non-federal civil authorities, and increase response requirements to support international stability and humanitarian assistance needs.”<sup>7</sup>

2. *Id.*

3. Statement on the 2015 National Security Strategy, DAILY COMP. PRES. DOC. 201500085 (Feb. 6, 2015).

4. Memorandum on Climate Change and National Security, 1 PUB. PAPERS 621.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

In conjunction with the presidential memorandum, the National Intelligence Council released a report titled “Implications for US National Security of Anticipated Climate Change.” This report further outlines the effects that climate change poses for the United States on national security, specifically over the next two decades. The possible climate related effects that the report outlines are: (1) “[t]hreats to the stability of countries”; (2) “[h]eightedened social and political tensions”; (3) “[a]dverse effects on food prices and availability”; (4) “increased risks to human health”; (5) “[n]egative impacts on investments and economic competitiveness”; and (6) “[p]otential climate discontinuities and secondary surprises.”<sup>8</sup> In light of the findings made by the 2015 National Security Strategy and the report by the National Intelligence Council, the presidential memorandum provides an approach through a new task force to identify and address these climate change-related concerns.

## II. FUNCTIONS OF THE WORKING GROUP

The Working Group would be led by the National Security Council staff and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Additionally, the Working Group must have representatives from over twenty federal agencies, among them the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Justice. These agencies would work together to ensure that the current and most accurate information regarding climate change-related impacts are used to reinforce the United States’ national security.

The Presidential Memorandum outlines seventeen functions that the Working Group would perform. The Working Group’s functions would include, but would not be limited to “identify[ing] U.S. national security priorities within the scope of the Working Group’s mission;” “develop[ing] recommended climate data requirements and consider[ing] the cost of the production and exchange of this information and making this information available;” and “provid[ing] a venue for enhancing the understanding of the links between climate change-related impacts and national security interests and discussing the opportunities for

8. Memorandum on Implications for US National Security of Anticipated Climate Change, DAILY COMP. PRES. DOC. 201600621 (Sept. 21, 2016).

climate mitigation and adaptation activities to address national security issues.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition to providing a venue for federal agencies to identify climate data and use that information to develop recommended climate data requirements, the Working Group would also address international concerns pertaining to particularly vulnerable geographic areas presented in the 2015 National Security Strategy by “develop[ing] . . . guidance for Working Group members on building climate change resilience in countries vulnerable to climate change-related impacts,” as well as “identify[ing] the most current information on regional, country, and geographic areas most vulnerable to current and projected [long, mid, and short term] impacts of climate variability.”<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, the Working Group would look into the current climate change information and programs and “identify information and program gaps” that currently exist within the U.S. government which “limit the consideration of climate-change related impacts in developing national security doctrine, policies, and plans.”<sup>11</sup>

The Working Group would provide federal agencies with a venue to identify new information and priorities relating to climate change impacts on national security as well as ensure that the current information and programs in place are up to date, accurate, and in accordance with the policy and mission outlined in this presidential memorandum.

### III. TIMELINE FOR WORKING GROUP ACTION

Within ninety days of the date of the memorandum, the Working Group was to develop an action plan detailing its “specific objectives, milestones, timelines, and identifications of agencies responsible” to carry out the functions and mission of this Working Group.<sup>12</sup> This action plan was to be submitted to the National Security Council staff and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the Working Group’s action plan, the federal agencies represented in this Working Group are directed to develop an implementation plan to address climate related impacts

9. Memorandum on Climate Change and National Security, 1 PUB. PAPERS 621.

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. As of the writing of this field report, no such action plan has been publicly released.

to national security within 150 days of the date of the memorandum. Each agency's implementation plan must support the overall policy of the memorandum, by identifying "climate-related data repositories"; "risks to agency missions"; "global health security concerns affecting humans, animals, and plants"; as well as "risks that may be caused by agency policies, programs, and actions concerning international development objectives, fragility, and regional stability." The climate-related considerations described in the memorandum are not exhaustive, but provide guidance for what federal agencies can address in their respective implementation plans.

#### IV. THE FUTURE OF THE TASK FORCE UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

President Donald Trump has repeatedly denied the settled science behind climate change and, through his "America First Energy Plan," promised to abolish all of President Obama's climate change initiatives.<sup>14</sup> Trump may not immediately begin to abolish all initiatives upon entering the White House; for example, the Paris Agreement requires a three-year waiting period plus a one-year notice period for any country wishing to withdraw.<sup>15</sup> However, since the presidential memorandum was promulgated directly through the executive branch, the climate change task force may be much easier to abolish. Considering Trump's stated belief that climate change is a "hoax," it seems doubtful that Trump will support a task force whose goal is to ensure that climate change is considered in national security.<sup>16</sup> This may place the incoming Trump administration's policies on climate change in tension with the goals of the national security community.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Barack Obama's Memorandum on Climate Change and National Security issued on September 21, 2016 sought to put into action a task force comprised of over twenty federal agencies and designed

14. *Column: What does Trump's Victory Mean for Climate Change Policy?*, PBS NewsHour, Robert Stavins, Nov. 11, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/trumps-victory-mean-climate-change-policy> [<https://perma.cc/HA7A-BGUS>].

15. *Id.*

16. *The Biggest Threat to Earth has Been Dismissed by Trump as a Chinese Hoax*, Business Insider, Lindsey Dodgson, November 11, 2016.

to identify and assess climate change related impacts on national security as well as correct any information or program gaps currently in place. This Working Group would ensure that the significant impacts of climate change on national security would be addressed in the next administration and that the United States would continue to be a leader in addressing climate change impacts generally. Donald Trump's rhetoric denying the reality of climate change, and his apparent ideological opposition to climate change action, suggest that his administration will not effectuate the goals of the presidential memorandum, including the tasks delegated to the Working Group. This would compromise the national security interests of the United States identified in the 2015 National Security Strategy and elsewhere.