

**From obscurity to action:
Why Canada must tackle the security dimensions of climate
change**

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Margaret Purdy, Resident Scholar at the Liu Institute for Global Issues, spoke at the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) International Conference on October 29th, 2009. An excerpt of her speech is included here.

“...Climate change-induced events will not be “security as usual”. The frequency, severity, and duration of events will be unprecedented. The concurrence and pervasiveness of these events will exacerbate their impact. Even developed states such as Canada may struggle to cope as multiple events occur simultaneously – at home and around the world – compounding crises and straining the resilience and capacity of governments, communities and individuals.

So, what should we do about all of this? Let me make five suggestions.

1. Accept climate change as a mainstream security concern

No more time should be wasted arguing over whether climate change deserves attention as a security issue.

2. Start taking it seriously now

I know that the Ottawa security agenda is already crowded with here-and-now problems and priorities -- Afghanistan, a growing cyber threat, crime gang activity, security for the 2010 Olympics, and so on. And I know that, especially in minority government situations, decision makers are firmly focused on the near term, the tactical, and initiatives which generate immediate results. In this environment, it is tempting to dismiss climate change as a down-the-road issue for somebody else.

But the impacts of changing climate are already evident in every region of Canada. And, regardless of the outcome of emission reduction efforts, many impacts are expected to persist for at least 1,000 years. We have already waited too long to think about what this means for Canada’s security.

3. Start by assessing the risks

To the extent that discussions do take place in Canada around the security consequences of climate change, they are anecdotal and vague. More serious and systematic assessment is long overdue. Here again, Canada has a comparative advantage. Risk assessment and risk management are well understood and practiced widely within the Canada’s security community.

Federal security officials should take the lead and engage a cross-section of internal and external experts to examine credible scenarios – including worst cases – as the basis for taking informed decisions.

4. Take concrete action



- Embed climate change considerations in policy making, intelligence assessments, the development of long term security strategies
- Establish a dialogue among scientists and security experts

5. Engage internationally

Canada should join other nations in assessing countries most at risk, and how their vulnerabilities could affect regional and global stability

Canada should help vulnerable states enhance their mitigation and adaptation capabilities, and

Canada should work multilaterally on contentious issues, including the legal status of “climate refugees”.

I do not want to leave the impression that no work is under way in Canada. Several eminent Canadian scholars are analyzing Arctic security issues – as are federal and territorial governments. Many federal public servants are thinking about the broader range of security issues associated with climate change. Some are meeting informally to exchange ideas. A couple of Canadian journalists are paying attention. The International Development Research Centre is conducting valuable research on climate-related vulnerabilities of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

But I remain puzzled by the overall scarcity of attention to security in the public, academic and political debate around climate change in Canada. I was somewhat comforted to learn that Paul Krugman is similarly puzzled.

Writing about climate change¹, Krugman said he feels that we’re hurtling toward catastrophe but nobody wants to hear about it or do anything to prevent it. The Nobel Prize-winning economist recently cited the boiled frog theory in his *New York Times* column.² A frog, placed in a pot of cold water that is gradually heated, never realizes the danger it’s in and is boiled alive. Krugman used the hypothetical boiled frog as a metaphor for what he described as “a very real problem – the difficulty of responding to disasters that creep up on you a bit at a time”. As Krugman put it, climate change is a creeping threat, not an attention-getting crisis.

And yet it deserves attention, certainly much more attention that it is receiving today in Canada. As the new NATO Secretary General put it: “We may not know the precise effects or the definite dates of how climate change will affect security, but we already know enough to start taking action.”³

To download the full speech, please click [here](#).

¹ Paul Krugman, “Cassandras of Climate”, *New York Times*, July 13, 2009

² Paul Krugman, “Boiling the Frog”, *New York Times*, September 28, 2009.

³ Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen on emerging security risks, Lloyd’s of London, October 1, 2009.

Related stories and publications

[Apocalypse Soon](#), in the Ottawa Citizen
[Does Climate Change Qualify as a National Security Issue? A Canadian Perspective](#), a chapter in the edited volume "*Climate change and security: planning for the future*", edited by Jonathan Boston, Philip Nel, and Marjolein Righarts.

Biography: Margaret Purdy

Margaret Purdy is Co-Director of the Climate Change and Security: A Canadian Perspective project of the Liu Institute's Centre of International Relations. This project is a component of the Centre's Security and Defence Program. Please see <http://www.cir.ubc.ca/#/climate-change/4532641878> for further information. Margaret is also a consultant specializing in national security, emergency management and public safety issues. From 1975 to 2006 she worked in policy, operational and senior management positions with various departments and agencies in Canada's security, policing and intelligence community.

Background: About the Liu Institute for Global Issues

Named after Dr. Jieh Jow Liou, the Liu Institute conducts and facilitates research on global issues, mobilizing knowledge into solutions and policy. One of sixteen research units in the College for Interdisciplinary Studies (CFIS), the Institute takes an interdisciplinary problem-solving approach to explore new ideas and ways of learning to catalyze innovative thinking and positive societal change. Its current focus is on advancing sustainability, security, and social justice: understood as moving toward economic, social, and environmental interactions that promote the well-being of people in ways that are just, equitable, and sustainable.

Founded in 1998 by Professor Ivan Head and opened in 2000, the Institute acts as a hub for global research and emerging issues at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

A hallmark of the Institute is to provide innovative learning and research opportunities for UBC graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, faculty, and community members that help to bridge the gap between academics and practitioners.

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