

Climate change is truly a global problem

By Bob Doppelt For The Register-Guard

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Imagine it's the year 2015. As climate scientists predicted, the consequences of global climate change are intensifying.

Sea levels are rising and big storm surges continually swamp the world's coastal cities. Typhoons are devastating the tropics and hurricanes regularly batter the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Droughts in Asia, Africa and regions of the United States are causing food and water shortages. Climate refugees are streaming out of ravished areas to safer havens, causing political turmoil.

The U.N. secretary-general calls a summit to hammer out another international agreement to further reduce greenhouse gas emission. But due to contrasting priorities and distrust, China, India and the United States cannot reach agreement on reduction targets. The prospects for avoiding calamitous climate change slip further away.

Implausible? Not according to a group of high-powered national security strategists, business leaders and scientists who recently played climate war games. That's right. Inspired by the release of the report "The Age of Consequences: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Global Climate Change," in late July leaders from nations across the globe used war gaming and scenario planning techniques to consider what the world in 2015 and beyond will look like under an extreme climate change scenario, and how nations might likely respond. It was not pretty.

The games were organized by the Center for New American Security, a national security think tank whose bipartisan board includes former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and former elected officials and military leaders. About 40 people played on five teams representing China, India, Europe, the United States and the rest of the world. Participants were exposed to actual climate impact projections for

2015, explored their national security consequences, and then tried to devise strategies for dealing with those effects.

Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee produced the picture of the world in 2015 for the group using the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's worse-case scenario, which combines rapid growth with continued reliance on fossil fuels. This is not far-fetched.

The world economy has been growing at about 5 percent annually, which means it will double in size in 14 years. Fossil fuels remain the dominant energy source. For millennia, the atmosphere held about 280 parts per million of greenhouse gasses. Today it is 377 ppm — and growing at 2.2 ppm annually. So by 2015 concentrations will be more than 400 ppm. Unless a major shift quickly occurs, the worse-case scenario will be reality.

After three days of intense haggling, the group reached agreement on a framework for reducing emissions by 30 percent by 2025. They also agreed to finance a portion of the emissions cuts in the developing world. China, however, refused to agree to any specific emission targets. India accepted cuts only after numerous contingencies were included. Most participants left the meeting disturbed that they could not produce the comprehensive agreement needed to prevent severe climate impacts.

The Bush administration refuses to support U.S. emission reductions. Instead, U.S. officials claim that China is now the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases and therefore it and other developing nations should take on a major portion of reductions.

China, in turn, claims that fossil fuel use by the United States and other developed nations generated most of the CO₂ that has oversaturated the Earth's natural heat-trapping blanket and caused global warming. Because the contribution of developing countries to total CO₂ buildup is small, and because they are comparatively poor and have much lower emissions per capita, China says the United States and other developed nations must bear the brunt of emissions reductions.

Both of these positions have merit. Given the trajectory of climate impacts, however, both are suicidal. The atmosphere is a unified system, which makes climate change the first truly global environmental problem affecting all people and critters that inhabit the Earth. Climate change is also the first indisputable global political problem, because no matter who adds more emissions, every nation will be affected. Every nation must, therefore, be party to solutions.

The consequences of climate change, however, are not proportional. The nations that contributed the most to today's crises — starting with the United States — can protect themselves somewhat through engineered solutions. The developing nations that have contributed little will, at least initially, experience the harshest impacts. This suggests that the United States has first-mover responsibilities.

Global interdependence and mutual responsibility are tough for most governments to grasp. However, if we are to avoid severe climate change, officials here and abroad must come to grips with this new reality.

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