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Before the
Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis

February 13, 2020

Opening Statement

Senator Duckworth, Chairman Schatz, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the ways in which climate change affects national security.

My name is John Conger and I am the director of the Center for Climate and Security, a think tank with an advisory board of distinguished retired military and security leaders that is focused squarely on the challenges posed by climate change to our national security. CCS is an institute of the Council on Strategic Risks, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to anticipating, analyzing, and addressing core systemic risks to security in the 21st Century. Obviously climate change is one of the most pressing.

When I was in DoD, I served both as the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) and before that for several years as the OSD official with oversight over roughly a trillion dollars of DoD infrastructure and led development of the DoD's Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap.

I have a short opening statement, but would like to submit as my written statement our Climate Security Plan for America, a document CCS published but which is co-signed by 64 respected national security officials including 8 retired four-star military officers, a former Chief of Staff of the Army, a former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and a former Commandant of the Coast Guard. This report describes the threat that climate change poses to our national security and outlines dozens of recommendations to address it.

It's clear that senior defense leaders understand that climate change is a significant security issue.

For example, former Secretary Mattis said that “climate change is impacting stability in areas of the world where our troops are operating today.” He cited security impacts such as “increased maritime access to the Arctic, rising sea levels, [and] desertification.”

Similarly, former Chairman Dunford called it a “source of conflict around the world.”

Each of these senior leaders was describing the way climate change shapes and disrupts our security environment. As the Quadrennial Defense Review described it – it is a threat multiplier. It makes bad situations worse. It adds stress to fragile nations and drives instability.

The case of Syria is often cited. You already had a tenuous situation in Syria with hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Iraq war. However, a record, multi-year drought disrupted Syria's agricultural sector and drove farmers to abandon their farms and move to urban areas, amplifying tension in those regions. I wouldn't say that climate change caused the Syrian civil war, but it certainly impacted the stability of Syria. It was certainly one of the sources of that conflict.

I'd like to highlight two more impacts.

First is the Arctic. With the ice melting and unveiling a whole new ocean, the Navy and the Coast Guard are facing expanding responsibilities. When asked why he was increasing focus in the Arctic, former Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer responded "The damn thing melted."

Russia is increasingly aggressive, moving forces North and exerting its reach into the region. General Scaparrotti, former Commander of European Command testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that he had to change operational plans in response. China is also expanding its influence in the Arctic, seeing it as a valuable economic opportunity, and has more icebreakers than the United States.

Second, there is clearly a climate impact on our installations and infrastructure, and it will get worse. Sea level rise and its impact on coastal installations is the most frequently cited, invoking the Hampton Roads region. Wildfires have forced evacuations and threatened installations, and they are occurring more and more frequently.

But extreme weather has by far the biggest bill associated with it. Consider the \$5 billion it'll cost to restore Tyndall AFB in Florida, the \$3.7 billion cost of repairs at Camp Lejeune on the North Carolina coast, and the billion-dollar cost imposed by the record flooding of the Missouri River that overwhelmed Offutt AFB, Nebraska. These disasters all occurred since late 2018, and they crystallize the importance of focusing on resilient infrastructure both at DoD and across the nation.

I'll offer one final thought as I close. The national security implications of climate change have actually been a fruitful area of bipartisan cooperation in Congress, and I would like to thank you for your efforts. In 2017, Congress passed – and the President signed – legislation that declared climate change to be a direct threat to national security. For the last three years, defense authorization acts have incorporated pragmatic, bipartisan resilience measures that have been very constructive – including two key bills authored by Chairman Schatz. I am hopeful that climate security can and will remain a bipartisan issue.