

PROTECT, PREVENT & PREPARE

A CLIMATE & SECURITY
ACTION PLAN FOR AUSTRALIA





THE CLIMATE THREAT IS RECOGNISED BY CATASTROPHIC RISK AND SECURITY ANALYSTS AS THE GREATEST THREAT TO CIVILISATION.

Adm. Chris Barrie (Retd)
Former Chief of the Australian Defence Force

Australian Security Leaders Climate Group,
Canberra ACT October 2024

Cover Photo: Australian Army Blackhawk helicopter
flies over flooded Fitzroy River in Rockhampton after
a paralyzing deluge (January 8, 2011).

Photo: Hagadera Refugee Camp south of Dadaab, Kenya
as severe drought continues to ravage East Africa.

KEY ACTIONS

An integrated, whole-of-government understanding of the risks

1. Recognise that climate disruption is an existential risk to human civilisation, and the greatest security threat to Australia and to societies around the world, requiring an emergency mobilisation in response.
2. Establish a Climate Threat Intelligence Unit within the Office of National Intelligence (ONI), with outputs including an annual, de-classified briefing to Parliament.
3. Establish an Abrupt Climate Change Early Warning System coordinated by the Climate Threat Intelligence Unit.
4. Implement an integrated climate risk-management methodology across government, based upon a strategic global perspective of climate risk that avoids silos and recognises the systemic, cascading nature of the climate threat.

Leadership

5. Take leadership in encouraging national and international preparedness and prevention (emissions mitigation) to address the climate threat, and in engaging the Australian community about climate-security risks.
6. Make human security and the Australian community central to the duty of government to "protect the people", recognising that securitising climate threats through enhanced militarisation and claims to national security secrecy are not a coherent response.
7. Build an Australian National Prevention and Resilience Framework with coherent emergency processes across relevant areas including energy and water, logistics, health, industry and agriculture, research and nature.

Regional cooperation and support

8. Understand that global cooperation rather than conflict is key to responding to the climate crisis, and act accordingly by building alliances with big and small Asia-Pacific governments for a regional climate mobilisation.
9. Increase support for developing nations to facilitate their preparedness and prevention plans.
10. Partner with nations in the region to deploy a monitoring system to identify potential food insecurity hotspots, and fund enhancement of food, supply chain and energy resilience in the region.

Protect and prevent

11. Adopt a goal to protect the most vulnerable communities, nations and natural systems.
12. Recognise that the most damaging climate impacts occur at the high end of the range of possibilities, and ensure mitigation actions are consistent with avoiding the plausible worst-case scenarios.
13. Prevent devastating climate impacts by mobilising all the resources necessary to reach zero emissions as fast as possible. Develop the capacity to prevent irreversible tipping points and draw down greenhouse gases back to safer conditions in the long term.

ABOUT THE ASLCG

The Australian Security Leaders Climate Group is a non-partisan network of Australian security and policy professionals. The ASLCG comprises former members of the ADF, the defence sector and Australian national security community, including many senior leaders. The ASLCG Executive members are:



Admiral Chris Barrie AC (Retd) former Chief of the Australian Defence Force. Chris Barrie retired in 2002 after 42 years in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Since then, he has worked on strategic leadership issues as consultant, teacher and mentor at Oxford University, the National Defense University in Washington DC and at the Australian National University.



Air Vice-Marshal John Blackburn AO (Retd) former Deputy Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force and currently the Chair of the Institute for Integrated Economic Research – Australia, and also a consultant in the field of defence and national security. He has extensive experience across the fields of strategy, policy, planning, operational command, capability development and materials acquisition.



Colonel Neil Greet (Retd) a former Australian Army officer with operational service in Iraq and Timor Leste, who led projects in several remote indigenous communities and played a key role in Defence's response to Victoria's 2009 Black Saturday disaster. He is a Director of the Institute of Integrated Economics Research, and the consultancy Collaborative Outcomes.



Cheryl Durrant former Director of Preparedness & Mobilisation, Australian Department of Defence, and was the Defence partner with the Australian National Resilience Taskforce's Disaster Vulnerability Profiling Project. Cheryl served 15 years with the Australian Army, specialising in strategic intelligence, information operations and domestic security.



Major Michael Thomas (Retd) a former Australian Army officer and is a non-resident Senior Fellow with the Washington-based Center for Climate & Security where he co-leads the Indo-Pacific Program. He is also a council member with the International Military Council on Climate and Security and author of *The Securitisation of Climate Change* (2017).



Ian Dunlop a Member of the Club of Rome. He was formerly an international oil, gas and coal industry executive, chair of the Australian Coal Association, CEO of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and chair of the federal government's first emissions trading taskforce, with wide experience in risk management.



Jane Holloway a systems scientist, recently retired from the Australian public service. Over several decades Jane provided research and analysis for various policy areas including Middle East relations, trade and environment, trade and development, agricultural and veterinary chemicals, biotechnology, assets and future of Australia's rangelands (Crown lands), futures analysis, emerging technology assessment, defence preparedness and global change effects.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change now presents a grave, and potentially existential, threat to society and human security.

Today, unimaginable new climate extremes confront us: record-breaking droughts and floods, cruel heatwaves, unstoppable bushfires, broken infrastructure, and coastal inundation. Worse is to come.

In vulnerable countries, governments have collapsed and civil wars have erupted, forcefully displacing millions of people looking for a safe haven.

Instability is on the march. A new insecurity shadows our lives and the relations between nations.

Responding adequately to the climate threat is fundamental to the survival of the nation.

Asia-Pacific, the highest-risk region in the world, faces devastating climate impacts, and Australia as a hot and dry continent is particularly vulnerable.

Great pressure will be placed on the Australian Defence Force, and emergency and disaster relief agencies, to pick up the pieces in the face of accelerating climate impacts. Higher levels of warming will stretch them beyond their capacity to respond.

Inadequate action by Australian governments has left our nation poorly prepared to face global warming's consequences, and Australia remains "missing in action" on climate-security risks.

We have many of the solutions at our disposal. We have the ability to act now, and we need to act now.

The focus should be on the root causes of climate warming, principally eliminating emissions much faster than proposed, rather than primarily responding to the symptoms of floods, fires and related disasters.

The Australian Security Leaders Climate Group proposes a set of initial actions in a climate and security plan to Protect, Prevent and Prepare.

A CLIMATE-SECURITY ACTION PLAN

The action plan has four themes: Demonstrate leadership, Assess climate risks, Coordinate and cooperate, and Act and invest with urgency, all based upon an unflinching assessment of climate risk.

Demonstrate leadership

The first duty of a government is to “protect the people”: their safety and wellbeing, their livelihoods and health. Despite some mistakes along the way, governments at State and federal levels committed to protecting the Australian people from Covid-19 with a set of policies and actions that required national, coordinated leadership that were not politically easy.

That leadership was open about the risks and the solutions, the choices, the costs and the benefits, and the long-term outcome. Money was not spared in boosting research, getting the best expert advice, and communicating what needed to be done.

The usual administrative arrangements were put to one side, as necessary, to build integrated and whole-of-government responses, including the establishment of the national cabinet and new administrative arrangements in the States.

We urge that similar energy and application be applied to climate-security risks with demonstrable leadership to:

- **Show** the Australian people that our leaders care by committing to protect the Australian people with imaginative and credible emergency mobilisation climate plans to safeguard our future.
- **Acknowledge** climate disruption as an existential risk to society, a threat to the stability of nations and to the relationships between them.
- **Seize** the initiative by conducting informed, national public conversations and working with all levels of government, communities, business and academia.
- **Put** human security and the Australian community at the centre of the conversation about the duty of government to “protect the people”, recognising that securitising climate threats through enhanced militarisation is not a coherent response.

Assess the risks

The risks are existential in character, requiring a precautionary approach to risk management.

The Covid-19 response shines a light on managing the risks: governments were very frank about the risks, especially those at the high-end of the range of possibilities. In many cases, more ICU beds were prepared than it turned out were necessary, because the other possibility – not enough beds – was not to be countenanced. What would happen if a similar approach was taken to climate disruption, where policymakers erred on the side of being over-prepared, rather than under-prepared?

Ongoing analysis of climate-security risk from a specialist branch of Climate Threat Intelligence within ONI could break down bureaucratic silos, provide regular assessments by consistent monitoring, and be a foundation for policy development. But it must be publicly available, and not classified in conventional national security terms.

Actions should include:

- **Establish** a Climate Threat Intelligence branch within the Office of National Intelligence (ONI), with outputs including an annual, de-classified briefing to Parliament;
- **Prepare** for plausible worst-case scenarios by establishing an Abrupt Climate Change Early Warning System coordinated by the Climate Threat Intelligence Unit¹;
- **Rebuild** the climate science and risk-analysis capacity of the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology, and the climate policy-making capacity of the Australian Public Service;

- **Assess** the threats and impacts of climate disruption with brutal honesty, identifying the worst, as well as most likely, cases and considering the full range of probabilities.

Coordinate and cooperate

Some of governments' most notable risk-management failures have been due to "thinking in silos" and not adopting a coordinated, whole-of-government or whole-of-system approach to understanding risks, of which the failures to foresee the 9/11 attacks and the Global Financial Crisis are but two notable examples. The need to integrate risk analysis, policies and action across federal government departments, and between all levels of government, cannot be overemphasised.

Coordination is also important in Australia's response to a changing climate. We have witnessed the consequences of being ill-prepared for the impacts of some extreme climate events, such as bushfires, and the lack of readily-available equipment when Covid-19 affected Australia. Our oil energy supply lines are insecure, as is our national logistical capacity in the face of cyclones and floods. An Australian National Resilience Framework is required for these, and broader, issues.

On climate action, global cooperation – not conflict – is key. Harvard professor and former US Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers says that coronavirus had helped "to usher in a world where security depends more on exceeding a threshold of cooperation with allies and adversaries alike than on maintaining a balance of power"².

¹ For discussion on the need for such a system, see Showstack, R 2013, 'Concern About Abrupt Climate Changes Prompts Call for Early Warning System', *Eos*, vol. 94, pp. 498-499.

² Summers, L 2020, 'Covid-19 looks like a hinge in history', *Financial Times*, 14 May.

The world needs a robust climate pact for security, which involves all the major emitting countries, including China, which is today the world's biggest emitter. But the USA and China account for 40% of today's global emissions. Before the Paris climate talks in 2015, the USA and China announced their own climate deal. The US and China must work together toward a climate and security pact, with Australia strongly encouraging its development.

Actions should include:

- **Implement** an integrated climate risk-management methodology across government, based upon a strategic global perspective of climate risk that avoids silos and recognises the systemic, cascading nature of the climate threat.
- **Coordinate** a holistic, whole-of-government approach, building capacity across the public service and government agencies, and at all levels of government.
- **Cooperate** with big and small Asia-Pacific governments to build alliances for climate action, understanding that cooperation rather than conflict is key to responding to the climate crisis.
- **Build** an Australian National Prevention and Resilience Framework with coherent processes across areas including energy and water, logistics, health, industry and agriculture, research and nature.

Act and invest with urgency: Protect, prevent and prepare

Climate impacts disproportionately fall on the most vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Building their capacity to withstand and respond to climate shocks is a key task in ameliorating climate-security risks, both in Australia and globally, and preventing social breakdown, conflict and forced displacement. This must encompass both mitigation and adaptation.

Reducing the risks through adaptation strategies will not be effective at the higher levels of warming that are on the horizon. "Resilience and adaptation buys us time, but ultimately there is no way to insulate ourselves from the massive disruption that would be caused by unmitigated climate change," says Prof. Michael E. Mann.³ Due to some inertia between emissions and impacts, hard and fast reductions right now in greenhouse gas emissions provide the best opportunity to manage climate-security risks.

Being prepared demands a focus on inclusive and integrated responses "that build resilience against both climate and conflict risks and include a special focus on 'no regret options' in the face of uncertainty and shifting probabilities of climate-related hazards and future socio-political developments".⁴

³ Rozsa, M 2021, 'As climate change disrupts supply chains, American life is poised to change drastically', Salon, 5 August 2021.

⁴ Rüttinger, L et al., 2021, Weathering risk, adelphi research gemeinnützige GmbH./Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact, Berlin/Potsdam.

The Australian Government should adopt a policy of Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent, which systematically and holistically addresses climate security risks, with national, regional and international adaptability, to decrease the probability of instability and conflict, and promote adaptive pathways and sustainable development. The complex, transnational and cross-sectoral nature of climate risks demands such a comprehensive approach.

Actions should include:

- **Adopt** a goal to protect the most vulnerable communities, nations and natural systems.
- **Recognise** that the most damaging climate impacts occur at the high end of the range of possibilities, and ensure mitigation actions are consistent with avoiding the plausible worst-case scenarios.
- **Prevent** devastating climate impacts by mobilising all the resources necessary to reach zero emissions as fast as possible. Develop the capacity to prevent irreversible tipping points and draw down greenhouse gases back to safer conditions in the long term.
- **Prepare** to manage the risks and respond to the challenges of living in a climate-change-disrupted world with a responsibility to prepare and prevent.
- **Increase** support for developing nations to allow them to accelerate their climate action plans.
- **Partner** with nations in the region to deploy a monitoring system to identify potential food insecurity hotspots, and fund enhancement of food production, supply chains and resilience in the region.

Climate disruption by 2050

Consequences of the major systemic risk dynamics identified by an expert elicitation process conducted by the leading UK based policy think tank, Chatham House, in 2021:

Migration and displacement of people

- Rural to urban
- Refugee crisis
- Forced/unsafe migration
- Forced immobility (trapped populations)

Armed conflict

- Regional conflicts
- Rise of extremist groups
- Police/military intervention
- Organized crime and violence
- Conflict between people and states
- Civil war and war

Destabilization of markets

- Commodity price spikes
- Fall of asset prices
- Large-scale asset sell-off
- Falling stock markets
- Underfunded pension funds
- Financial market collapse

Source: *Climate Change Risk Assessment 2021*, Chatham House, London

ABOUT ASLCG

Climate change represents an unprecedented existential security threat, undermining the stability of our planetary systems, with implications across the full spectrum of human endeavour: from individuals and communities, to the nation-state, and regional and international relations.

Higher temperatures; more extreme weather events, including heatwaves, cyclones and fires; changes to local climates threatening water and food supply; and rising sea levels are all examples of major threats affecting our global and national security. These accelerating climate impacts are expected to increase the risk of civil unrest, conflicts and fuel mass refugee movement within our region over the coming decades.

This threatens Australia's security in many ways, including our energy security; our export market and vital imports, which are at risk from disruption to production and supply chains; breakdown in social cohesion; and the potential for state failure and regional crises.

However, right now climate-security risks are not being fully assessed or understood in Australia. There is a poor understanding of the systemic security risks posed by climate change, which constitutes a major strategic gap. As a result, Australia is failing in its responsibilities as a global citizen, as a major strategic defence ally, and to protect people. Our nation is ill-prepared for climate impacts and the security implications in one of the highest risk regions in the world, the Indo-Pacific.

Key facts

- Climate change is a current and existential security risk.⁵
- Climate risks are not being fully assessed in Australia, leaving us ill-prepared.
- Australia and the near region are on the front-line of climate security threats.
- Climate change is accelerating⁶, efforts to adequately respond to the speed and scale of the climate threat are currently failing.
- Our allies are acting now. In the US, the Biden administration has elevated climate change to a high-level national security issue, with significant stature within its security decision-making.⁷


Threats within our region

- The Indo-Pacific region is "Disaster Alley" for climate change, with threats including:
- In Bangladesh a 1m sea-level rise would flood 20% of the land and displace an estimated 30 million people.
- China already has a chronic water problem, as it accounts for 20% of the world's population but only 7 percent of its fresh water.
- In India, the extreme heat that threatens its population's capacity to survive is projected to become more frequent.
- Vietnam faces the inundation and salination of the Mekong Delta, one of the most important agricultural regions in the world.
- In Afghanistan and Central Asia, a loss of the Himalayan and associated mountain glaciers would threaten water availability of many nations.

5 Final Report, Senate Committee Inquiry into 'Implications of climate change for Australia's national security'

6 Based on 5-year average for second half of each decade, from NASA dataset: 2005-2009 (above 1880-1909)

7 0.89°C; 2015-2019 1.16°C.3 Xu, Y, Ramanathan V & Victor, DG 2018



**RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION
BUYS US TIME, BUT ULTIMATELY
THERE IS NO WAY TO INSULATE
OURSELVES FROM THE MASSIVE
DISRUPTION THAT WOULD
BE CAUSED BY UNMITIGATED
CLIMATE CHANGE.**

Prof. Michael E. Mann

Photo: An Australian Army Chinook flight during the evacuation of local civilian residents as bushfires burn Across East Gippsland (January 2, 2020).

