

## **Risky Business: The Long Term Impacts of the Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot**

Jacob Wellman  
*University of New Mexico*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>  
pp. 407-414

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Wellman, Jacob. "Risky Business: The Long Term Impacts of the Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot." *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 3 Suppl. (2013): 407-414.

This Papers is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

---

## **Risky Business: The Long Term Impacts of the Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot**

# **Risky Business: The Long Term Impacts of the Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot**

Jacob Wellman

*National Security Studies Program*

*University of New Mexico*

## **Introduction**

The impacts of a changing climate are only beginning to become clear, but their predicted impacts paint a picture of a troubled world, with physical changes driving millions away from their homes, natural disasters threatening untold damage, and agricultural systems disrupted by new temperature patterns. The effects of global climate change will be, as the term suggests, worldwide, but some regions are less prepared or harbor larger populations in areas that will be most drastically affected by climatic shifts, rising oceans, and agricultural disruptions.

President Obama's fall 2011 directive to expand and intensify the U.S. military presence in the South Asia-Pacific regions has already resulted in the reallocation of resources and personnel in the region and will continue to remain at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy, remaining unaffected by discussions around strategic funding cuts. As this 'pivot' of forces is perceived to bolster and balance American influence against Chinese interests, it is anticipated that this focus will continue through many future administrations.

As the United States has long been relied upon for leadership among natural disasters and tragic events affect broad populations in the developing world, the climate-driven impacts in the South Asia-Pacific region will be highly relevant to U.S. military strategy and activity. The following report details the project impacts from global climate change predicted for the region the U.S. military is currently transitioning to under the President's order.

## **Findings**

Climate change, a global threat, will impact some regions of the world differently than others. Because of differences in human populations throughout these regions, these disparate impacts will cause much more damage in both human and economic terms in the Asia-Pacific region than in Western Europe and the Middle East. United Nations reports predict that this region could experience temperature variations of over 3 degrees more than the Middle East.

Due to the Obama Administration's rebalancing of U.S. military forces to the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. military mission will be impacted by devastating climate impacts in Southeast Asia and on island Pacific nations predicted by the UN Environmental Program's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Included in these predictions are warnings of inequity in both initial impacts of climate change and divergent abilities for countries to respond and adapt to such impacts with disproportionate impacts on developing countries. As the Asia-Pacific region is predicted to be both more harshly impacted from physical damages of climate change and to have less capacity to adapt to changes than other regions of the world, the U.S. military forces will have a heavy role in assisting damaged populations.

The rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region, or 'Pacific Pivot', is predicted to shift 100,000 troops in surrounding countries as well as multiple Naval war ships to the South China Sea. The predicted crisis that will be caused by climate change in the Asia-Pacific region will create a need for American military forces to intervene and provide humanitarian relief. Both the country and the military must prepare for this dimension of the Pacific Pivot.

In 1988, the United Nations Environmental Programme and the World Meteorological Organization jointly formed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide scientific analysis of climate change, its impacts and strategies from adaptation. This body assesses the work of thousands of scientists from around the world to provide a consensus international opinion on climate change. Since its formation, the IPCC has published reports on extreme weather behavior, regional predictions for climate impacts, adaptations needed by changes brought on from climate change, and many more consensus documents on how climate change will alter the physical world and what social, economic, and political impacts it will bring. One of the trends identified in IPCC reports is that "those with the least resources have the least capacity to adapt and are the most vulnerable."<sup>1</sup> Although the panel has produced evidence of drastic changes in environments all over the globe, ability to adapt to environmental changes varies across populations according to wealth, infrastructure, and geography. In a 2001 report, the IPCC found that, in Asia, "adaptive capacity of human systems is low and vulnerability [to climate impacts] is high." More recently, the panel announced that, in the case of extreme weather events, "fatality rates and economic losses expressed as a proportion of gross domestic product are higher in developing countries."<sup>2</sup>

Pronounced impacts of climate change on Asia and in developing countries at large are significant to US foreign policy for two reasons. First of all, the United States is expected to play an important role in leading international responses to natural disasters around the globe. The nation's current National Security Strategy makes a strong commitment to caring for humans wherever there is need, specifically in the case of emerging challenges: "It would be destructive to both American national security and global security if the United States used the emergence of new challenges and the shortcomings of the international system as a reason to walk away."<sup>3</sup> This White House document makes a clear commitment to humanitarian efforts, stating that "a changing climate portends a future in which the United States must be better prepared and resourced to exercise robust leadership to help meet critical humanitarian needs." Second, an increased US military presence in highly impacted regions will necessitate leadership and agility in the US response to climate impacts in Asia. The Defense Department's strategic guidance directive from January of this year calls for the United States to "expand our networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests."<sup>4</sup> Already, at the start of this "Pacific pivot", the administration has deployed naval ships to the region and planned to send 2500 Marines to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *A Report of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva: United Nations, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation: Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Obama, Barack. *National Security Strategy*. Washington: United State Government, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington: United States Government, 2012.

stationed in Australia.<sup>5</sup> These investments are seen as down payments for a presence that will grow as military obligations elsewhere recede.

## US Foreign Policy and the 'Pivot'

From the conclusion of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, American foreign policy was clear and well-known. "The clear and present danger Soviet arms posed to the United States during the Cold War made the development of a consensus about the need to resist the Soviet Union relatively easy."<sup>6</sup> The Cold War saw a grand strategy of containment, with the United States doing all in its economic and military power to contain communism to the countries it currently existed in and stop its spread to other nations. This strategy was characterized by the Marshall Plan, America's commitment to providing resources to democratic countries as incentive for them to stay democratic and resist communist courting. Through this lens, foreign policy decisions were simple if not easy. America's national security calculus included not only protecting the physical borders and citizens of the United States, but it also valued the protection of any democracy under threat from a communist power--specifically the Soviet Union. Since the conclusion of the Cold War, America has wrestled with various forms of grand strategy. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States sat atop a global structure that it controlled by being able to fend off any foe. This "unipolar moment... began with the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and ended with the collapse of the Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008" and defined America's unmatched leadership as a stretch of time in which "the United States had no military peer... and fought one big war in the Persian Gulf and three lesser ones in the Balkans and Afghanistan."<sup>7</sup> Since the Great Recession, US GDP has fallen to second in the world behind the European Union and threatened by the growth of China's. This uncertainty of the United States' place as an unmatched global force necessitates shift in foreign policy post-recession.

Grand strategies "lay out a vision for how American power can be used to pursue national interests and values in a shifting global environment."<sup>8</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the world has changed in many fundamental ways. Rarely do states pose a threat to America or its global interests. Instead, our military is left tracking and fighting non-state terrorist groups sprinkled across the globe, free-standing from international legal requirements or limits on behavior. Climate change brings with it shortages in natural resources that already are stirring conflicts within and among political actors over allocation and use. With an increasingly gridlocked political system, the need for the United States to articulate a long-term strategy to guide priorities and decisions in Washington is nothing short of urgent. Military scholars have called for a fundamental shift in strategy from unitary leadership to cooperative collaboration on global

<sup>5</sup> Congressional Research Service. *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia*. Washington: US Congress, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Kagan, Frederick F. "Grand Strategy for the United States." In *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, by Michèle Flournoy, Shawn Brimley, Robert J. Art, Sarah Sewal and Vikram J. Singh, 61-80. Washington: Center for a New American Strategy, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Art, Robert J. "Selective Engagement in the Era of Austerity." In *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, by Richard Fontaine and Kristin M. Lord, 13-28. Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Fontaine, Richard, and Kristin M. Lord. "Introduction: Debating America's Future." In *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, by Richard Fontaine and Kristin M. Lord, 3-12. Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2012.

issues of security and peace. In “A National Strategic Narrative”, a Navy Captain and Marine Corps Colonel call for a shift from “a strategy of containment to a strategy of sustainment; from an emphasis on power and control to an emphasis on strength and influence; from a defensive posture of exclusion, to a proactive posture of engagement.”<sup>9</sup>

In January of this year, President Obama announced that the United States will “focus on a broader range of challenges and opportunities, including the security and prosperity of the Asia Pacific.”<sup>10</sup> An accompanying Defense Department report outlines a greater case for an American presence in Asia:

“U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. We will emphasize our existing alliances, which provide a vital foundation for Asia-Pacific security. We will also expand our networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.”<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 depicts some of the Administration’s announced plans for building up a major American presence in the Asia-Pacific region. With nearly 100,000 ground troops, stationed naval ships, and negotiations underway for larger presences in Australia and the Philippines, this map portrays how populated the Southeast of the region will be with American forces. In addition, the Defense Department has indicated that this shift will impact its force reduction exercise, resulting in greater cuts in Army and Marine forces than from the Navy, as the Pacific is considered a naval theater.<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of the Pacific pivot in long-range force planning indicates that the Asia-Pacific focus may be the closest policy produced from the Pentagon to resemble a post-recession Grand Strategy. Given a long-term commitment to the region, it is useful to explore the risks and predicted future of the area over the course of a U.S. rebalancing of forces in the Asia-Pacific region.

## The Climate Threat

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has amassed data and findings related to climate change since 1990. Among the panel’s publications is a regional analysis of risks and impacts from climate change, published in 1997 and updated in an

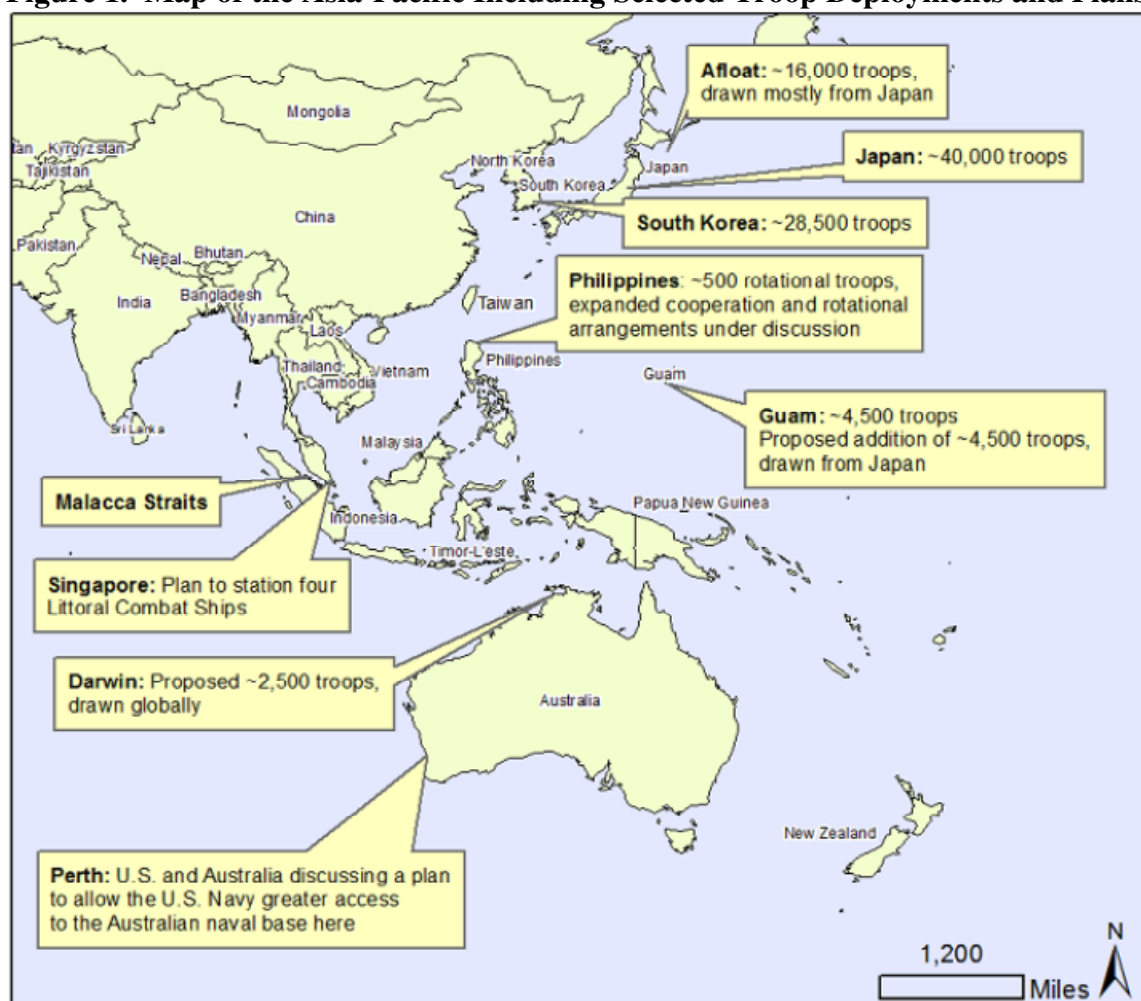
---

<sup>9</sup> Porter, Wayne, and Mark “Puck” Mykleby. *A National Strategic Narrative*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington: United States Government, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington: United States Government, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Congressional Research Service. *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia*. Washington: US Congress, 2012.

**Figure 1. Map of the Asia-Pacific Including Selected Troop Deployments and Plans**

*Congressional Research Service (2012)*

expanded report in 2012. The global impacts of climate change have also been detailed in IPCC reports and include rising ocean levels, loss of biodiversity, shifts in agricultural production, increase in disease, increased extreme weather events, reduced fresh water supply, and human health and justice issues related to previous impacts.<sup>13</sup> The most applicable use of this information, though, will be to compare the change in risks the United States faces as a result of rebalancing forces from the Middle East and Europe to the Asia-Pacific region.

With U.S. forces recently drawn down in Iraq and currently at a high in Afghanistan, the climate impacts for the Middle East can establish a baseline for comparison. A regional study conducted by the IPCC in 1997 warns of increased desertification of the region, reduced wheat output in Pakistan (a potentially unstable area) and Kazakhstan, as well as an intensification of present environmental threats.<sup>14</sup> For example, the area “is vulnerable to water shortages, and climate

<sup>13</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change: The IPCC Impacts Assessment*. Australia: United Nations, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *IPCC Special Report: The Regional Impacts of Climate Change*. Geneva: United Nations, 1997.

change is likely to exacerbate this problem.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Europe boasts a high “adaptive capacity” to climate impacts, lessening the severity of changes in weather and water levels when compared to other regions. In fact, some areas of the continent will benefit from longer growing seasons and be agriculturally improved by climate change.<sup>16</sup>

Comparatively, the Asia-Pacific region defined by the US Defense Department’s 2012 Strategic Directive lies more vulnerable to climate change in a number of ways. In contrast with the developed countries of Europe, the Asia-Pacific region is defined by high vulnerability and low adaptive capacity to climate impacts. Further, this region is more vulnerable to extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, forest fires, and tropical cyclones. For the same reasons that led the Defense Department to preserve the number of ships currently in the US Navy, the region also has lots of coasts and is therefore especially susceptible to rising sea levels. “Sea-level rise and an increase in the intensity of tropical cyclones would displace tens of millions of people in low-lying coastal areas of temperate and tropical Asia.”<sup>17</sup> Disease will be particularly problematic in Asia-Pacific as “malaria, schistosomiasis and dengue—which are significant causes of mortality and morbidity in Tropical Asia—are very sensitive to climate and are likely to spread into new regions on the margins of presently endemic areas as a consequence of climate change.”<sup>18</sup> The refugee issue caused by displacement from rising sea levels and health risks from increased disease contraction are hardly conditions that cannot be ignored by the wealthiest nation on Earth.

Of even greater concern than these continental disparities are the impacts upon small-island states that populate the Southeast Asia-Pacific region. One island (Majuro atoll) would be 80% covered by a 1 meter rise in sea level. Entire ecosystems and even full populations would be disrupted and displaced by climate impacts. Figure 2 shows how temperature increases vary across regions. While West Asia is predicted to experience 2-degree temperature increases in the next 45 years and 1.5-degree increase after that, both East Asia and Australia are predicted to see almost 5-degree warmer temperature in the short term followed by over 2-degree long term additional increases. So far, terrorist threats are substantially reduced in the Asia-Pacific region—compared to the Middle East, but the risks posed by climate change are substantially greater in the Asia-Pacific region, a change which will require much planning and preparation from the United States to assist in adaptation and reducing vulnerability to climate impacts.

---

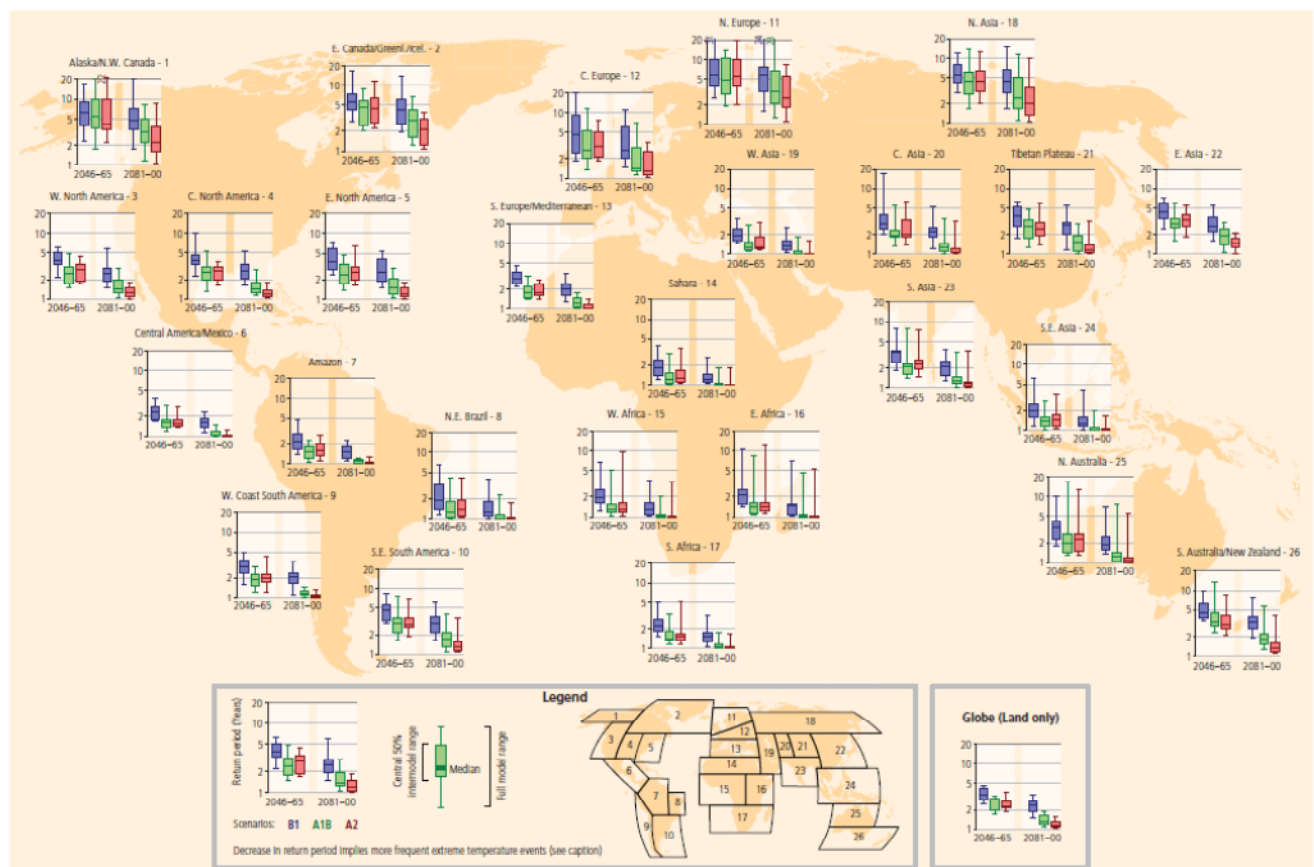
<sup>15</sup> Pumphrey, Carolyn. *Global Climate Change: National Security Implications*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *A Report of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva: United Nations, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *A Report of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva: United Nations, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *A Report of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva: United Nations, 2001.



**Figure 2. Projected Regional Temperature Changes.**

*Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2012)*

These climate risks are absent from any government analysis of the pivot and will need to be factored into future calculations. As climate impacts are better understood and the developed world's role in assisting those countries hit hardest by the climate of 2100 and its subsequent woes.

## The Military and Climate Change

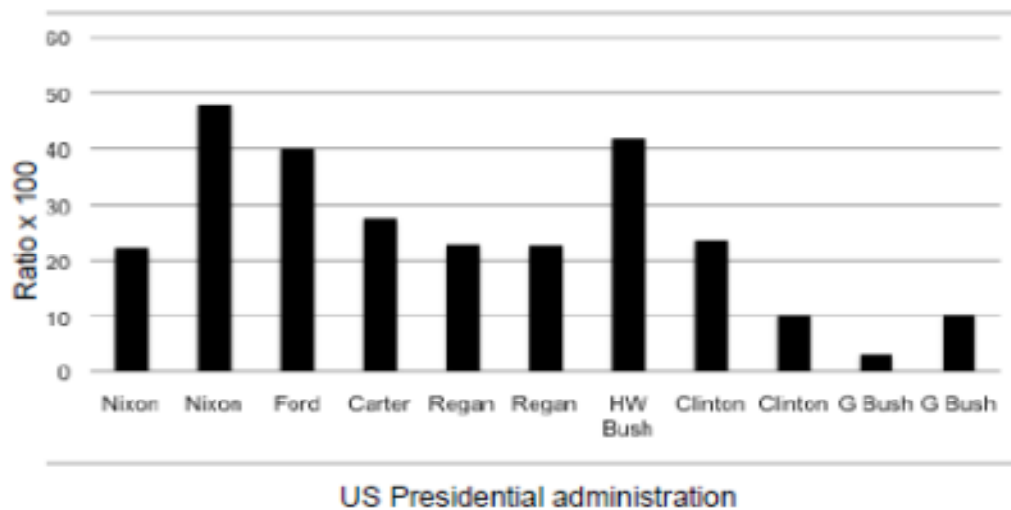
Without regard to regional location, climate impacts will affect the United States military due to its status as the primary responder to natural disasters across the world. In the case of past observed disasters, "higher-category storms tend to draw military forces because of the extent of the damage and the destruction caused to traditional infrastructure... that would support civilian response".<sup>19</sup> With an increase in extreme events, this trend would predict further activity for the US military. "Climate change is likely to cause an increase in demand for military forces in both disaster response and humanitarian assistance operations" while at the same time "climate change may introduce significant 'non-linearities' in the system of response, aid, security, and stability, making simple projections of future requirements extremely difficult."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> McGrady, Ed, Maria Kingsley, and Jessica Stewart. *Climate Change: Potential Effects on Demands for US Military Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response*. Alexandria: CAN Analysis Solutions, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> McGrady, Ed, Maria Kingsley, and Jessica Stewart. *Climate Change: Potential Effects on Demands for US Military Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response*. Alexandria: CAN Analysis Solutions, 2010

McGrady et al found that with rising political pressure required to deploy US forces that the military response to natural disasters has receded. Figure 3 demonstrates this decline over each U.S. presidential term since Richard Nixon. If this trend were to continue, the Asia-Pacific region would find itself with lots of U.S. military troops, an increasing rate of climate disasters resulting in death and displacement for huge populations, and no help from the West due to political obstacles. However, with the round-the-clock American media cycle of natural disasters, domestic pressure for action may reverse this trend. In order to maintain relationships with partner and host countries in the region, US forces will have to engage in humanitarian activity in the region. Past instances reveal a pattern of assistance, even in non-strategic instances. For example, the US has continually provided assistance to North Korea even though relations between the two countries have long been sour.

**Figure 3. Ratio of humanitarian responses to natural disasters.**



*McGrady, et al (2010)*

The extreme natural disaster events projected by climate change will fundamentally change the need for humanitarian assistance, an international need that has often been fulfilled by the US military. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to climate impacts because of its tropical climate, populated coastlines, and dangerous diseases. With America's recent shift to a long-term presence in Southeast Asia, its military will need to prepare for humanitarian assistance in climate-related events.