Inside the CIA's Decades-Long Climate "Spy" Campaign

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Rachel Santarsiero Friday, Feb 7, 2025 7:00AM

by Rachel Santarsiero

For decades, the Central Intelligence Agency—an organization best known for its espionage and secret missions—has been spying on climate change. Well, maybe not *spying*. Not at first, at least.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA conducted a top-secret US program using satellite imagery to capture images of Soviet military installations. The program, codenamed CORONA, dramatically improved U.S. knowledge of Soviet and other nations' capabilities and activities, and allowed the U.S. to catalog Soviet air defense and anti-ballistic missile sites, nuclear weapons related facilities, submarine bases, IRBM sites, airbases—as well as Chinese and other national military facilities. In total, the CORONA mission, along with sister programs ARGON and LANYARD, yielded almost a million images of the Soviet Union and other areas of the world.

While these satellites were capturing images of Soviet bases, however, they were unknowingly spying on something else: climate change.

Because satellites typically orbit on north-south paths, their sensors can capture the vast majority of the Earth's surface as the planet turns over the course of a 24 hour period, cataloging sweeping Arctic and Antarctic images. Over the twelve years that CORONA was in operation, the satellite captured approximately 850,000 static images of retreating polar ice, ecosystems' extent and structures, species' populations and habitats, and human pressures on the environment.

Due to their highly classified nature, these images weren't readily available for public and scientific use. In the early 1990s At the urging of first Senator and then Vice President Al Gore for the CIA and National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) to consider releasing environmental information gleaned from classified data, the CIA established the Environmental Task Force (ETF) to review the classified reconnaissance CORONA satellite imagery and determine whether or not "classified information could help on particular

scientific questions." According to a 1996 speech by former Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch, the ETF found that data collected by the Intelligence Community (IC) could fill critical gaps for the environmental science community and could be studied outside of the spy community without revealing "sources and methods."

The ETF quickly evolved into the MEDEA program, a name chosen, not as an acronym, but for the headstrong Greek Mythological figure Medea, and as a complement to another government advisory group, JASON. The MEDEA program gave 70 scientists high-level security clearances to understand satellite technology, orbits, sensors, and calibration so they could evaluate whether the highly classified spy satellite imagery and data could be released to the public.

In 1995, the world finally learned about the existence of the novel imaging reconnaissance satellite when President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12951, effectively releasing all 850,000 images from the CORONA, ARGON, and LANYARD spy satellites. Vice President Gore visited CIA headquarters to announce the EO, and the event marked one of the largest declassification efforts in U.S. history.

Today, these Cold War-era images fill a critical gap in environmental scientists' understanding of the planet's surface during the 20th century, and the full imagery archive has been transferred to the National Archive and Records Administration (NARA) and Earth Resources Observations Systems (EROS) Data Center.

The end of the Cold War, and the fruit of Gore's open-access initiative, also presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to share data via the U.S.-Russia joint effort of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission (GCC). Through the GCC's Environmental Working Group (EWG) MEDEA played an integral role in facilitating the development of a series of digital atlases that included Arctic data shared between the U.S. and Russia.

The MEDEA program was also a key driver in the IC's more concerted environmental analyses, and the program's successes led to the creation of the Director of Central Intelligence's (DCI) Environmental Center, which published intelligence briefs to boost environmental intelligence efforts spearheaded by national intelligence officers for global and multilateral affairs. Although the MEDEA program and the DCI Environmental Center continued throughout the 1990s with White House support from President Clinton, both programs were shuttered in 2001 under President George W. Bush. MEDEA was revived again in 2008 under President Obama with the help of Senator Dianne Feinstein and ran until 2015.

Despite the MEDEA's demise, its legacy lives on through projects like the Global Fiducials Program (GFP), an effort which initially collected and archived more than 20,000 fixed images, called fiducial points. Even while MEDEA was terminated from 2001 to 2008, the

GFP collected thousands of high-resolution images, providing an uninterrupted record of images for current and future Earth Scientists.

Around the same time that the CIA was employing spies and scientists alike to study earth systems imagery, the IC's growing emphasis on the environment as a security concern became more apparent through its National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) products. The NIE is a classified document published by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) that assesses a national issue and provides information on likely future events. Through a formalized process, the NIC will create an NIE to project existing military, political, and economic trends into the future and to estimate for policymakers the likely implications of those trends. Although nominally these reports are perhaps the most authoritative written judgement of the IC, other intelligence products, like the President's Daily Briefs (PDBs) hold much more sway, while NIE's are usually resolved to "sit on the shelf."

In January 1999, the NIC published its first environmentally focused NIE. The report concentrated on the "Environmental Outlook in Russia" and predicted that, over the next decade, Russia will be "unable to deal effectively with the formidable environmental challenges posed by decades of Soviet and post-Soviet environmental mismanagement." Although the report makes no mention of global warming or climate change, the NIC's emphasis on environmental concerns like water pollution, air quality, solid, hazardous, and nuclear waste generation, marked a divergence from its typical focus on adversary-centered threats.

In the 2000s, even as the George W. Bush administration stymied the CIA's climate intel efforts and officially pulled out of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the issue of climate change as a tangible security threat was taking hold. In 2007, a group of retired generals on the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) Military Advisory Board published its report "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change," one of the first publicly collaborative efforts within the U.S. military establishment to acknowledge climate as a national security issue.

The intelligence community had to respond. In 2008, at the behest of Congress (and specifically the late Senator Dianne Feinstein) the NIC produced its own National Intelligence Assessment (NIA) on the National Security Implications of Global Climate Change to 2030. The NIC's decision to produce an NIA, rather than the typical NIE, was deliberate. According to lead NIA author Dr. Thomas Fingar in his 2008 testimony before Congress, this assessment used "a fundamentally different kind of analytical methodological from what is typical for an intelligence product such as a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE)." Instead, the authors depended heavily on open sources and outside expertise at the US Climate Change Science Program, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Despite the NIC's reliance on open-source resources, the 2008 NIA remains classified at the confidential level after almost 17 years. Dr. Fingar attributes this to IC concerns over naming specific countries vulnerable to climate change. The thinking here is, what happens when ambassadors of named countries can point to a U.S. intelligence report that could ultimately support calls for additional climate aid and funding? This argument loses its footing, however, when you consider that the NIC's most recent NIE on climate change, the 2021 "Climate Change and International Responses to US National Security Through 2040," singles out specific countries for their particular climate vulnerabilities, like Iran, which, as the report predicts, will experience severe droughts and heat waves leading to increased food insecurity and greater instability, conflict, and displacement.

Throughout the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the IC has continued to publish a slew of intelligence reports about or mentioning climate change, such as its Annual and Worldwide Threat Assessments, Global Trends Reports, and National Intelligence Strategies. The agency even commemorated the establishment of its Center on Climate Change and National Security in 2009.

All this outward promotion of the IC's work on climate change begs the question, *why has the 2008 NIA remained classified?* As part of its climate change transparency efforts, government watchdog non-profit National Security Archive has since publicly called for the report's declassification and submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) on the grounds that its confidential classification indicates no source-and-method information within the document. Additionally, the report could provide the public with critical insights into how climate change may affect U.S. national security in the years to come.

When examining Dr. Fingar's 2008 Testimony, it's evident that this classified assessment would fill in critical gaps in our understanding of climate threats that other publicly available IC reports don't. Take the 2021 NIE mentioned above. According to former intelligence analyst Dr. Rod Schoonover, the newer report "downplays the risks" of the climate crisis. Not only does the assessment continue to make the same points "which we knew 15 years ago," it is also straightjacketed by the "threat multiplier" rhetoric established by the retired generals cohort in the 2007 CNA climate report. The report ultimately warns that Americans will face "massive" impacts and "wrenching" adjustments because of climate change, but the warning is buried on the last page of the report.

Now, less than three tumultuous weeks into a second Donald Trump administration, it's unclear if the intelligence community will continue its albeit business-as-usual approach of the last decade in evaluating climate as a security risk, or if its work will come grinding to a halt due to this administration's extreme censorship and suppression tactics.

That theme isn't new. In the last Trump administration, the White House blocked Dr. Schoonover's testimony before the House Intelligence and Energy Committees from being published, an order that was signed off on by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The testimony was later leaked and posted by *The Washington Post*, and Schoonover, a veteran analyst at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), resigned.

As President Trump's second term begins, his administration—packed with climate denying cronies tied to the fossil fuel industry—has already begun to wipe critical climate resources and data from government websites. And while there are some things Trump *could* do that would be a service to the scientific community, like calling for the mass declassification of the next generation of satellite imagery, it's still unclear at this stage if the intelligence community will continue, or even be allowed, to analyze environmental intelligence. How are you supposed to evaluate a threat that doesn't exist?

Rachel Santarsiero is the director of the National Security Archive's Climate Change Transparency Project. She first joined the Archive in 2022 as a Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellow and was one of the first Scoville Fellows to concentrate on climate change as a security issue. She also worked closely on the organization's Digital National Security Collection, *Targeting Iraq, Part II: War and Occupation, 2004-2011.* Santarsiero holds a Master of Science in International Development from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) where she concentrated on issues related to climate change and migration in North Africa. She also has a dual Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering and Professional Writing from WPI, with a minor in International and Global Studies. Prior to joining the Archive, Santarsiero worked as a professional civil engineer on climate resiliency and adaptation projects throughout New England.