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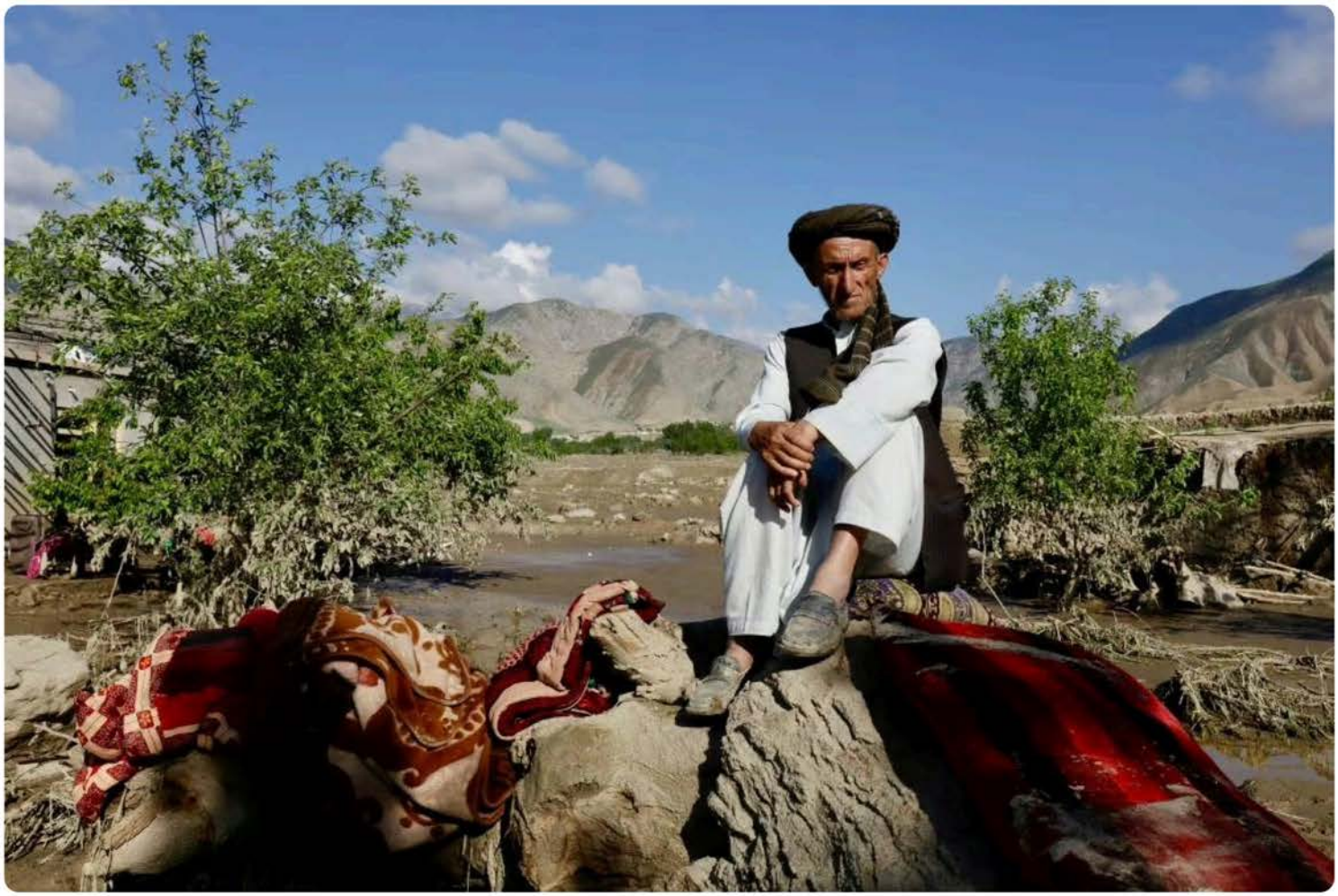
Comment, Politics

Hidden cost: How keeping climate data classified hurts developing countries

The National Security Archive is calling for the release of a major US intelligence assessment on climate change and security



Afghan farmer Ghulam Hussain sits on a fallen tree after his agricultural land was destroyed by a flash flood, in Burka District, Baghlan, Afghanistan, May 12, 2024. (Photo: REUTERS/Sayed Hassib)

Rachel Santarsiero

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The U.S. intelligence apparatus has long monitored how climate change will affect U.S. national security interests in the coming decades.

Relying on a broad consensus of open-source scientific studies, modeling, and forecasts, the spy community has intermittently let the public in on its climate change agenda. In large part, however, its work on climate has been kept secret, leading to the disproportionate harm of the most vulnerable populations living in developing countries.

Last month, the Climate Change Transparency Project, an effort dedicated to tracking U.S. climate policy at the National Security Archive, a government watchdog nonprofit, reported on a climate change intelligence assessment that the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) has kept classified for 17 years.

"Forgotten" fragile states unite to end climate-finance blind spot

In 2008, a panel of intelligence officers produced a National Intelligence Assessment (NIA) which evaluated the "National Security Implications of Global Climate Change to 2030," and was one of the intelligence community's first ever climate-focused assessments, a departure from its usual research on more "traditional" national security threats like state violence and terrorism.

Despite the assessment's reliance on open-source resources, as outlined in a testimony given to Congress by lead study author Dr. Thomas Fingar, the National Intelligence Council (NIC) mandated its classification. In Fingar's testimony to Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike advocated for the assessment's declassification, with Democrats arguing that the report could inform government agencies and private industries about the risks of climate change, and Republicans arguing that its reliance on open-source information didn't contribute anything new to the body of knowledge on climate change.

At the time, several representatives of key House select committees also pushed for declassification on grounds beyond the impacts to U.S. national security: "Information about the likely impact of climate change in other countries should be made available to help those countries prepare and direct their resources appropriately."

The power of climate intelligence

Reports generated by intelligence agencies like the NIC and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) help predict specific vulnerabilities of various regions around the world – like which cities are most at risk from flooding or which agricultural zones may soon face extreme heatwaves. If made available to all nations, this information could help governments and humanitarian organizations take proactive steps, design better policies, and protect these more vulnerable populations.

Unfortunately, classified reports like the 2008 NIA are still shrouded in secrecy- in part, at least, to maintain strategic U.S. advantage. Intelligence officials who worked on the report, like Fingar, maintain that the 2008 NIA should remain classified because it calls out countries most vulnerable to climate change: if specific countries were named in the report, what would stop them from using it to press the U.S. and other developed countries to provide additional aid and assistance for climate-related threats?

But this argument is moot given the level of climate intelligence already out in the open. Specifically, the NIC released a National Intelligence Estimate in 2021 that names two specific regions and 11 countries as particularly vulnerable to climate change through 2040. It predicted that these countries – Afghanistan, Burma, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Iraq – will experience climate-related and exacerbated events that will strain governments and civil societies.

Despite the age of the 2008 National Intelligence Assessment, it is imperative that this report is declassified to complement the already available climate data. In interviews with other former top intelligence officials, we heard the 2008 NIA is "far superior" to the 2021 NIE and could potentially provide a better roadmap for countries to mitigate against the worst impacts than the available data does.

Why developing countries suffer the most

It is troubling that much of this intelligence remains classified and out of reach for policymakers, scientists, and citizens alike in places where the impacts of climate change are being felt most acutely.

Take, for example, small island states in the Pacific, which are already seeing the impacts of sea level rise yet remain unsure of how quickly these changes will accelerate or what measures they can take to mitigate future risks. Similarly, countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where agriculture is heavily dependent on climate conditions, face the double threat of droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns.

At-risk nations have limited capacity to produce or analyze their own climate data, and access to accurate global climate intelligence would enable them to understand shifts happening in their regions and to secure funding for adaptive infrastructure.

The case for climate transparency

U.S. national security concerns must be weighed against the global nature of climate change, which affects all nations regardless of geopolitical standing. By withholding key climate data, wealthy countries are not only perpetuating environmental inequality but also undermine global efforts to curb the impacts of climate change. Providing developing nations with the same level of climate intelligence that wealthier ones receive would enable them to make better-informed decisions, prioritize resources, and act more swiftly in response to emerging climate threats.

Trump's aid cuts make Malawians more vulnerable to climate change

Declassifying the 2008 National Intelligence Assessment could also strengthen regional cooperation between mentioned nations, which developing countries may increasingly look to as the current Trump administration continues to withdraw from previous environmental international commitments, including the Paris Agreement and the new Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage. As the United States abdicates its responsibility as a global climate leader, countries like China and India

will most likely step up – and developing countries may choose to rely more heavily on them as a partner in mitigation and adaptation measures.

Climate change is a global issue that demands a coordinated response. If certain nations hoard climate intelligence, they not only hinder the adaptation efforts of developing countries but also undermine the collective action necessary to lessen future climate impacts. The sharing of climate data can foster trust and collaboration, enabling countries to work together to create a more resilient global climate framework.
