Keyword: global-warming

Headline: Climate change as terrorism on the people

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Published Date: 01:18 AM November 21, 2013

Section: opinion

Word Count: 829

Content:

As part of the pivot to Asia, the US government has ramped up its counterterrorism cooperation with the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere. But the bigger question from the perspective of the Filipinos, beyond the disaster at hand, is this: Why is it that the United States still doesn't have a domestic consensus that there is such a thing as climate change? When we talk about a global community, we at least ought to be able to start with that item at the top of the agenda.

For Filipinos and many poor people around the world, climate change, in effect, is terrorism conducted on them. And that is a far bigger threat to people's livelihood and physical safety than all the things the United States is trying to sell them in order to have its troops' forward-positioned in the Philippines.

The United States, notwithstanding its recent rescue missions in the areas devastated by Supertyphoon "Yolanda" ("Haiyan") hasn't put enough emphasis on fighting climate change, despite its extensive security implications. The United States may have the world's largest military, but it is this question that it will be faced with time and again. Is the world's mightiest country going after the right issue at the top of the global pecking order?

The typhoon that hit the Philippines is a useful reminder that we need to think more about what can be done, both on climate mitigation and on disaster preparation.

The US reaction to the situation in the Philippines was curious. A lot of room was given to asking why the Philippines was so unprepared. Why, indeed? It is a very poor country.

Americans starting to lecture about doing disaster relief leaves a sour taste in other people's mouth. Few outside the United States have forgotten the lack of US preparedness in New Orleans when Hurricane "Katrina" hit.

Another instinctive reaction is to point to China. Sure, it hasn't helped enough—and, yes, China has higher carbon dioxide emissions than the United States, but it is the latter that is supposed to be the advanced and responsible power.

China also comes in for quick criticism that, if and when it engages, it acts in quite a self-interested manner in global infrastructure projects in places like sub-Saharan Africa.

True, but it also gets the job done. The Chinese bring in their workers and get it done quickly. Too often, when one looks at those areas, Western powers for centuries have promised to do infrastructure and they haven't exactly delivered. So the Chinese can hold that in their favor.

But the more important point in the global context is that we need a very real debate about the constant militarization of US foreign policy. That taking this approach simply "sells" better in Congress compared to more soft-power infrastructure projects certainly isn't a good enough reason. Neither is the fact that this approach allows some folks in Washington to pay for ever larger villas in the suburbs.

What needs to be addressed in this context is that there are many people in the Washington establishment who have strong incentives to ensure that the United States takes a more aggressive posture in the Pacific, whether through lobbying fees or pricey defense appropriations.

The return on these “investments” is actually much lower than on building better highways and seawalls. While it would be a positive step for the United States to invest more in long-term development projects to aid emergency preparedness, there are also other means to achieve the same ends.

In Asia, for example, there is the Asian Development Bank, suitably enough based in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. What better tool is there to take out long-term loans—on behalf of all the poor countries backed by the credit rating of the ADB—so that these countries can invest in being better prepared for the next climate event?

Clearly, the West can’t do it all. We need to have more of a regionalization of these efforts. And these countries—independent of the discussion about who’s at fault for climate change—need to be prepared for their own sake.

Either way, the investment in infrastructure also makes commerce easier, allowing countries to grow their national economies and promote tourism. So it’s an investment in their own future, and they need to do that.

Individual countries can’t shoulder that burden alone. The Philippines remains a very poor country. President Benigno Aquino III has been doing quite well in fighting corruption, and the economy has been growing a little bit faster than in the past.

But the Philippines would probably need to have 20 years of solid economic growth before it can be adequately prepared on key emergency preparedness infrastructure in its own right.

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