

Climate Security

An input paper for the High-Level Advisory Panel on Global Public Goods

What's new? Without sufficient support in the UN Security Council for a resolution on climate security, and with the annual conferences on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change unlikely to find consensus on security-related matters, the international system has no clear path to dealing with the challenges posed by climate change for peace and security.

Why does it matter? Half of the most climate fragile countries also suffer from conflict. With the globe warming faster than expected, urgent action is needed to protect those exposed to this double threat.

What should be done? The UN should focus on protecting and beefing up the institutional infrastructure that already exists: preventing backsliding in the Security Council; expanding the place of climate security in missions where possible; better integrating climate science into peace and security conversations; increasing the portion of climate financing commitments dedicated to adaptation and ensuring they are delivered; and encouraging regional bodies to take the lead.

Why does it matter to the Panel? There is broad agreement that climate change adaptation and mitigation are Global Public Goods, and that effective global mechanisms are necessary to address these tasks. This note argues that it is necessary to view climate security in similar terms, as climate-related violence threatens to impede efforts to “encourage sustainable agriculture, slow or stop deforestation and help preserve nature writ large”. In addition, climate-related violence will complicate climate financing schemes. There are of course also humanitarian and security-based arguments for addressing climate-related security risks.

Background

Working Group Two's contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released in late February, is the UN's latest call to attend to the climate crisis. Like the first part of the Assessment Report, published last year, it confirms that the Earth is warming faster than previously thought. The new contribution also does something else: it ties climate change to conflict with “high probability”. How can authorities around the globe best come to grips with these overlapping challenges?

The past year has seen two major climate proceedings. In October and November 2021, the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) convened in Glasgow (COP26). Its main priority since the 2015 Paris Agreement has been to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, a goal that has become vanishingly remote. This year, the conference had four main goals: (1) reducing or preventing greenhouse and other gas emissions

to keep a 1.5 degree Celsius rise “within sight”, in order to mitigate the severity of climate change; (2) advancing adaptation, meaning how to make the effects of climate change less dangerous and onerous for those who bear them; (3) raising money to finance both mitigation and adaptation; and (4) increasing cooperation and finalising the “Paris rulebook”, that is, formalising how countries go about pursuing these other objectives.

The conference made progress in certain areas. At least on paper, the pledge to end deforestation by 2030 and coal limitations were a success; if the measures announced at COP are implemented, they will bring global warming by the century’s end down from an estimated 2.7 degrees to 2.4 degrees.

Why climate security matters

While the question of conflict has figured passingly in the IFCC reports over the years, climate-related violence hasn’t been part of COP itself. The annual conference aims to advance shared solutions to shared problems. Negotiations on emissions and finance were contentious enough. Introducing questions of war and peace likely would have stymied any progress at all.

But though climate security — the catch-all phrase for climate-related violence—wasn’t on the official COP agenda, it will loom large in adaptation implementation. It will be impossible to encourage sustainable agriculture, slow or stop deforestation and help preserve nature writ large without dealing with the conflicts that wrack so many of the countries affected by climate change.

Nor will it be possible to effectively make use of climate financing. Finance prefers safer bets, so a disproportionately small share of adaptation money, mainly in the form of grants, flows to conflict-affected areas. Much more funding, in loans, flows to mitigation, since it can be done for profit, often by the private sector. States must change this balance if they are to reach those suffering in the most fragile environments. Aligning climate finance with development priorities was already a goal for COP26. Moving forward, aligning it with conflict prevention and resolution must be priority as well.

The role of the Security Council

The UN Security Council, of course, is the place to tackle questions of peace and security. It has held sessions on climate change and its implications for peace and security since 2007. These discussions, which were sporadic at first, have become much more frequent in the last five years. But aside from one statement (which lacks the stature of a resolution) in 2011, the Council has never formally put its concerns about climate change on paper. The draft resolution, tabled by Ireland and Niger in December last year, aimed to create a baseline for systematic discussions of how the impact of climate change – manifested in droughts, sea-level rises, floods and other extreme weather events – is shaping peace and conflict worldwide.

The Council has focused on climate security in an ad hoc fashion. It has tended to emphasise the issue in dealing with parts of Africa, notably the Sahel and Lake Chad basin. In the absence of an overarching Council strategy on climate change, members who worry about the issue – often European, African and Latin American governments – have inserted references to the topic in the mandates of specific UN peace operations and political offices. These have typically encouraged the UN missions to assess climate-related risks in their areas of operation and support national authorities' efforts to develop risk management strategies in response.

The draft text called on Secretary-General António Guterres to deliver a big report on climate security within two years, which would include general recommendations for how to tackle climate-related security risks. The draft also asked UN field missions to report more often on climate-linked concerns and encourages the UN to deploy experts on the topic in its operations. Finally, it invited Guterres to consider appointing a special envoy for climate security.

The UN system's capacity to respond to deal with climate security has been limited but is improving. In 2018, Sweden (then a member of the Security Council) provided funding for a new Climate Security Mechanism – a team of staff spread across the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, UN Development Programme and UN Environment Programme – to generate better risk analyses. The UN has also deployed a climate security adviser to its mission in Somalia to analyse climate-related risks and coordinate UN agencies' responses, and Council members have discussed sending similar officials to the South Sudan operation.

In 2020, Germany, which championed climate issues during its 2019-2020 term on the Council, partnered with Niger to initiate a new Informal Expert Group on Climate and Security (IEG) to act as a forum for detailed discussions of these matters among members. This mechanism lacks formal status at the Council, and Russia has refused to participate even as an observer in 2021 – a posture that reflects Moscow's broader doubts about the climate security agenda. Still, despite its limitations, the IEG has already discussed the Sahel, Somalia and South Sudan.

Against this backdrop, neither the Security Council nor the UN as a whole has yet fully come to grips with many of the implications of climate change. The different parts of the UN system working on climate issues and conflict are far from well integrated. They still do not regularly fuse climate-related information – such as satellite data – with the UN's political analyses of tensions in affected countries. The Council also does not make systematic connections between parallel discussions of climate change and related phenomena, such as food shortages, in vulnerable regions. The proposed resolution would have enabled a platform for the secretary-general and UN officials to present the Council with better-integrated analyses and warnings on climate security as it relates to international peace and security — a goal that the Council should still aim at, when political conditions permit.

When that time comes, supporters of a resolution will have to overcome the opposition of states with veto power in the Council. Most states are keen to pass a resolution, but Russia and China, in addition to some others, are suspicious of initiatives that they believe could lead to what they see as meddling in states' internal affairs. They also express doubt about the science

underlying the assertion of a relationship between climate and conflict, claiming that the evidence is not robust.

Their concerns about expanding the remit of the Council are probably most salient, though their views on the science too are understandable, if dated. Climatic distress is often termed a threat or risk multiplier, meaning that climate change exacerbates already existing political, social and economic tensions. This notion, while correct, implies that factors other than climate are more essential in the security equation. Opponents in the Council and elsewhere exploit this implication to suggest that discussions of climate change belong elsewhere in the UN system, whereas UN Security Council deliberations should be reserved solely for underlying, fundamental drivers.

As climate science and associated social sciences have improved, they've enabled a more fine-grained delineation of precisely when and where climate change is linked directly with violence. In the Sahel, land degradation associated with climate change has sparked violence between farmers and herders. In South Sudan, where UN peacekeepers are tasked with protecting civilians, three consecutive years of historic flooding have exacerbated widespread food and economic insecurity, displacing over half a million people, driving pastoralists south and fuelling conflict in the Equatoria region.

Thinking about climate security after the Council deadlock

The Council as a path for advancing climate security work was already blocked before the invasion of Ukraine, and it's unimaginable that Russia would assent in the foreseeable future to what they refused last year. Indeed the best that can be hoped for at the Council, with opponents feeling emboldened, is to prevent backsliding and preserve in mission renewals the language that currently exists. Nor is a General Assembly resolution likely to yield positive results. After the resolution was vetoed, the fact that it had gathered 113 sponsors suggested that the General Assembly could pass what the Council hadn't, but given the lesser weight attached to such resolutions, it's hard to see what practical results even a success there could afford.

The best path forward is to build momentum elsewhere. Climate security efforts until now have been ad-hoc, but those efforts have generated footholds to develop an institutional infrastructure to support climate security work. Two UN missions now have climate advisers and several others have expressed interest in pursuing climate security questions. Some UN regional organisations are starting to address the issue as well. At regional bodies such as the African Union, proponents are asking the right questions, even if they haven't yet found the right answers. The AU should start by appointing a climate lead for its Political Affairs, Peace and Security Division and consider naming a climate change and security envoy as requested by the Peace and Security Council in 2018. Eventually the AU, like regional bodies around the world, will have to address how local resource competition and extreme weather events factor into conflict prevention and resolution work, including through national authorities working more closely with local community leaders to design solutions.

With the COP process focused on mitigation, adaptation and financing – and making decisions by consensus -- introducing issues of war and peace to the official agenda is a non-starter. But it may be possible to inject conflict sensitivity into the deliberations in two ways. First, though past COP events include side events on climate security, there has yet to be such an event at the highest level of seniority and convened by the host country. Second, the preparations for COP must ensure that the measures debated at the event are indeed conflict-sensitive. This could be achieved by the UN's Conflict Security Mechanism preparing informal guidelines on conflict sensitivity for the parties to the Convention, and ideally working directly with the conference's host nation, on COP preparations.

Options for the Panel

The Panel may wish to restate the case for a Security Council resolution on climate security. Recognizing the obstacles to this, however, the Panel could make recommendations concerning (i) strengthening the overall UN architecture for addressing climate risks in ways that are not reliant on Council mandates (as through UNEP, UNDP, etc.); (ii) boosting regional actors' work on climate security; and (iii) establishing a framework for discussing climate security in parallel with the COP process (while acknowledging the need to avoid complicating COP discussions of the broader challenges of climate change).