

Maintenance of international peace and security: the impact of climate change

Concept Note

1. Introduction

Climate change is among the key challenges for the international community. The impacts of climate change on peace and security are already tangible and will increasingly unfold in the years to come. This is happening at a time of rapid global change signified by growing populations, increasing demand for natural resources and depletion of fertile soils and freshwater. They bear the potential of driving social tensions, political unrest and violent conflict. The effects of climate change thus go beyond the mandate of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which is the UN body for international climate negotiations .

The potential security implications of climate change were highlighted when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. Shortly after that, the United Nations General Assembly invited in its resolution A/RES/63/281 of June 3, 2009 all UN organs, as appropriate and within their respective mandates, to intensify their efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications and requested the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive report on the possible security implications of climate change. Drawing upon the best available science at the time and the perspectives provided by member states and international organizations, the Secretary-General's 2009 report (A/64/350) of September 11 clearly outlined the link between climate change as a risk multiplier and security – including for armed conflict.

2. Security implications of climate change at the United Nations Security Council

The Security Council has in recent years increasingly acknowledged that sustainable peace requires a comprehensive approach to security. Only recently, the Security Council noted “that in matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security under its consideration, conflict analysis and contextual information, on inter alia, social and economic issues is important, when such issues are drivers of conflict” and “requested the Secretary-General to ensure that his reporting to the Council contains such contextual information” (S/PRST/2011/4).

Since climate change presents a particular challenge to fragile countries, it is important to take the security implications of climate change and its impact of resource availability into account in conflict analysis, mission planning and mission monitoring. The same applies to peacebuilding activities.

The Security Council has already debated the link between energy, security and climate (S/PV.5663) in April 2007 under the Security Council Presidency of the United Kingdom, and over 50 UN member states have contributed inputs. Since this first debate, the international political and scientific discourse has evolved significantly, and awareness of the potential security implications of climate change has increased. Against this background time has come to bring the security implications of climate change again to the attention of the Security Council, consistent with its mandate to maintain international peace and security and offering an opportunity to advance the intense dialogue on this issue from its specific security perspective. This debate will focus exclusively on the potential security implications of climate change, recognizing the important role of other UN bodies in dealing with other aspects of climate change.

3. Security Implications of Climate Change: Sea-level Rise

The Secretary-General's report of 2009 identified sea-level rise as the "ultimate security threat" for some small island states, with some possibly set to "disappear over the next 30 years". While complete inundation may take years and the increase of the sea-level may differ in different regions of the world, this is not only a future risk but a reality today: on some islands, the situation is already dire enough to command the evacuation of the resident population now. Furthermore, even before sea-level rise actually submerges an island completely, its impacts may render it uninhabitable, requiring permanent resettlement.

This raises profound questions regarding the very survival of several UN member states. Receding coastlines could furthermore incite disputes over maritime territories and access to exclusive economic zones. This is not limited to small island developing states, but impacts all island nations and countries with low-lying coastal areas as well, thus affecting the majority of UN Member States. These are threats so far unknown in the history of the United Nations. Current legal and political arrangements as well as the preparedness of the UN system to deal with these situations may prove insufficient to handle them, making climate-induced territorial changes a threat to international peace and security.

Globally, millions of people will be affected on all continents. This is particularly worrisome with regard to post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts in a number of countries, such as Haiti, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Timor Leste.

Uncoordinated strategies aiming to cope with forced migration as a consequence of sea-level rise may create social and political tensions, which may derail efforts in peacebuilding and post-conflict stabilization – and thus become a threat to international peace and security, as outlined by the Secretary-General's report (A/64/350).

The issue of sea-level rise raises among others the following questions:

- Is the UN system prepared to deal with the security risks emanating from sea-level rise? What are the different scenarios we will have to face ? How could the Security Council address these scenarios within its mandate?
- What are the implications of climate-induced statelessness for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as well as dispute settlement?

4. Security Implications of Climate Change: The Food Security Nexus

Already back in 2005, the Security Council discussed the role of food security in its debate on "Africa's food crisis as a threat to peace and security" (S/PV.5220). During the debate, it became clear that food insecurity can be both a cause and a consequence of violent conflict, and that food insecurity and intra-state conflict are closely linked.

Climate change is likely to reduce food production globally, with large parts of Africa and Asia suffering particular negative impacts. Though some countries in northern latitudes may theoretically benefit from climate change in the short-term, the wildfires and crop failures in Russia and Australia in recent years have shown that developed and developing countries alike can be negatively affected.

Following the recent food crisis, "social protests and unrests occurred in a number of countries and cities around the world" (A/64/350). Populations in countries in a post-conflict situation or

suffering from instability can rarely afford escalating global food prices following droughts and similar events; this challenge, along with having access only to few substitutes, makes them even more vulnerable to climate change impacts.

In addition, a number of fragile states are especially susceptible to increasing food prices due to their dependence on food imports. In some countries on the Security Council's agenda, such as Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan, nearly half or more of the labour force is employed in the agricultural sector. Major droughts, an increase in extreme weather events and a rising number of large-scale inundations causing a falling crop production may degrade the social-economic fabric of these and other countries, and may be detrimental to peacebuilding.

Thus, climate change-induced food insecurity and related developmental impacts make countries more fragile and vulnerable to conflict risks, and may create a threat to international peace and security. It is necessary to consider these issues in all efforts related to conflict prevention, crisis management, peacebuilding and post-conflict stabilization.

Climate-induced food insecurity raises, among others, the following questions:

- How could climate-induced food insecurity be linked or integrated with existing mechanisms for early warning and conflict prevention?
- What are the implications of the nexus of climate change and food security for UN peacekeeping missions and peacebuilding activities?

5. Further issues for discussion

Against the arguments outlined above, a number of additional questions merit further reflection on the security implications of climate change.

- Besides sea-level rise and food insecurity, what other risks climate change presents to international peace and security need to be addressed (such as extreme weather events, impaired access to drinking water, climate induced migration)?
- How could the Security Council and regional organizations working on peace and security best complement each other with regard to the security implications of climate change?
- What would be appropriate mechanisms to bring the security implications of climate change relevant to the work of the Security Council periodically to the attention of the Council?
- How could the Security Council play a part in a more integrated approach to conflict prevention as foreseen in Security Council resolution 1625 (2005), including greater emphasis on climate-related factors?
- How could other UN organs and agencies working on conflict prevention and peacebuilding – such as the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the Peacebuilding Support Office or the Department for Political Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, the UN Development Programme's Bureau on Crisis Prevention and Recovery or the UN Environment Programme's Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch – best integrate the security implications of climate change in their work?