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A Climate for Change in the UNSC? Member States' Approaches to the Climate-Security Nexus

Traditional security actors and institutions facing complex socio-ecological dynamics stand on the brink of change. Based on key results of research on the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its member states' approaches to the climate-security nexus, this Policy Brief recommends:

▎ That the UNSC formally recognize the complex interrelations of climate change and security and their effects as a cross-cutting issue, and adapt institutional working methods in order to comprehend the challenges

▎ Improving dialogue within the UN by strengthening work capacity and knowledge provision in the Climate Security Mechanism (CSM)[1] and establishing a systematic forum for sharing lessons learned and responses to the climate-security nexus between countries

▎ Establishing an international, interdisciplinary science network

JUDITH NORA HARDT | 2020

The UNSC is the only institution with a mandate to maintain international peace and security. Since its creation, it has primarily adopted a traditional defensive, reactive understanding of security focused on violent conflict, war and military activity. While the UNSC has dealt with broader security topics (e.g. human security and the "Responsibility to Protect") and included climate change's adverse impacts on stability in resolutions and mandates for field missions[2], official recognition of the multiple connections between climate change and other larger socio-ecological phenomena remains overdue despite several initiatives to address climate change in the UNSC since 2007.

Within this context of scattered approaches and positions, the international collaborative research project "Climate Change in the UNSC" (CLISEC UNSC) provides, to date, the most systematic analysis of whether and how the 15 UNSC members (2020) approach the climate-security nexus in domestic and international policies and practices. With a large international network of interdisciplinary and country-specialized partner scientists, the analysis relies on a broad spectrum of official primary sources from state governments on policy (see table), various ministry strategies (such as security strategies, military doctrines, policy frameworks and presidential orders), UNSC documents, and interdisciplinary academic literature on the climate-security nexus. It brings to light how traditional security actors and other governmental entities include and describe climate-security linkages in basic policy frameworks and practices. The analysis covers 2007 through April 2020, with a particular emphasis on recent events. Policy recommendations were formulated on the basis of research focusing on state activities at the regional and international level and their corresponding positions in the UNSC.

APPROACHES TO THE CLIMATE-SECURITY NEXUS BY THE 15 UNSC MEMBER STATES

The assessment of government positions led to a key research result: All 15 member states acknowledge the climate-security nexus and have been doing so to an increasing degree over the past few years in complex, changing, partly country-dependent ways. Following a comparative analysis, security approaches were divided into the three categories illustrated in the table below. The traditional security approach (I) is characterized by securing national and international security, ensuring peace and stability and responding to violent conflict with military measures. The extended security approach (II) shares some concerns with the traditional approach but also includes, for example, climate change and extreme weather events as threats to statehood and health. The existential security approach (III) understands climate change to be part of broader socio-ecological phenomena and exceeding – in magnitude, scope and quality of threat – the current institutional contexts for existential threats to the future of humanity.

The table summarizes actors and views on the climate-security nexus as identified in research on UNSC member states.

"IT IS ESSENTIAL
TO RECOGNIZE THE
INTERRELATIONS
OF CLIMATE CHANGE
AND SECURITY
AND THEIR MULTIPLE
EFFECTS."

Another key research finding is that all member states except the Dominican Republic and Tunisia (where no link was found), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (which lacks a military) acknowledge the climate-security nexus within the traditional security approach. Furthermore, all states include the climate-security nexus within the extended security approach, and several (e.g. China and South Africa) reference the existential security approach.

A third key finding is that the importance attributed to the climate-security nexus varies widely among states. While some states (e.g. France, Germany and the UK) place a relatively strong focus on the climate-security nexus in their foreign policy, other states (e.g. China, the Dominican Republic, Niger, Russia and South Africa) refer to the nexus primarily in domestic policy. Responses include mostly non-military, preventive and protective approaches such as climate change mainstreaming, institutionalization, scientific assessment, strategic or presidential policy plans and frameworks, disaster risk management, humanitarian and development aid, and climate politics and diplomacy.

"URGENT INSTITUTIONAL, MULTILATERAL, SCIENTIFICALLY-INFORMED CHANGE IS NECESSARY TO PROTECT INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY."

The drive to include the climate-security nexus in the UNSC has evolved significantly over time. While several member states have expressed concerns in the past about militarization and potential misuse of climate change in power politics, in recent debates during a meeting with external experts[3] all 15 member states affirmed the necessity of improved information on and scientific assessment of the linkages between security and climate change.

Three climate-security nexus approaches by the 15 UNSC member states

Approach	I Traditional Security	II Extended security	III Existential security
Actors	Military, Ministry of Defence, etc.	Several ministries, e.g. the ministries of ▌ Disaster Risk Management, ▌ Health, ▌ Environment, ▌ Economics, ▌ Foreign Affairs, ▌ Domestic Affairs, etc.	
Description	**Climate change is ▌ interrelated with / ▌ impacts on:** ▌ conflict, terrorism, war and peace ▌ national security, international peace and stability ▌ military forces, infrastructure, military activity ▌ social vulnerability, fragility and migration	▌ vulnerability of sovereignty and statehood ▌ livelihood and health of people via socioeconomic and ecological impact and extreme weather events	**Climate change itself is a ▌ threat to / ▌ interrelated with / ▌ linked with multiple threats to / a ▌ challenge to:** ▌ poor and vulnerable population, states, regions ▌ future generations ▌ humanity

Source: Elaborated by the author on the basis of primary sources analysis in the context of the CLISEC UNSC project. See forthcoming IFSH Research Report #005 "A Climate for Change in the UNSC? Member States' Approaches to the Climate-Security Nexus" for detailed research results.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE OF THE CLIMATE CHANGE-SECURITY NEXUS

Scientific alarm concerning the ecological state of planet Earth[4] and complex, socio-ecological security threats and their impact on conflict and peace for states, peoples, future generations and humanity as a whole urgently demand institutional, multilateral and scientifically-informed change. This Policy Brief strongly recommends establishing an international, interdisciplinary science hub/network that deals explicitly with questions in this ample research field and provides knowledge to the UNSC, CSM, UN and the broader international community. The network's assessments could provide the UNSC with a scientific basis for future decision-making, dialogue and bargaining concerning:

▌ The building of case-by-case analyses of complex, dynamic, context-dependent connections between the forms and socio-political roots of the climate-security nexus in possible responses at the local level. The accompanying scientific analysis should include local experts and be informed by the disciplines of Peace and Conflict, Security Studies and Earth System Sciences, among others.

▌ The development of proposals for specific institutional adaptation and improved working methods. A central goal should be developing preventive and multilateral responses to protect essential conditions for life and the most vulnerable, thereby protecting other core aspects of global security – the environment and future generations – as already addressed in multiple member states' constitutions.

ENDNOTES

[1] Established in 2018 as a joint initiative by the UN Department of Political Affairs, UN Environment Program and the UN Development Program at UN HQ in New York.

[2] See e.g. Resolution 2349 (2017); 2408 (2018); 2457 (2019) and e.g. field mission mandates as MINUSMA; MINUSCA; UN-OWAS; UNAMID.

[3] UNSC (2020) Arria-Formula meeting on climate and security risks, 22 April 2020.

[4] IPCC (2019) Special report, In press; Lenton, T. M. et al. (2019) Climate tipping points. Too risky to bet against. Nature, 575(28), 592-595.

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