

The United Nations Security Council and Climate Change: Preparing for an iceless future

A world without ice – Geopolitical imagination or a vision for the future?

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The year 2017 marks the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) first considerations of the security implications of climate change. Over the past decade, climate change has become one of the major concerns of the security policy community. According to the calculations of the American Security Project approximately 70 per cent of the nations in the world have now defined climate change as a national security concern (DeGarmo & Holland 2014). In 2015, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (PA) passed a resolution on Climate Change and International Security, urging all the member-states to better recognize and prepare for the security implications of climate change. After its first meeting on climate change held in the same year the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and former US Vice president Al Gore for their efforts in obtaining and disseminating information on climate change, the United Nations Security Council has engaged with several formal and informal discussions on climate change. Some member-states have seen the Security Council as a way to generate pressure for global climate action and further engagement to conflict prevention. However, the attempts of integrating climate change permanently into the agenda of the Security Council have also raised notable resistance and revealed sharp disagreements on the scope of the Security Council's mandate. Much of this resistance is a result of different understandings of how climate change is conceived to be threatening, what kind of security it is that climate change threatens and who are conceived as the legitimate actors in providing security. What unites most of these understandings is a demand for a shift in security-thinking from reaction and preservation towards preparing and transformation.

Traditionally, security has been understood mainly in military terms with the primary focus on the state's ability to withstand aggression from abroad. After the end of the Cold War, this discourse has been increasingly challenged as policymakers and scholars have engaged in rethinking the premises of security, leading to widening and deepening of the concept of security to include non-military threats to states and individuals. One of the most influential discourses challenging the traditional security discourse has been 'human security', which profoundly impacted the United Nations Security Council establishing the principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect' and adapting the 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict' as new agenda items. The influence of human security discourse has not meant a replacement of the state by an individual as the main referent object in global security policies, but rather has placed human security as the precondition for national and international security. Mutually imbricating with an increased shift toward global problematique of security, the human security discourse has contributed to further reinforcing the understanding of development and security being inextricably interlinked. The climate security discourse(s) is both building on and challenging this understanding.

Development, even as conceived essential for security, is also understood to be forming a great threat to global security if pursued either unsustainably or without global aspect.

Within the United Nations Security Council, climate change is most often perceived as the macro-driver of a wide range of other threats, which are accelerated by the extent of which the climate continues to change. By negatively impacting on human security and to the availability of valuable resources, climate change is feared to overburden the institutional capacities of states, aggravating destabilizing trends within and between states and societies. Already fragile and conflict-prone states and regions are seen to bear the greatest risk of turning into breeding-grounds for global threats such as terrorism and large-scale migration, due to the destabilizing effect of climate change. The threat associated with climate change, therefore, does not come from climate change itself, but rather, from how the changes brought about by climate change are interacting with existing social, political and economic structures. Sustainable development and multisectoral partnership are conceived as the most effective ways to strengthen the adaptive capacities of vulnerable societies, without which the world will become increasingly unstable and dangerous. The existing security structure, that is highly dominated by separate security policies and the logic of deterrence and containment, is seen insufficient in maintaining security against threats that are increasingly seen to be arising from non-military sources and lacking definite temporal or spatial parameters. No state, irrespective of its economic or military capacity, is believed to be able to respond its own security needs without strengthening preventative measures and multilateral cooperation, which includes partnership, not only between states but also between public and private sector, overreaching the sectoral boundaries.

However, this understanding has not been accepted by all. Especially the representatives of many small island states have tried to remind that climate change does not only act as a multiplier of already existing threats, but forms a direct threat to the very existence of many states, cultures and societies, whose security and survival are not maintained by only quarantining the sustainable development or increasing military power. The focus on the secondary implications of climate change is feared to result security policies that are taking the warming as inevitable, aiming to prevent social instabilities and the spillover effects from the global south, simultaneously creating further insecurities for many states and societies. It is emphasized that it is not the lack of adaptive capacities that poses the threat but the way of living that rely on intense consumption of fossil fuels and the refusal of the international community to realize the existential threat posed by climate change and the necessity of rethinking the premises of the current social structures. To fully carry out its Charter obligations the Security Council should address the root causes of climate change and not only the root causes of conflict and instabilities. Security is based on globally shared responsibility where the encroachment of rising seas on the territory of a state should be addressed with equal significance as military encroachment. This understanding of climate change as an existential threat is further bridging the gap between so called 'high' and 'low' politics.

The critique of small island states demonstrates how the demand for sustainable development is still highly anchored to the idea of continued economic growth as the solution to all societal ills. The resistance of many emerging economies to accept a link between sustainable development and security is further indicating this point. For them, climate change is fundamentally a sustainable development that can turn into a security issue only if used as an excuse for aggressive interference into the domestic politics of other states. The key to security is not global stability as taken in other approaches, but the right for development and self-determination. The attempts of integrating climate change into the international security agenda are feared to reduce the

sovereignty of the state by bring forth global regulations restricting state-based aspirations for economic development. The negative impacts of climate change on human security are detached from international security and framed as humanitarian, developmental and environmental problems, which should be addressed within bodies representing these separate sectors. According to the emerging economies, the transition to low-carbon economy must be achieved through financial and technological aid that does not form a threat to the sovereignty or developmental goals of states, which would potentially lead to military involvement or unnecessary politicization, which would only hinder the actions taken to tackle climate change.

While the climatic changes in the Arctic are conceived to be central to the security considerations in many other arenas, within the United Nations Security Council they are nearly absent. The Security Council's approach is highly centralized around the socio-economic vulnerabilities and a need for prepare for an iceless future. Despite the regions high exposure to climate change, the Arctic is often conceived as a low-risk region. All the Arctic states, apart from Russia, that have contributed to the discussions of the Security Council have identified climate change as a threat multiplier emphasizing the need for conflict prevention in socio-economically vulnerable areas. The Arctic states have called for the Security Council to incorporate a better understanding of climate impacts into its current operations and to develop emergency measures for future humanitarian disasters that are estimated to be more frequent and severe as the globe gets warmer. Russia has opposed the recognition of climate change as a security threat and the aspirations to widen the Security Council's approach to security beyond the military dimension. Together with China and the majority of the G77 countries, Russia has seen that the Security Council's engagement on climate change encroaches on the prerogatives of other UN entities that would be more effective and appropriate to address the issue. Climate change is perceived as a matter of international cooperation and not punitive measures that are associated with the security field.

Due to the Security Council structure that has stayed nearly untouched ever since of its establishment after the two World Wars in 1945, the interpretations of the five permanent member-states enjoy preeminent position in determining the actions of the Security Council. The Security Council's a unique authority to mobilize the UN institutions and agencies to undertake strategic operations can be executed only if not objected by any of the permanent members. Even as the Security Council has taken very limited action with regard to climate change it can be argued that the acceptance of recognizing the security implications of climate change has been growing. In 2011, the Security Council members agreed to a Presidential Statement acknowledging the potential link between climate change and conflict and the possible security implications from the loss of territory resulting from sea-level rise. The negative impacts of climate change have also been recognized in several contextual debates and resolutions, such as in the resolution on the Lake Chad Basin adopted in March. However, even as there is a growing demand for a shift in security-thinking from reaction and preservation toward preparing and transformation, the Security Council is still predominantly focused on conflict management and concerns over the sovereignty of development choices, and largely ignoring the direct effects of climate change. For the Arctic region, this means continuity of the accelerated pace of warming and changes that will significantly affect the people living in the area.

References

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