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Background Paper: Session V

Climate Change and Security

In 2018, after a summer characterized by heatwaves in the entire Northern Hemisphere, the IPCC published its Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. The report received wide global publicity. Its message was clear: if we overshoot 1.5 °C of warming, the impacts of climate change will quickly scale up and become more and more destructive.

In response, many leaders have called for more ambitious climate policies and quick operationalisation of the Paris Agreement. Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) António Guterres stated that “this report by the world’s leading climate scientists is an ear-splitting wake-up call to the world”, while the EU’s commissioners for Energy and Climate Action noted in a joint statement “saving our planet Earth should be our number one mission”. Discussion on climate change impacts and security concerns has also become more vibrant. In Finland, for example, President Sauli Niinistö recently framed climate change as “a fundamental question of peace and security”.

Academic scholarship on the relationship between climate change and security has typically focused on investigating causalities of climate induced conflicts, and their linkages to questions of water and food supply. Other notable topics have been climate impacts on critical infrastructure and national security. Analysing and forecasting broad societal and international changes is even more challenging than analysing physical changes in the atmosphere. However, there is now a growing field of study that addresses climate change and security in a multidisciplinary way.

As a quintessentially transboundary issue, climate security has also entered the agenda of global governance. The UN Security Council has held both formal and informal discussions on the topic, emphasizing the role of climate change and natural resources in conflicts. This acknowledgement has been regarded as an important signal of political approval for the linkage of climate change and security concerns. Other UN agencies have begun to integrate environmental security into their practical work. The UN Development Programme’s human security approach has an environmental component. It notes the security dimension and its interconnections with other aspects of sustainable development. Meanwhile, the UN Environment Programme has created a unit for conflicts and disasters, and has developed some concrete practices, such as post-conflict environmental assessments and early-warning systems.

The EU has been a frontrunner in recognizing the security implications of climate change. For example, already the European Security Strategy of 2003 mentions climate change. A report in 2008 by the High Representative and the European Commission explicitly identified climate change as a 'threat multiplier' for security and stability across the globe. The Global Strategy of 2016 frequently refers to climate change and stresses that it 'exacerbate[s] potential conflict' due to desertification and land degradation, as well as its impact on water and food security.

Currently, the EU is rolling up its sleeves and beginning to develop actual policies on the ground. As noted in the Global Strategy, the EU should assist partner countries in terms of climate action, for example through the development of renewable energy and technological transfers, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation. The latest Council Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy 2018 indicate that the EU is now convinced of the need to address and mitigate security risks posed by climate change.

Points of discussion:

- How can the EU's foreign policy, diplomacy and outreach address the security risks posed by climate change?
- What kind of a multilateral response to the security implications of climate change is achievable and desirable? How can the current challenges to multilateralism be addressed as a whole?