

CLIMATE SECURITY IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL IN RECENT YEARS

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Abstract

This article explores the discussions on climate security within the UN Security Council, questioning why the Council has not embraced this concept more unanimously. We examine how various UN members frame the relationship between climate and security and compare this to the broader acceptance of the concept in the General Assembly. Our goal is to identify the underlying issues and highlight conflicting interests and discourses.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a push to include climate security in the responsibilities of the Security Council. This effort aims to define climate change as a security risk that the Council should address directly. While the UN and the General Assembly acknowledge the link between climate change and security, the Security Council has struggled to fully accept this expanded role.

Climate change can destabilize geopolitics through resource insecurity, poverty, and the reversal of development gains. Recognizing it as a direct threat is essential, as it can exacerbate other security threats. Proponents argue that the Council, which typically focuses on acute security risks, should consider the impact of climate change on such crises. Opponents, however, question the direct threat of climate change, suspect climate alarmism, and prefer the Council to focus on immediate, short-term crises.

This debate centers on whether climate change poses a significant long-term threat that requires the Council's attention. Advocates for climate security see it as a necessary responsibility of the Council, promoting global solidarity and accountability among its members. In contrast, opponents view it as a political issue that could disrupt international relations and prefer a narrower focus on immediate security concerns.

This research identifies a gap in the literature: while climate security is recognized as underappreciated in the Council, existing explanations do not consider the identities and identity-related interests of Council members. This conflict reflects a competition between norms of global solidarity and the responsibility of the global North, versus the perception of climate change as a political problem. We examine how these differing identities and beliefs influence support for or opposition to climate security, avoiding a narrow technical view and instead considering the broader implications.

Climate security and the council

In recent years, climate security has entered the Security Council's discussions as part of the evolving concept of human security and the emphasis on sustainable development (Sindico 2017). Environmental security has also emerged linking environmental degradation with violent conflict and prompting the Council to debate non-military threats like global health issues (Sindico 2007). Climate change undermines state security in unexpected ways particularly affecting unstable regions (Dellmuth 2018). As climate change increasingly

becomes defined as a security issue, especially in the European Union (EU), it dominates international discourse, linked to conflict and insecurity (McDonald 2013).

Climate security has moved from the margins of policy discussions to the mainstream with many governments and international organizations normalizing the concept (Busby 2021). While not directly causing violent acts, climate change affects security by shaping conditions and harming societies' adaptive capacities (Dellmuth 2018). Dalby (2014) argues that climate security should consider both environmental changes causing political difficulties and politics causing global warming.

Attempts to promote climate security are increasing especially from the US, the UK, and the EU which call for global structural changes and greater cooperation (Trombetta 2008). Framing climate change as a security problem shifts responsibility to the Council which has more power and resources but this reduces the voice of states not in the Council (Arias 2021). Climate change threatens security by harming resource access causing migration and raising tensions deserving the attention it gets (Brown, Hammil, and McLeman 2007).

Debates on climate change in the Council can be seen as securitization or "climatization," aiming to attribute responsibility to the Council for expanding climate politics (Maertens 2021). However, the links between climate change and security are still controversial, with competing interpretations making wide acceptance difficult (Hardt 2021). There is no international legal regime capable of adequately addressing climate change. The Council could facilitate mitigation through its mandate to maintain international peace and security (Ash 2019).

Climate securitization aims to frame climate security as a serious challenge with the Council determining relevant threats. A resolution on climate change would make it a legal obligation to motivate efforts to elevate it to the highest international institution (Ash 2019). Some UN moves have included environmental degradation as a threat to international security and linked sustainable development to conflict prevention (Sindico 2007). While formal high-level discussions on climate security are limited, the Council is moving towards the securitization of climate change (Scartozzi 2022).

Securitization of climate change increases international attention but has not been taken as seriously as many states would like. Surprisingly, countries less affected by climate change as a security risk have been more vocal about it than those more affected. Western permanent members in the Council seek more power for the body while states opposing climate security fear it would divert attention from urgent crises and overburden the Council (Conca 2018). Focusing on national security and sovereignty in relation to a global problem like climate change might be counter-productive. Global prevention should be prioritized (Dalby 2014). Climate security would redefine national security to include non-military and non-state-centered definitions, potentially shifting the roles and identities of Council members (Sanwall 2013).

The Council has long accepted that non-military sources of instability including economic, social, humanitarian, and ecological fields, threaten peace and security (Warren 2015). Climate security calls for preventative multilateral actions which is not a traditional practice at the Council. However, climate change is now understood to have implications for national and international security, as well as human security (Scott 2012). Some Council members wish to debate climate security to generate momentum for global climate action but this creates mistrust among the larger UN membership (Conca 2017).

Understanding the history of climate change in international politics is essential. Recognized as a threat to international security since the late 1980s, climate change's indirect effects such as migration and conflict, contribute to unpredictable instability. The UNFCCC, originating from the General Assembly, addresses climate change as a common concern for humanity (Scott and C Ku 2018). In 2005, the Council emphasized conflict prevention and addressing root causes including climate change (Warren 2015). Since 2007, the Council has debated climate change and international security with Western states supporting China and developing states opposing its securitization (Scott and C Ku 2018).

In 2009, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on climate change and its security implications which led to a secretariat report on the topic (Sindico 2017). Despite efforts, the Council's acceptance of climate security remains limited. Climate change is acknowledged as a threat multiplier affecting state security and necessitating inclusion in the Council's agenda (Dellmuth 2018).

Climate security challenges are transnational, requiring increased reliance on international organizations for policy solutions. While climate change has not been coherently securitized across IGOs, the Council has increasingly acknowledged its impact on state security (Dellmuth 2018). Framing it as a security issue could enhance and broaden policy responses especially in vulnerable regions like Africa where resource scarcity linked to climate change poses significant threats (Scott 2012). Despite opposition from developing states fearing loss of influence, the Council remains a crucial tool to address global warming (Maertens 2021). The Council's power to inject political momentum into other UN bodies should be leveraged to address climate security effectively (Conca 2017).

Theoretical framework

Using constructivism allows us to view the council as a social construct that is constantly changing its members and which is constantly being changed by their interactions. The members have certain interests but they are modified by their membership with their capabilities and influence being changed by participation even for non permanent members. The ideas that are discussed and the norms that are accepted in the Council have a wide effect on the membership but have the most direct effect on the members. Wendt (1995) developed constructivism by theorizing that politics are socially constructed and that their basic structures shape the identities of the members. However, long-term cooperation can only be achieved through collective identification with a common basic goal in mind (1994). The norms related to climate change which are discussed are of high importance and understandably agitate the members. These norms have a strong influence on behavior and on how community members are socialized (Hoffman 2010).

As danger in the form of threats gives states an identity as a defender against threat and justifies its existence (Campbell 2018), so too does the Council receive its identity from opposing all threats to international security. Constructivist views of security posit that security threats are based on norms which are themselves made through social construction (Farrell 2002). This makes climate security discussions in the Council fundamentally conflict. It is a clash between security culture which would affect identity and behavior (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996) and reveal the deeply entrenched interests and identities of the competing states.

Methodology

We took the years 2018-2023 going as far as we can to be current. We conducted a document analysis of the primary UN documents to conduct a discourse analysis of climate security in the Council, while at the same time tracing the process of conflict in the Council resulting from different understandings of climate security. We attempted to understand how the discussions of the concept have changed the views and discourse of the permanent members of the Council specifically in order to trace the evolution of the climate security concept as it faced challenges. We used datasets of Security Council meetings, resolutions, reports of the Council and other bodies. We used constructivism as our epistemology and ontology as we are primarily dealing with an idea being proposed which would have effects on both policies of the states embracing or rejecting it but which would also affect the identities of such states as accepting this security complex would add to the identity of the Council as having a common responsibility for its membership in the context of climate change.

Empirical analysis

Security Council (SC) meetings in 2019 showed divergent views on whether climate change (CC) should be considered a security threat and what can be done about it. It was accepted that CC poses risks to international security and peace through massive displacement of people and increased competition for scarce resources. CC-related risks and effects are already a reality for millions of people and have increased tensions and instability with the UN considering mitigating CC a part of peacebuilding efforts. CC was described as a risk multiplier necessitating immediate action to prevent the displacement of over a hundred million people by 2050.

Representatives from Russia, China, and India continued to refuse the securitization of climate change, arguing that adding climate security (CS) to the SC agenda would be excessive and counterproductive, potentially leading to the assumption that CC always leads to conflict. They claimed that thinking in security terms would lead to aggressive actions instead of cooperation while acknowledging that CC was a major challenge that could only be solved through multilateral work. While not accepting it as a security issue for the Council, CC was considered a growing driver of instability by Western states which pledged large financial aid and warned of the humanitarian toll of CC-related natural disasters that are destabilizing regions.

CC was framed as an existential threat by the “elders,” a group of notable individuals and peace activists from the political sphere who were gathered by Nelson Mandela to resolve the problem requiring multilateral cooperation to prevent it. It was considered a crisis that the SC should take a leading role in solving. Representatives of Western states accepted this framing and considered CC as a future source of conflict that had to be addressed, placing it in the same context as conflict prevention and human rights. Representatives of island states accepted this as well with Fiji’s representative emphasizing the link between CC and international peace and security by saying that the climate crisis has all the features of war, the consequences of which are fuelling inter-state conflict. The Irish representative echoed this. Ireland being notably active in the securitization of CC and condemned the SC for failing to meet its responsibilities regarding CC and called for more multilateral action on sustainable development and the application of the stipulates of the Paris Agreement.

The 2021 debates included an understanding that conflicts are linked to the struggle over natural resources which are harmed by CC. It was discussed as a root cause of instability negatively impacting the resilience of communities in preventing conflict. The discourse on SC and rhetoric directly connecting CC to peace and security was mainly used by EU states and the US while Russia continued to consider CC as related to sustainable development and

a topic for the General Assembly (GA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). CC was widely discussed as a general problem related to other chronic issues such as human rights, development, sustainability, vulnerability, inequality, violent extremism, and poverty. Some states accepted it as multiplying security risks and increasing the risk of conflict while a minority of states (EU, US, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)) accepted the direct link between CC and CS and argued for CC to be taken more seriously as a security threat at the SC considering human security as part of it (France, Estonia, Ireland, Norway, Netherlands, Liechtenstein). Several developing states saw the best remedy to CC-related vulnerability as overall development viewing CC as causing further inequality and hindering development. An increasing number of states considered the nexus between climate and security to be valid and welcomed the increased focus of the SC on CC issues. But opinions were mixed in the global South.

At the end of 2021, the situation in the SC was heated when a draft resolution was proposed claiming that climate-related security risks were important enough to be included as a central component of conflict prevention strategies. This was an important discussion on security in the context of terrorism and climate change meant to expand the mandate of the SC to account for the security risks of CC as an element of the overall peace and security architecture. It aimed to give more attention to the effects of climate change on the security of states and thereby international security considering the adverse effects of climate change on various fields including peacebuilding.

The discussion accepted CC as an emergency that would exacerbate poverty and cause resource insecurity in vulnerable countries and conflict-prone areas thereby exacerbating instability and conflict. This was not novel but an increasing number of developing states (especially in Africa and the Middle East) were open to linking climate and security and the Climate Security Mechanism of the UN received wide support. The US was especially vocal, claiming that the climate crisis was a security crisis and a threat to international peace that the SC had to address as it is a security risk and a challenge for every member state and because only the council could ensure that CS is integrated into the UN framework of prevention, mitigation, and peacebuilding. EU states openly promoted the link between climate and security as being already established and obvious as CC already have negative effects on the security of states and populations stressing the need for multilateral action and support for the most vulnerable populations.

Their main rhetoric considered CC as a driver of conflict, displacement, and weakened governance as it exacerbated vulnerabilities and instability emphasizing that the mandate of the SC which is over 75-years-old had to be expanded for the contemporary world. Even the states that rejected CS in the SC did so by accepting CC as a serious problem but deflecting it onto the more representative bodies of the UN and accepting current measures to mitigate it without added SC compliance mechanisms. While linking CC to other security threats it was discussed as having a negative effect especially on climate-vulnerable countries, which were also dealing with instability and conflict. It exacerbated social problems, led to violence, and being a fertile ground for extremism. It was especially noted that many climate-vulnerable states were on the Council's agenda for other security-related reasons and that CC was making them even more fragile. EU states, led by Ireland, led the way in trying to paint CC as an issue of high importance and framed the CS agenda as preventative which would limit risk and support community resilience. They demanded these concepts to be mainstreamed and operationalized in the Council. They considered CC an existential issue and called for CS to be included in peacebuilding mandates. They were supported by the "group of friends on

climate and security”, an informal group of more than 60 states, composed mostly of Western states and a number of states that accepted the climate-security nexus, it included a number of developing island states which saw CC as a more pressing issue.

Leading the opposition to direct SC acceptance of the CS concept was Russia which feared that politicization of the climate agenda would harm the global consensus surrounding CC which was well managed at the UNFCCC. Russia argued that there were more important reasons for state fragility and violence than CC which would lose attention by putting CS in the SC. India likewise supported CC being a major problem but refused to draw a link between it and security while accepting that it exacerbated conflicts. China likewise accepted the effects of CC on conflict, especially in Africa and climate-vulnerable regions but for the SC it asked for it to be considered on a case-by-case basis largely connecting it to development. While the climate-security nexus was not universally accepted in the SC and was not made official policy, wide agreement was reached on the security effects of CC as an indirect cause of conflict and there was a consensus on the need to act multilaterally to stop CC through existing frameworks such as the GA and the UNFCCC.

The resolution related to climate security was co-authored by over a hundred states and was proposed by one of the non-permanent members, Ireland, which framed the draft as built upon several years of work. It defined climate change as the most important issue of this generation with a direct effect on international security. The Irish delegate noted that they should present the draft as one of the non-permanent ten members of the SC considering themselves responsible for protecting the interests of the entire UN membership. When the draft was offered for a vote, Russia first spoke against it and eventually vetoed it using the argument that the resolution would politicize a scientific and socioeconomic issue and take away attention from genuine deep causes of conflict in the countries on the council’s agenda. Russia highlighted that about 80 states had reservations about it, showing that the difference of opinion persisted over the years. The Irish delegation framed the failed resolution as built on several years of work, defining climate change as the most important issue of this generation, with a direct effect on international security. The gulf between the two sides was not bridged. The debate was acrimonious but it marked another important step in CC being taken seriously at the SC even though there was still no resolution on the matter.

The discourse over 2022 continued to stress how the impacts of conflict are amplified by the climate crisis especially in vulnerable developing states where it was potentially reversing growth and causing poverty. However, it was largely painted as a pessimistic picture where CC, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine came together to disrupt global development as one of the contributors to the worsening of ongoing humanitarian crises, and was not prioritized as much as before. An increasing number of developing states, especially from Africa, promoted the link between CC and security and the discourse was increasingly tied to food security which was considered to be harmed by CC.

The debates over 2023 continued to underline how the most vulnerable states to climate-related risk are among the most affected by conflict, being even less able to adapt to CC. Increasing attention was given to the need for climate-related financing of developing states. Germany and the Nordic states were outspoken in their demand for the Council to discuss the nexus between CC and peace and security systematically and on a regular basis. This was actively supported by the EU, the US, France, and the UK. CC was considered to have been felt more directly due to the convergence of crises around the world but it had not been accepted within the SC agenda.

Conclusion

We can see that the UN has accepted climate security as an important part of overall international security and taken it very seriously, from the Secretariat down, emphasizing the concept at the very top. The General Assembly and its appendant bodies such as the UNFCCC and IPCC are also very active in promoting climate security as a concept. Over the past years, there has been a significant increase in climate-related discourse in the Security Council led especially by Western states. However, the Eastern and Southern states have not accepted this attempted securitization. We have seen an intensification of the debate and charged rhetorical conflict over ideas, however, the two sides remain adamant. While there has been a movement towards greater recognition of climate security as something the Council should be directly concerned with, two permanent members of the Council and large swathes of the membership refuse it. The main reasons include a fear that a minority of states would monopolize the response to climate change which would give them more power, the fear that the concepts of security would be stretched in an unproductive way, and a general desensitization to climate-related rhetoric due to its overabundance and related alarmism. The political lines in the sand already drawn in the Council on other issues have permeated the climate security debate as well. With a lack of its acceptance as an immediate threat, it has even been used as a political tool for international competition. The Council remains as divided as ever and even a global issue doesn't seem to be able to unite it, largely because some of its members refuse to see it as an immediate global crisis. Thus, a potential resolution remains out of sight and polarization seems to be the immediate diagnosis of the Council's condition. However, we would be remiss if we didn't include a note of optimism as climate security went from being a non-issue to a widely accepted concept rather quickly opening the door for more urgency in future mitigation efforts.

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