

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title and subtitle.

Climate Change and Global Security

What Role for the UN Security Council?

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- The UN Security Council is under increasing pressure to address climate change as a threat to international security, as reflected in e.g. the survival of small-island states, environmental degradation as a driver of conflict, and the prospect of climate refugees.
- Whereas the Council in its current *modus operandi* seems poorly suited for many of the roles that have been proposed for it, action on climate change could play a part in transforming the Council into an organ better suited to the world's needs.
- The Council's capabilities on climate change action would be improved, for example, by forward-looking initiatives that are supported by affected states, or by a coordinated, symbolic gesture from its permanent members that would position the Council as reinforcing the UN's system-wide response rather than encroaching on it.

Amid growing concerns that climate change will affect international security, climate has emerged as a topic for debate within the UN Security Council. Some member states see the Council as a way to generate momentum for global climate action; others urge engagement out of concern that climate change impinges on peacekeeping operations or requires conflict prevention measures. In recent campaigns for elected seats on the Council, Australia, Bhutan, Cambodia, Luxembourg, and Ukraine identified climate change as an appropriate topic for the Council to address.

The Council's climate discussions may create pressure for action. The ability to legitimize an issue is one of the most significant Council powers and former UN-Secretary-General Ban perceived attracting media attention as a vital Council function. Yet, agenda-setting has costs. Climate discussions have revealed sharp disagreement on the scope of the Council's mandate and the appropriate division of labor among UN organs. India captured the core concerns succinctly: »To make an uncertain long-term prospect a security threat amounts to an informal amendment of the [UN] Charter.«¹ Mistrust of the Council's hierarchical membership and procedures, along with fears about undermining the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has also shaped the debate. Moreover, actors anxious to see an effective, action-oriented Council express concerns about mandate expansion and that widening the Council's mandate can also dilute it. Finally, a role for the Council on climate taps into a wider controversy about highlighting security in – or what may be termed the »securitization« of – other policy domains. While some member states argue that framing issues in security terms can suppress consideration of a full array of options, others have been quite willing to securitize Council discussions, at least rhetorically: Tuvalu has branded climate change »a chemical war of immense proportions,« while Namibia likened it to »low-intensity biological or chemical warfare.«²

Thus, there are good reasons to ask hard questions about a Council role, including risk of politicization, lack of expertise, danger of institutional gridlock, the Council's questionable track record on conflict prevention,

and the uncertain consequences of securitizing the issue. Sometimes lost amid these controversies, however, is a fundamental question: what could the Council plausibly do on climate change?

Our research on climate change as a Council issue, which includes a review of the scholarly literature, interviews with relevant experts in and around the UN, and analysis of several past Council forays into new domains, identified several specific proposals for Council actions.³ These range from modest add-ons within current operations to bold measures that would stretch the body's mandate, tax its capacity, and change how it functions. For our case analysis, we drew upon the work of *Security Council Report (SCR)*, a unique reporting mechanism for Council watchers. SCR recently undertook detailed case analyses of three thematic issues on which the Council has sought to sustain attention: women, peace, and security; the protection of civilians; and children and armed conflict. Although the analogy to climate change is not perfect, we have relied on SCR's assessments to help us understand several pertinent dynamics, including the Council's collection and use of information, its ability to set and sustain agendas on cross-cutting or »thematic« topics, and the politics of monitoring and implementation.

We find that there is a poor fit between the challenge of climate change and the Council as it currently operates. The Council's tendency toward reactivity and its hierarchical structure, poor information dynamics, and chronically weak monitoring and follow-through all bode poorly for both its effectiveness and the avoidance of political controversy. However, the high likelihood that facts on the ground will keep the issue alive in the Council also affords an opportunity to use climate change to begin to build the Security Council the world needs – better informed; more capable of legitimate, preventive action; proactive in its approach to peacebuilding; and better able to take the long view. Toward that end, we identify several opportunistic steps: improved reporting and information flows; prioritizing regional-scale initia-

1. United Nations Security Council, 5663rd meeting, April 17, 2007. S/PV.5663 (Resumption 1), p. 23.

2. United Nations Security Council, 5663rd meeting, April 17, 2007. S/PV.5663 (Resumption 1), p. 8, and S/PV.5663, p. 31.

3. For greater detail, full references, and quoted material from our interviews, readers are encouraged to consult the publication from which this policy brief is excerpted: Ken Conca, Joe Thwaites, and Goueun Lee, »Climate Change and the UN Security Council: Bully Pulpit or Bull in a China Shop?« *Global Environmental Politics* 17 no. 2 (May 2017). The opinions expressed here and in the original article are those of the authors and not necessarily the institutions with which they are affiliated. Adapted from the original with the permission of MIT Press.

tives that enjoy broad backing by the affected states; pressing Council aspirants to explain how they would lead the body toward an appropriate climate role; and encouraging symbolic coordinated action by the five permanent Council members.

1. The Rise of Debate

As Security Council president in April 2007, the UK engineered the first »debate« (sequential, scripted monologues) on climate and security, attracting a record 55 member states. The UK's concept paper identified potential consequences for peace and security, including border disputes, instabilities around migration, impacts on energy supplies, food and water shortages, social stresses in weak states, and humanitarian crises from drought and flooding. Many member states focused their remarks on the (in)appropriateness of discussing the issue in the Council, and the session yielded no formal outcome.

Pacific island states then took the issue to the General Assembly. They extracted a compromise: Resolution 63/281 invited »relevant organs of the United Nations, 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 report on security implications »based on the views of member states.«⁴ The resolution created political space for the Council by urging all relevant UN organs to act, and the Secretary-General's report stressed »threat-minimizing actions« clearly within the Council's purview, including preventive diplomacy, mediation, and dispute resolution.⁵

Against the backdrop of stalled UNFCCC talks, Germany brought the issue back to the Council in 2011, drawing a record 64 member-state participants. Opposition from China, India, and Russia nearly blocked discussion, triggering a US rebuke: »Because of the refusal of a few to accept our responsibility, by its silence the Council is saying in effect ›tough luck.‹ That is more than disappointing; it is pathetic, short-sighted and, frankly, a der-

eliction of duty.«⁶ The session proceeded, and a cautious presidential statement, negotiated behind the scenes, expressed concern that »possible adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security,« in particular the threatened loss of territory for small-island states due to sea-level rise. The statement requested that the Secretary-General include »conflict analysis and contextual information« on possible security implications of climate change when reporting to the Council.⁷

Since 2011, the Council has not held another debate, but instead two »Arria-formula« sessions – informal, off-site, off-the-record meetings during which non-UN experts may brief Council members.

2. Possible Roles

2.1 Incorporating Climate Understanding into Current Operations

Many Council watchers have called for the Council to incorporate a better understanding of climate impacts into its current operations. Several member states have endorsed such reasoning. For the 2011 session, a concept note from Council chair Germany stressed that climate change »presents a particular challenge to fragile countries,« including post-conflict or failing states already on the Council's agenda.

Better analysis in support of peacekeeping is not controversial. For the contentious 2011 debate, Council members agreed to a Presidential Statement requesting the Secretary-General to report contextual information on possible security implications of climate change. Experts contend that this was a missed opportunity to raise Council awareness. Of 446 subsequent Secretary-General reports to the Council through January 2016, 25 mentioned climate and only 12 referenced conflict or security aspects. Eleven of these examined Africa. Much of the content was general, noting trends thought to bear a climate signature that increase conflict risks (drought, urbanization, land tenure conflicts, and farmer-pastoralist tensions). A few reports flagged links between climate and

4. UN General Assembly, Resolution 63/281, June 11, 2009, p. 2 A/RES/63/281.

5. UN General Assembly. 2009. Climate Change and its Possible Security Implications: Report of the Secretary-General. A/64/350.

6. United Nations Security Council, 6587th meeting, July 20, 2011. S/PV.6587, p. 7.

7. United Nations Security Council, Statement by the President of the Security Council, July 20, 2011. S/PRST/2011/15*, pp. 1, 2.

Council engagements: the role of fragile resource-based livelihoods in Mali's deteriorating situation, and the roles of land degradation and shrinking water levels in heightening intercommunal tensions around Lake Chad. Even the most specific reporting here lacked the subnational, temporal detail necessary for it to be considered climate »early warning.« Reporting was also sporadic, with only one instance in 2012 and none in 2013.

Climate information could be most impactful when high-quality evidence demonstrated specific, actionable links to peace and security and was disseminated through a channel that could effectively reach the Council, such as through Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs). This raises a larger challenge: the UN system's inability to ensure that its relevant parts receive and share information in a coordinated, timely manner. It lacks staff to aggregate and systematize information. Powerful members instead use national means, often without sharing.

The SCR case analyses focusing on women, children, and civilians illustrate these challenges. In each domain, the Council's sustained engagement set in motion a mechanism to inform current operations, with monitoring, reporting, and the quality of information frequently revisited. Yet each area has faced a lack of capacity and resources, hindering implementation. Member state positions are another challenge. Many view these issues as add-ons rather than »central tenets which support conflict prevention and underpin long-term stability.«⁸ On women, China and Russia prefer to »narrow the scope of the Secretary-General's reporting... particularly on situations that in their view do not constitute threats to international peace and security.«⁹ Consultation mechanisms are limited by the nonparticipation of key members, as with China and Russia in the case of the expert group on civilians.

A more positive example is the Council's movement – halting, incomplete, and sometimes reluctant – toward managing »conflict resources« through sanction regimes, expert panels, chain-of-custody initiatives, and, in a few instances, the mandates of peacekeepers. Expert panels have provided far more specific, actionable

information than the sort in the Secretary-General's reporting (even if the Council has not always acted on it). Another positive example is a long-term assessment of climate trends, migration, and conflict across the Sahel that was produced through the collaboration of several UN organs. This seems to have been well-received in the Council, for both its specificity and the backing it had from member states in the region.

2.2 Developing Climate Early Warning

Over the past decade there have been several calls to improve the integration of environmental variables into conflict early-warning systems. An EU-funded consortium led by International Alert identified climate and conflict as one of four focal points for strengthened early-warning capabilities. Belgium called on the UN to »intensify its early warning efforts« during the Council's 2007 climate session.¹⁰ In the 2015 Arria-formula session, Germany noted a failure to use risk assessments and early warning effectively.

In 2013 the UN launched an Operations and Crisis Centre, coordinating among ten organs to produce daily operational reports and issue alerts for senior leaders. Early warning taxes the Council in several ways, however. The problem requires not just high-quality information but also the skill to interpret it and the capacity to distribute it. Again, the Council's experience on the themes of women, children, and civilians demonstrates the difficulty. In 2010 the Council resolved to standardize monitoring, analysis, and reporting arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence. But SCR found »the focus has been only on monitoring known perpetrators from committing further acts of sexual violence« rather than »intervening variables that may prevent as well as predict.«¹¹ Azerbaijan, China, Pakistan, and Russia opposed requiring the UN Special Representative to consult with nonstate actors without consent or request of the concerned government.

Even if the Council agrees on the scope of early-warning information and improves its timely use, conceptual, practical, and ethical challenges will remain.

8. Security Council Report. 2014. *Cross-Cutting Report: Women, Peace and Security*. No. 2. New York: SCR.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

10. S/PV.5663, p. 6.

11. Sara Davies, Zim Nwokora, and Sarah Teitt. 2015. »Bridging the Gap: Early Warning, Gender, and the Responsibility to Protect.« *Cooperation and Conflict* 50 (2): 228–249.

Conceptually, there is no scholarly consensus on how climate drivers enhance risk of conflict. There are also challenging ethical questions about who should have access: the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has argued that disaster early-warning systems work best when they not only assess and monitor but also disseminate information to vulnerable communities.

Consider what a climate-conflict early-warning system might have foreseen in the case of Syria. Some argue that the Syrian civil war bears a clear climate-change signature through sustained drought. But careful assessment shows the importance of complex linkages between climatic drivers and economic and political facts on the ground. Any »early warning« would have had to integrate information on not only drought but also water management practices, farmer livelihoods, and policy changes regarding rural subsidies. More broadly, risks to people derive not just from hazards but from the complex mix of capacities and vulnerabilities in affected communities. Much conceptual and empirical work remains to be done before such analysis could be mapped onto the crisis-oriented, interventionist, victim-protecting logic that shapes conflict early warning.

2.3 Engaging in Preventive Diplomacy

In principle, the Council strives for conflict prevention »as an integral part of its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.«¹² Also, high monetary cost of post-conflict peacekeeping should work as a strong practical incentive for prevention, for both the Council and the UN.

Nonetheless, conflict prevention remains contentious. Russia has expressed wariness about preventive efforts stretching beyond the Council's mandate. Prevention is also hampered by Council working methods, which default toward reactivity. As one expert put it, »When refugees start arriving, that's when the [Council] comes in. It's hard to know what it can do before that point.«

The British and German concept notes for the 2007 and 2011 Council climate debates each stressed conflict prevention, as did several participating member states.

During the 2015 Arria-formula session, Pacific island states reiterated their call for a Special Representative on Climate and Security, in part for preventive diplomacy. Lithuania suggested that peacekeeping missions could play a role in »climate change induced local disputes mediation« with the aim to »prevent the conflict at its grassroots.«

An important distinction is between conflict-specific »operational« prevention (including dispute mediation, conflict resolution, and confidence building) and the broader management of conflict risk factors, or »systemic« prevention. For operational prevention, the Secretary-General's office has arguably been a more effective tool than the Council. There may be instances in which the Council can play an anticipatory role in climate-driven interstate disputes – for example, by exerting pressure for negotiated solutions to emerging resource competition in regional seas or international river basins. Weighing in on intrastate matters is trickier, given many member states' anxieties about a slippery slope toward the preventive use of force. Also, many states resist the stigma of being placed on the Council's agenda as »fragile.« Such concerns emerged when the Council initiated »horizon scan« briefings from the Secretariat that focused on instability and emergent conflict.

Systemic prevention affords more space politically, and is analogous to activities such as the Council's emerging focus on the small-arms trade as a global risk factor for conflict. Again, however, SCR's analysis of experience with other issues raises cautions about the Council's ability to translate discourse into action.

The Sahel provides an emergent test of the Council's ability to link climate and conflict prevention. The region seems to be a rare instance of Council unity in recognizing the peacebuilding potential of environmental cooperation. The UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, triggered by the 2012 Mali crisis and endorsed by the Council in 2013, takes a forward-looking approach to regional challenges, with building long-term resilience one of its core objectives. In May 2016 the Council received a briefing on climate and desertification impacts in the region, and it recently urged governments in the Lake Chad region to recognize environmental challenges as one of the »root causes« of instability and extrem-

12. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2171, August 21, 2014. S/RES/2171, p. 3.

ism.¹³ The MINUSMA peacekeeping mission to Mali was instructed by the Council to minimize its own environmental footprint in the field – but the wider challenges linking environment, conflict and instability were not acknowledged or incorporated into its mandate.

2.4 Addressing the Threat to Small-Island States

Small-island developing states (SIDS) face a range of climate-driven perils, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and territorial loss or abandonment, all worsened by background conditions of poverty and low adaptive capacity. The specter of »stateless« UN member states raises complex legal and political questions about sovereignty, the rights of states and individuals, forms of redress, and potential trusteeship arrangements. The problem links several putative Council roles discussed herein, including conflict prevention, early warning, and displacement.

The chief advocates for Council action on climate change have been SIDS themselves, taking advantage of their substantial numbers at the UN. Papua New Guinea noted in the 2007 Council session, »The dangers that small islands and their populations face are no less serious than those faced by nations and peoples threatened by guns and bombs.«¹⁴ Even India, a consistent opponent of a Council climate role, affirmed during the 2011 session the »existential threat« that small islands face; the presidential statement from that session noted concern over »possible security implications« from their loss of territory.¹⁵

Pressures for Council engagement also stem from the lack of alternative venues. A longstanding body of treaty law exists on refugees and statelessness, but it does not address threats to a nation's entire territory and population. The Secretary-General has noted that »multilateral comprehensive agreements would be the ideal preventive mechanism, providing where, and on what legal basis, affected populations would be permitted to

move elsewhere, as well as their status.«¹⁶ Territories will become uninhabitable long before they are submerged, however, and quite possibly before such a legal framework can be put into place. If facts on the ground move more quickly than institutional responses, and with no other obvious venue, the Security Council would likely feel increasing pressure to respond.

The question is whether the Council can conceive a specific response without provoking member states that are wary of expansive, vaguely defined roles. One complication is that island nations are not united. While the Pacific island states have pressed aggressively for a Council role, the Caribbean Community endorsed the G77 position, urging the Council to »refrain from encroaching on the functions and powers that the Charter and tradition have placed within the purview of the General Assembly.«¹⁷

Another complication is the relationship with the UNFCCC. Many observers have noted that the climate regime is poorly adapted to the statelessness problem. Besides the risks to SIDS there is the larger problem of uninhabitable territory in coastal zones and deltas, and the complex politics of loss and damage. The Paris Agreement's accompanying decision states that the article on loss and damage »does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation,« although countries could pursue remedies in other domains. While this may block climate justice for those facing statelessness, it arguably sidelines one barrier to addressing the statelessness problem under the UNFCCC. The Paris Agreement identifies several potential areas for cooperation and facilitation on loss and damage, including early warning, emergency preparedness, slow-onset events, risk management, and resilience. These mandates are likely to reduce the political space for Council action on statelessness.

2.5 Addressing Climate Refugees

According to the Stern Review, »Some estimates suggest that 150–200 million people may become permanently displaced by the middle of the century due to rising sea levels, more frequent floods, and more intense

13. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2349, March 31, 2017. S/RES/2349, p. 6.

14. S/PV.5663 (Resumption 1), p. 25.

15. S/PV.6587 (Resumption 1), p. 19.

16. UN General Assembly. 2009. Climate Change and Its Possible Security Implications: Report of the Secretary-General. A/64/350, p. 20.

17. S/PV.6587 (Resumption 1), p. 28r.

droughts.«¹⁸ Scholarship on mobility, however, paints a complex picture. The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change cautions that migration has multiple causes, that extreme weather can disrupt as well as stimulate migration, and that movement is often a last resort, particularly for the very poor, many of whom are likely to suffer in place

Complexities notwithstanding, the »climate refugees« theme resonates with member states. More than half of those participating in the Council's 2007 debate flagged climate displacement as a concern. In the 2011 session, the Secretary-General warned that »environmental refugees« are »reshaping the human geography of the planet, a trend that will only increase as deserts advance, forests are felled and sea-levels rise.«

If concern is apparent, less clear is how the Council could address the issue. Under international law refugees are individuals who have crossed a border for fear of persecution. This definition limits responsibility to the actions of the home state, determines status on an individualized basis, and recognizes only cross-border displacement. The legal status of climate-displaced people is more akin to that of internally displaced people (IDPs), for whom there is no treaty defining roles and rules. The Council and other UN bodies engage regularly on IDPs and a large body of soft-law guidance exists in the forms of resolutions, institutions, routine practices, and guiding principles. But experts suggest that climate displacement is, as one put it, »too early [for a Council response]... unless Bangladesh gets hit,« and that there would be a strong preference to »duck the issue« by leaving matters to the humanitarian side of UN operations or the UNFCCC. The SCR reviews of the cross-cutting experiences regarding women, children, and civilians in conflict show precisely this pattern, in that displaced people have only rarely been addressed in those thematic contexts.

There have been several proposals for an international agreement to clarify rights and responsibilities regarding climate-displaced people. UNFCCC's COP 21 provided a mandate to establish a task force to develop recommendations on how to address climate displacement. Again, the UNFCCC, while not really addressing the issue, may have done just enough to blunt Council action.

18. Nicholas Stern. 2007. *The Economics of Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 77.

3. Moving Forward

This review suggests that the climate challenge fits poorly with the Council's *modus operandi*. In general, the Council is reactive, hierarchical, and often poorly informed, and has weak monitoring and follow-through. These are nontrivial obstacles to any Council role beyond cajoling.

Proponents of a Council role therefore face a heightened burden of proof. They must articulate much more clearly how their proposal meshes with these Council dynamics and the prospects for effective action. Bringing the issue into the Council may have its place in injecting urgency into climate politics, but there are legitimate reasons for opposition and skepticism. And there is always a cost to using the Council as a bully pulpit, particularly on issues outside the core of consensus regarding the Council's mandate. Member states that have pushed for Council action know this, but have largely failed to articulate a clear vision of what the Council would do going forward.

Of course, effectiveness is also a function of the space available to the Council politically. The potential roles discussed here vary in terms of both political consensus and the extent to which they stretch the Council's mandate. The relationship between mandate stretching and lack of support is not strictly linear. Focused initiatives lacking alternative institutional bases, such as the SIDS challenge, can garner political space beyond what one might predict if looking only at their mandate-stretching character. In contrast, things the Council has struggled to do well or sustain its focus on, such as conflict prevention, lack political space despite residing comfortably within the mandate.

Neither the Council nor the UN is static – witness the evolution of symbolic peacekeeping missions into today's complex peacebuilding operations, or the unprecedented 2016 public campaign for the election of the Secretary-General. Challenges in the world are not simply acted upon by institutions; they also shape, and can be used to shape, institutional character. Climate change could play a part in transforming the Council into the better organ the world requires – better informed, more capable of legitimate preventive action, proactive in peacebuilding, and better able to take the long view of risks and responses.

We suggest five initial steps toward transformation:

Improve the Secretary-General's reporting function on »contextual information« about climate-conflict links. Malaysia's concept note for the 2015 Arria-formula meeting suggested that the Secretary-General's reporting incorporate »information on how climate change impacts are threatening peacekeeping missions.«¹⁹ Such information is most useful when it sits somewhere between crisis operations briefings and long-range scenarios – that is, when it is regional in scale and medium-term in time horizon.

Encourage forward-looking initiatives that are supported by affected member states. An example is the Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, which stresses a regional scale and medium term. Another is the plight of small-island developing states and their unprecedented challenge of permanent displacement. A broader global opportunity would be to encourage the institutionalization of conflict resolution capabilities in international river basins.

Use experience to evaluate capabilities. The Pacific island states have called for »an assessment of the capacity of the United Nations system to respond« to security-related impacts of climate change. Such an assessment would be most useful if it worked through lessons from past episodes, such as the example of Syria, and enhanced the role expert groups might play in reporting, advising, and curating information.

Challenge countries aspiring to a Council seat to explain how they view its role on climate. This could be applied both to campaigns for elected seats and to aspirants

for permanent seats on an expanded, reformed Council (notably Brazil, Germany, India and Japan). Aspirants should speak specifically about their vision of how climate meshes with the Council's mandate, with attention to preventive diplomacy and disaster vulnerability.

Work for a symbolic gesture by the permanent Council members. During the 2011 debate, Nigeria noted »Seated around the table are those who could encourage developed countries to implement their commitments to reducing emissions and supporting developing countries with the requisite technological and financial assistance to address climate change effectively.«²⁰ Cooperative action among the permanent members could come in the form of a resolution within the Council or in other venues, such as making identical commitments to action within the Nationally Determined Contributions that states offer under the Paris Agreement. Coordinated commitments to address SDG 13 of the Sustainable Development Goals – for example, on target 13.1 regarding natural disasters or target 13.3 on climate early warning – offer another venue, and would position the Council as reinforcing the UN's system-wide response rather than encroaching on it. Whatever the venue, the key would be to link such action explicitly to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and to do so in a way that recognized a unique P5 leadership responsibility. The 2014 US-China climate deal would have been a compelling opportunity to do this, but it avoided even rhetorical links to conflict prevention.

19. Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the UN. 2015. Open Arria-Formula Meeting on the Role of Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier for Global Security: Concept Note. June 30, p. 3.

20. S/PV.6587, p. 11.



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