

SWP Comment

NO. 34 AUGUST 2018

Climate and Security Revisited

Germany's Priorities for the 2019/2020 UN Security Council Period

Susanne Dröge

Germany will hold a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2019 and 2020, and has announced that climate fragility will be one of its priorities. However, the Council members' interest in climate change and willingness to debate improving preparation for its security implications are very mixed. In continuing the follow-up to the Swedish-led debate of July 2018, Germany will face three challenges. First, adding value for all parties involved, the vulnerable developing countries as well as the permanent five countries in the Security Council. Second, matching ambitions with resources; in particular, Germany's credibility as a climate policy leader needs to be maintained and engagement needs to be pushed at the highest level possible. Third, managing expectations on possible Security Council progress on this non-traditional security issue in the next two years. Diplomatic efforts should improve information flows for countries suffering from climate change impacts, intensify connections across forums inside and outside the UN, and lay out what can actually be achieved through the Security Council.

Political attention for security implications of climate change peaked for the first time in 2007. Extreme weather impacts on food and water supply, land losses due to sea level rise, and systemic issues such as changing precipitation patterns and melting polar icecaps are the most prominent phenomena. Their potential to create multiplier effects in conflict-prone regions was identified already early in the debate.

Two areas have developed dynamically over the past decade. First, knowledge and data about climate change impacts on the natural environment and populations in several world regions has increased. Re-

searchers conducted increasing numbers of case studies and data-based evaluations, collated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Accordingly, more detailed information is available today when policymakers want to address specific security risks associated with climate-related events.

Second, political attention has grown steadily, starting with a UK-led initiative and the first debate in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2007. When it previously held a seat on the UNSC, Germany staged a debate in 2011 on climate-related security risks which concluded with a presidential



statement. The statement underlines that “adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security”. Another debate followed in 2013, in an Arria-formula meeting of UNSC members where the need for rapid preventive action was stressed. Arria meetings are convened at the initiative of a UNSC member, but are not an official Security Council activity and thus enable frank and confidential exchanges.

The G7 foreign ministers in 2013 established a Working Group on Climate Change and Fragility. Under the German G7 presidency 2015 a report was commissioned and a platform launched to address implications of particular climate-fragility risks like for example local resource competition, livelihood insecurity and migration, extreme weather, and transboundary water management. During 2017 and 2018, the Netherlands and Sweden followed up with UNSC debates on climate and security.

In parallel, calls became louder to reform UN structures in order to advise policymakers on non-traditional security risks such as climate change impacts. This history sets the stage for the coming two years of German engagement.

Climate change in the UN system – UNFCCC and UNSC

With the Paris Agreement effective from 2020, the international climate regime comprises rules on climate protection, adaptation to climate change, and irreversible losses and damage, and also includes financial assistance, capacity-building and technology transfer. It took many years to get this far. The Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) began in 1994 with a clear focus on greenhouse gas mitigation, based on an assumption that the atmosphere will not have deteriorated to a point of unmanageable irreversibility by the end of the century. Policymakers in the 1990s also wanted to escape the fatalism inherent to thinking

about adaptation and determination of losses and damages. They regarded mitigation as the top priority because it would have avoided the need to adapt.

It has become clear, however, that these efforts did not suffice. Climate change is happening fast with considerable impacts already felt today, mostly but not exclusively in developing countries.

A number of developing countries, the small island developing states (SIDS), are forced to take the consequences of climate impacts very seriously as they face threats to their territories, but lack the financial and institutional capacities to safeguard their interests. Since 2007 the SIDS have been demanding a forum for regular exchanges about threats from climate change. They regard the UNSC as a suitable place, where the developed countries, which contributed most to climate change, could take responsibility for its effects.

The appetite of UNSC members to address non-traditional security risks is mixed, however. At the latest debate in July 2018, led by Sweden, three groups emerged. France, the United Kingdom, Côte-d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden, support establishing climate change as a matter of UNSC involvement. China, the United States, Kuwait, Peru, and Sudan were interested; Russia and Bolivia were outspokenly critical.

The key players, however, are the five permanent members (P5: United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, France). As they hold the power of veto, non-traditional security threats cannot be addressed in this forum without their support. Germany will join the UNSC, together with Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and South Africa, in 2019, when the terms of Bolivia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands and Sweden will end.

What is in the cards?

The UNSC addresses acute security crises with the authority to intervene using mili-

tary force. Preventive action is not included in its mandate. Yet, the links between climate and security are increasingly obvious and identifiable. References to these and to the need for risk assessments have entered some recent resolutions, the Lake Chad resolution (2017) and Darfur (renewed 2018) being prominent examples.

Climate change research and impacts forecasts show that the extent and frequency of extreme weather will increase and the global mean temperature will rise. The intensity of extreme events will vary, but will affect all UNSC member countries through first-, second- and third-order events.

First-order events are measurable GHG impacts, for example on temperatures; water systems like glacial reservoirs in the Himalayas, Alps and Andes; sea level rise in all oceans, tornadoes and hurricanes hitting coast lines in Europe, the United States, China, and many other Asian countries; frequency of flooding and drought; or changes in land quality and availability. The most extreme effect is the total loss of territory, which some low-lying island states anticipate in the event of unabated climate change (slow onset events). Second-order events affect security of supply, like loss of agricultural productivity and disruption of water resources (with catastrophic proportions reached in the Lake Chad Basin). Such events are projected to occur more often. Migration is a third-order effect. If sources of income and sustenance disappear, temporary migration can turn into permanent displacement within and across national borders.

Thus, human security can be at risk on all three levels, with the actual magnitude depending on a whole range of other factors.

Ethnic, territorial, political or socio-economic conflict are the main drivers of outbreaks of violence on the national, regional and local levels. Changes in the natural environment influence these drivers, for instance opportunities to generate income. In the case of Lake Chad, once the largest lake in Africa, shared by

Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, there is even a link to terrorist groups. The lake's dramatic decline means that agriculture and fishing can no longer guarantee income, which in turn makes it easier for militias and terrorist groups to recruit young men.

The reactions of natural systems to a warming climate develop over long periods, making it hard to identify and prepare for immediate threats. A study that looked into the 2007–2010 drought in the Fertile Crescent with a focus on Syria illustrates how the consequences of rising temperatures become visible. The authors found that the severe drought cannot be explained by natural variability alone; local changes in precipitation are linked to a warming eastern Mediterranean. This long-term trend more than doubles the likelihood of droughts in the region. In Syria, this generated severe stress for farmers and livestock herders who suffered great losses. Many moved to the urban centres, adding to inflows of Iraqi refugees and contributing to a 50 percent expansion of the urban population in only eight years. These social strains and a lack of local resources contributed to political unrest.

How to handle the risks?

The effects of climate change events can be managed. But to do so, policymakers have to take decisions in anticipation of *future* incidents and different degrees of *uncertainty* about scale. Both features demand a functioning governance system with strong and effective institutions. In many countries, such governance is rare or lacking. Accordingly, international and regional cooperation often is the only channel for mobilizing resources for populations in fragile environments suffering climate risks. This is where the adaptation agenda under the Paris Agreement has already enhanced international cooperation. Yet for international actors, ex post humanitarian aid is easier to legitimize than ex ante interventions.

Prevention

First and foremost, foreign policy and development cooperation provide measures to help vulnerable countries to avoid food and water scarcity, to reconstruct after extreme natural events, and to enhance their resilience to a greater frequency and severity of extreme weather.

The UN system covers all relevant aspects of prevention, but governance needs to be improved. New initiatives are emerging, based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. A UNDP report on climate resilience projects in Arab states shows how various SDGs (like poverty reduction, zero hunger, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, and peace, justice and strong institutions) can be supported through climate action and thus contribute to overall resilience, in particular against water stress. Together with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Food Programme and other regional institutions, UNDP plans to launch an SDG-Climate Nexus Facility in 2018, in a move to support bottom-up local actions by enabling investment, with shared benefits across the SDGs. More such approaches need to be pushed by key UN members. While they are unlikely to defuse the underlying security threats in regions with simmering tensions, for instance in Somalia or Yemen, they stand a good chance of avoiding additional threats from climate impacts.

Preparation

Rather than prevention, “preparedness” for climate-related risks has become the UNSC’s buzzword in the debate over its role.

Security circles in general, and the Security Council members China, Russia and the United States in particular, however, are cautious in relation to non-traditional risks and demands to prepare for them. There is good reason for this. The securitization of indirect drivers of conflict does not automatically lead to solutions that are in the interest of all parties involved, nor does

short-term intervention with military means resolve long-term structural risks in vulnerable situations. Thus it is understandable that many countries are also skeptical about granting the UNSC a climate mandate.

Stronger and more visible connectivity with the climate agenda between UN institutions that function at the preventive end could divert some of the demands placed on the UNSC. Nevertheless, there is also reason enough to establish more systematic preparedness for future risks. Attempts to implement better and more innovative foresight exist for instance for strategic development assistance planning at the UN level.

Risk cultures and framing of climate security

The US Department of Defense (DoD) frames climate change impacts as a matter of national security and has stepped up its activities. US military operations inside and outside the United States experience directly how climate change could play out, for example by aggravating security of supply at US bases hit by extreme weather or by melting permafrost in the Arctic region. Based on a 2015 DoD report on climate-related risks, the Pentagon announced it would integrate climate impacts into its planning cycles and conduct vulnerability assessments. Senior defence officials in the current administration have continued this pragmatic approach. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) adopted by Congress in 2017 and signed by President Trump includes spending to prepare the military for climate-related impacts. Trump signed the 2019 NDAA in August 2018, continuing this approach with a stronger focus on installations in the Arctic.

In Europe, preparedness and planning for climate-related risks differs considerably. The 2008 Solana/Ferrero-Waldner report showed little military-related interest, but rather the perception that risks would increase in non-European region and affect the EU’s foreign relations and devel-

opment policy. The European Council accordingly prioritized cooperation with third countries and regions regarding the international security implications of climate change.

Ten years later, the EU approach is little changed. The climate diplomacy agenda of the EU Foreign Affairs Council takes a holistic approach, integrating climate into the European External Action Service (EEAS) mandate. In June 2018 at a high-level event in Brussels, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini laid out three EU policy priorities: climate protection as the best way to prevent conflicts, climate diplomacy to address the risks together with partners, and investment in technologies like satellite systems to inform countries on weather impacts. The top concern for the EU is displacement of people by natural disasters.

That reluctance to frame climate risks as a matter for national security policy is also shared by the German government, and hinders direct connection to US interests. The 2016 white paper on German security policy recognizes climate change as a phenomenon, but fails to deliver any deeper analyses or a statement on the role of Germany's future defence policy. Although the report focuses on early warning of upcoming crises, it limits itself to referring the issue of climate fragility to international forums and organizations like the G7, the UN and the EU, or to development policy.

Germany in the UNSC

Its non-permanent seat on the UNSC in 2019 and 2020 gives the German government the opportunity to follow up on this priority and to further promote the credibility of the process. For this, first, the climate risks debates and initiatives that have developed in the UNSC-context since 2011 need to be consolidated. Second, any suggestion on handling country-specific climate fragility in the UNSC needs to be matched with the diverging interests of the P5 in conflict-prone regions, for instance in

Africa. Seeking dialogue also with the critical countries like Russia and Bolivia is necessary.

Third, Germany initiated a *Group of Friends on Climate and Security* on 1 August 2018, co-chaired with Nauru and consisting of twenty-seven UN member states, the majority of which are vulnerable islands and other developing countries. The group is an important diplomatic means of intensifying and focusing the debate in New York. It can help to sound out ideas on how to bring climate-related issues to the UNSC, to involve critical members and to deepen and broaden the understanding of the climate-fragility risks.

Next steps

Improving credibility

Giving direction and shaping an agenda in New York will have to go hand in hand with other German climate policy activities. Germany is expected to perform as an integral facilitator in the UN system and in other forums like the G7. France will host the G7 summit in 2019 and is a reliable partner for pushing climate issues in this setting, as well as in New York.

Moreover, expectations on national development policy, the UNDP agenda, and matters such as UNEP's intensified work on transboundary water crises will need to be matched by German and EU commitment. In particular, the Green Climate Fund – which is struggling to operationalize its project funding – plays a part in this context.

The outcomes of the UNFCCC climate conference COP24 (Conference of the Parties) in Poland in December 2018 will set the tone for 2019, and for 2020, the year the Paris Agreement comes into effect. For the SIDS and other vulnerable poor countries the UN-processes are closely intertwined and consistency is imperative. The less is achieved at COP24, the more efforts have to be undertaken to convince developing countries and civil society stakeholders

that engagement for their cause can also function through other forums – the UNSC being one of them.

Constructive contributions to a strong rulebook for implementing the Paris Agreement from 2020 – the key deliverable of COP24 – are as important as domestic action for Germany’s reputation. A significant political push for domestic climate policy would thus be helpful to underpin credibility.

Improving knowledge

Better preparedness for climate risks will function only with better information flows and risk analyses. There is still a need to improve the knowledge base on climate impacts from different sources and in particular regions, and to bring that knowledge to those who are affected. The special report of the IPCC on a 1.5 degrees climate change target, expected for release in October, will highlight the latest scientific insights and will set a mark also for the climate and security debate. Exchanges on early warning for policymakers seeking to prevent crises, and meta-studies on risk constellations in specific regions can further improve understanding of where massive conflicts are to be expected. Germany should disseminate and promote such expertise to inform debates. With a view to the UNSC, this should be included in the Groups of Friends agenda and in Arria formular meetings.

Cross-cutting approaches

The German agenda could also serve to more closely connect the debates on preventive policies in the UN, such as humanitarian aid and the implementation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) with experiences of institutions inside and outside the UN that deal with crises aggravated by climate change. Effective SDG implementation in particular is a building block for improving resilience in fragile states. Regular reviews of climate action implementation in the Paris Agreement – the

first being due in 2023 – will also reveal how the big emitters, to which the P5 belong, follow up on their own promises to limit global warming.

Last but not least, the climate diplomacy capacities at the EU level, including the Foreign Affairs Council, the European Parliament, and the EEAS, need to be activated at an early stage to support the German agenda at the UNSC and other UN institutions during 2019 and 2020.

Managing expectations

The UN system as such is suffering pressure from sharp financial cuts and long-standing demands for reform. The appetite for new institutional arrangements is weak. Pushing for Security Council resolutions or statements on climate risks is not a safe bet, and the ambition of such attempts is amplified by a weak UN system. Still, drawing attention to climate impacts will maintain the pressure on the critical UNSC members, where Germany is one of the few countries with the standing to make a difference. Whether the outcome of Germany’s two-year stint matches the ambition will depend on the overall political situation at the UNSC when an open debate is held as much as on the diplomatic resources invested upfront.

Diplomats will need to prepare for flexibility. Working with the United States exemplifies the issues: While the ongoing US withdrawal from multilateralism undermines the UN system, Germany could leverage US national security interests concerning climate risks to engage with US representatives in the UNSC. Similarly, formulating common interests of the P5 in the Arctic region could be a door-opener, but also delicate as long as Arctic neighbour Russia is critical of talking about climate security at all.

Germany will need a mix of sound alliance-building with countries in the UNSC (like the United States and China, Peru and South Africa), sufficient diplomatic resources to follow up across UN institutions that are already addressing the risks for

fragile states, flexibility of concepts, and high-level domestic and European government engagement. The German government can build on the recent efforts and experiences of the Netherlands and Sweden, which promoted the debates and tested approaches during the past two years, and showed how to enhance foreign policy infrastructures to achieve impact. Not least, Germany can build on its strong reputation as a reliable international partner across different forums, including G7 and G20, in times of weakened multilateralism.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2018
All rights reserved

This Comment reflects the author's views.

The online version of this publication contains functioning links to other SWP texts and other relevant sources.

SWP Comments are subject to internal peer review, fact-checking and copy-editing. For further information on our quality control procedures, please visit the SWP website: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/>

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Dr. Susanne Dröge is a Senior Fellow in the Global Issues Division at SWP.

SWP Comment 34
August 2018