

Security Council thematic debate in April: UK Concept Paper

On 17 April 2007, the UK will hold a thematic debate in the Security Council exploring the relationship between climate, energy and security.

Background and objective

1. All members of the international community face a shared dilemma. To ensure well-being for a growing population with unfulfilled needs and rising expectation we must grow our economies. Should we fail, we increase the risk of conflict and insecurity. To grow our economies we must continue to use more energy. Much of that energy will be in the form of fossil fuels. But if we use more fossil fuels we will accelerate climate change, which itself presents risks to the very security we are trying to build.
2. The aim of the debate is to raise awareness of a set of significant future security risks facing the international community as a result of failing to resolve this shared dilemma, to promote a shared understanding of these risks, and to explore ways to address them.
3. The focus of the debate will be on the security implications of a changing climate, including through its impact on potential drivers of conflict (such as access to energy, water, food and other scarce resources, population movements and border disputes). No other international forum has yet addressed these issues at this level. A Security Council discussion will therefore make a useful initial contribution, while recognising that it is for other UN bodies (in particular the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) to pursue other aspects of climate change (including negotiations on stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere), which are not within the Security Council's mandate.
4. World leaders agreed in the UN 2005 World Summit Outcome document (GA 60/1) on the need to act with resolve and urgency in facing the serious and multiple challenges in tackling climate change, promoting clean energy, meeting energy needs and achieving sustainable development. At the same time, the Security Council, meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government (S/RES/1625 (2005)) reaffirmed the need to adopt a broad strategy of conflict prevention, which addresses the root causes of armed conflict and political and social crises in a comprehensive manner, including *inter alia* by promoting sustainable development.
5. The International Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report is further documenting the likely impact of climate change, with the forthcoming Working Group II report (due for release on 6 April) providing more detail on the likely physical and human impacts, including key vulnerabilities.
6. **While the physical effects of climate change and what can be done about them are important issues, it is their potential impact on security that is the focus of this Security Council debate.**

Impact on key security risks

7. Research on the wider implications of climate change is exploring its potential impact on issues closely associated with threats to international peace and security:

a) Border disputes

A significant proportion of current threats to international peace and security are disputes over borders or land. Melting ice and rising sea levels caused by climate change are likely to result in major changes to the world's physical landmass during this century. Will political and maritime borders change as well? Areas of concern include the possible submergence of entire small island states, dramatically receding coastlines, and the development of new shipping routes. These could all lead to disputes over maritime zones and other territorial rights. Such disputes may require resolution through international politics as well as international law.

b) Migration

On current projections, substantial parts of the world risk being left uninhabitable by rising sea levels, reduced freshwater availability or declining agricultural capacity. This will exacerbate existing migratory pressures from rural areas to cities, from unproductive land to more fertile land, and across international borders. Some estimates suggest up to 200 million people may be displaced by the middle of the century. Migration does not in itself lead directly to conflict. But it can alter the ethnic composition and population distribution within and between states, which can increase the potential for instability and conflict - particularly in situations of resource scarcity, and in already sensitive cross-border areas.

c) Energy supplies

There is already extensive discussion on the relationship between energy resources and the risk of conflict, in terms of competition over scarce energy resources, security of supply, and the role energy resources play once conflict has broken out. Climate change is expected to complicate this relationship still further, presenting us with a shared dilemma about how to balance our climate and energy objectives while preserving security. Some nations will seek to change their sources of energy supply to reduce emissions, or for other reasons. Others will have to change their sources of energy supply as a result of the physical impacts of climate change, for example changing patterns in the availability of hydro-electric power due to glacier melt and changing river flows. Gradual, managed changes are unlikely to lead to conflict. More sudden changes might.

d) Other resource shortages

Climate change is likely to make essential resources (notably freshwater, cultivable land, crop yields and fish stocks) more scarce in many parts of the world, particularly in already vulnerable societies. Resource scarcity threatens people's livelihoods, especially when changes occur relatively quickly. Much depends on the adequacy of adaptation strategies. But increased scarcity increases the risk of competition over resources within and between communities and states. This can create instability, increasing vulnerability to conflict. This is already well-documented in the case of freshwater, whose availability may decrease by at least 20-30% in some regions as a result of climate change, while populations continue to increase.

e) Societal stress

Some states consider climate change the most serious threat to their development in general, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals in particular. The 2006 Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change noted that climate change was a

major challenge to poverty reduction, affecting the poorest countries earliest and most. The tensions that climate change through its impact on development - and hence inequality - could produce within and between states might not in themselves necessarily lead to conflict. But in some weaker states - eg where severe inequalities occur among different groups in society, for example on ethnic grounds - political violence within and between states may become more likely.

f) Humanitarian crises

Climate change is likely to increase the risk of extreme weather events that may become sudden humanitarian emergencies. There are already indications that such events, especially on a large scale, can exacerbate societal and cross-border stresses, with potential consequent political and security impacts. There is a proven correlation between drought and the likelihood of high intensity conflicts in some regions, and some governments have struggled to cope with the social consequences of major natural disasters.

8. In assessing the risks posed by climate change in each of these areas we need to consider how the different impacts will interact with each - for example how resource shortages and migration will impact development and inequality and states' vulnerability to humanitarian crises. We also need to recognise that the past may not always be a good guide to the future as we encounter climatic changes that are more extreme, widespread and continual than any experienced by modern human societies to date.
9. The immediate drivers of conflict are likely to remain national and regional power struggles; ideology; ethnic, religious and national tensions; and severe economic, social or political inequality. **The cumulative impacts of climate change could exacerbate these drivers of conflict, and particularly increase the risk to those states already susceptible to conflict**, for example where weak governance and political processes cannot mediate successfully between competing interests.
10. In this regard, it is worth noting that parts of the developing world are both particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and least equipped to cope with them. Some states in these regions, notably in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, parts of the Middle East, and parts of Asia and the Pacific, are already areas of existing instability, and in some cases, current or recent conflict.

Questions for discussion

11. **We suggest that discussion in the Security Council debate could usefully focus on the following questions:**
 - Which of the risks that climate change presents to international peace and security are of most significance, particularly in the most unstable parts of the world? Are there other risks not identified here?
 - What are the priority areas where our understanding needs to be improved? And how can we build a sufficient, shared understanding?

- How can the Security Council play a part in a more integrated approach to conflict prevention as foreseen in UNSCR 1625, including greater emphasis on climate-related factors?
- How can the international community prepare more effectively to support states or regions at increased risk of instability because of climate-related factors?
- What role is there for the Secretariat to better inform the Security Council and the wider UN membership of the risks that climate change presents to security, and to promote a more coherent response to reducing that risk across the UN family?

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