



Complex Climate Emergencies and the UN Security Council

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30 September 2019

Although the UN Security Council has paid greater attention to climate security in recent years, when and how it might act if called upon to do so by member states remains an open question.

Author's note: For a fuller discussion of the UN Security Council's work on climate security, see Shirley V. Scott and Charlotte Ku, "[The UN Security Council and global action on climate change](#)," and Christopher K. Penny, "[Climate change as a 'threat to international peace and security'](#)," in Shirley V. Scott and Charlotte Ku, eds., *Climate Change and the UN Security Council* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2018): 1-45.

The association of climate disasters, good governance, and security is not new. For millennia, rulers and leaders across the globe have understood that famine, invasion, and bad weather that led to poor harvests, flooding, drought or other suffering could undermine their rule. Elaborate rituals were devised to propitiate the gods in order to keep such calamities at bay; such rituals captured public imagination and helped to establish a ruler's legitimacy and authority. In exchange for their allegiance and obedience, individuals expected security and protection from invasion, famine, flood and other life-threatening conditions. The occurrence, and certainly the recurrence, of such disasters was a signal that the ruler had lost the ability to control hostile forces, justifying a challenge to and overthrow of existing authority.

Today, climate security has become one of the most pressing issues facing mankind and there have been several international efforts to prevent climate

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breakdown and its effects. The most recent global and large-scale effort to focus on the urgent need for action to slow climate change [took place](#) on September 22-23, 2019 during a Climate Action Summit convened by Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres. The Summit unveiled a host of partnerships and projects developed with the specific purpose of taking action to combat climate change and to address the physical risks created by the natural disasters and diseases of a warmer planet. Although no breakthroughs resulted from the Summit, the projects advanced underscored the multiple dimensions and actors involved in managing the issue and addressing the results of climate change. One of the difficulties of taking action against climate change is the challenge of marrying aspiration and goal setting to operations and implementation on a worldwide basis.

Looking at the sectors and players involved in the Climate Action Summit demonstrates the point. Businesses, all levels of government, topic focused alliances and networks like the Powering Past Coal Alliance, pension funds international and regional development banks, groupings of countries, private financial institutions, cities, small island developing states, and coalitions of private citizens and public authorities were all represented at the Summit. This list also includes the United Nations Security Council which presently sits at the apex of the international governing and security system. How can these disparate and varied entities – large and small – that have traditionally not worked together now do so to address their common concern of climate change?

The UN Security Council and environmental crises

[Article 25 of the United Nations Charter](#) charges the UN Security Council (UNSC) with the primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security. UN

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Charter Article 39 provides that the Security Council “shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression...” and recommend appropriate action. The Council has become increasingly involved with long range monitoring of crisis areas, overseeing the work of subsidiary bodies, and providing a forum for UN members to define and to act on common thematic interests. It has the authority to draw together agencies and organisations throughout the UN system and to mandate action across jurisdictions at multiple levels of government; but how to use this authority to address climate security is a work in progress for the organisation. What might the UNSC add to the currently fragmented and crowded array of actors working on issues of climate change?

The creation and use of scenarios defined as “discrete narratives of contingent futures,” can provide those who may have to interact with the Council with a hands-on, interactive mode to engage individuals in problem-solving, decision-making, and response. These exercises that are perhaps most frequently associated with military planning have also been used to test the capacity of such coordinating agencies like the U.S. [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEA\)](#) to respond to disasters and emergencies. These exercises test the performance of existing systems and the validity of the assumptions on which those systems are built, identify gaps, and provide experience managing and reacting to new situations. Scenarios contribute to a process “of learning about the future by discussing the present.” They can minimise tunnel thinking and provide “common language for scientists, researchers, planners, and policy makers from diverging areas.” This form of exercise can therefore build capacity for both risk assessment and response in the face of uncertainty and complexity. It can facilitate cooperation, reduce costs, and encourage partnerships.

The security risks associated with climate change have been included in U.S. military planning for more than a decade. The way in which it has included climate change in addressing preparedness was by developing complex planning scenarios to help decide how to organize, train, and equip U.S. armed forces to deal with those risks. The impetus for this effort came in 2007, when the authors of a CNA Corporation [report](#), led by former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Sherri Goodman, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change* characterised climate change as a threat multiplier and established climate change as a legitimate military security issue. The [report](#) included recommendations from a Military Advisory Board made up of retired flag rank officers from all four services, including service chiefs and regional combatant commanders. The Military Advisory Board recognised the challenge of planning for action and decision-making based on uncertain and complex information, but explained the [danger of inaction](#):

“ As military leaders, we know we cannot wait for certainty. Failing to act because a warning isn’t precise enough is unacceptable. ”

Former U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gordon R. Sullivan chaired the Military Advisory Board and [explained](#) how military leaders have to manage risk by identifying “high consequence events” even if the probability of their occurring may seem low.

The U.S. military recognised that a further challenge in understanding climate as a security threat is that “it cannot be identified as a discrete hazard.” Climate threats are “diffuse and seemingly abstract in their origins, and finding appropriate responses may seem difficult.” Maintaining a narrow administrative and substantive view or stovepiping within organisations, between government agencies, and within expert and academic communities is a barrier to turning awareness about the possible threats generated by climate change into action by individuals at multiple levels of government, at the community level, and in homes and businesses. In their study on disaster security, *Disaster Security: Using Intelligence and Military Planning for Energy and Environmental Risks*, Chad Briggs and Miriam Matejova compared the challenges of dealing with climate change to those encountered by the intelligence community after the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States. Connecting the dots of information held in separate locations by different entities for their own specific purposes required the development of a systems-wide approach and perspective, as climate change does today. Scenarios can facilitate the development of such an approach while also raising public consciousness of the need to respond to the impacts of climate change at an individual household and personal level.

Creating scenarios that can provide insights and learning on how well actions will address a complex issue involves four elements:

1. Foresight Workshops: Experts are brought together to generate ideas about non-linear changes in various systems.
2. Scenario Validation: A process is created to verify that the science, politics and other factors are plausible and “match existing knowledge.”

3. Handling Uncertainty: Find ways to explore uncertainty and to identify the “known unknowns” where information is incomplete or unreliable to understand potential disaster risks.
4. Scales and Cascades: Account for local actions that might have global effects and where larger systems may have quite localised effects.

Such a scenario approach can be helpful to the United Nations as organs and agencies within the UN system consider their role and work with counterparts around the world. The field testing undertaken within the UN’s Humanitarian Assistance’s cluster approach would have similar characteristics to building and using scenarios for training, testing, and development for personnel and individuals from mixed groups. The U.S. Department of Energy’s Energy and Environmental Security Directorate has developed a hybrid scenario approach containing three primary components that could be relevant for UN Security Council planning. *An “environment” within which the scenario is created.* This is often a predetermined geographical region and time scale, with explicit background assumptions concerning extrapolated conditions (e.g., demographics). Contemporary or short-term scenarios are generally easier to create, because the environment itself does not introduce greater uncertainty.

1. *Four “drivers” of change.* These are often abrupt geophysical changes but can also include political events, resource constraints, technological innovations, or other [Energy and Environmental Security] hazards.
2. *Cascading impacts from combinations of the drivers, meaning secondary and tertiary impacts/risks and the ways in which they relate to one another.* These cascade maps help identify points of critical vulnerabilities (critical modes) and critical uncertainties, identified by participants as the scenarios are created....When done properly, impacts will often come as a surprise, as

risks can spread in different directions and also act as feedback loops onto previous drivers and hazards.

The United Nations' use of such a scenario approach could identify when UNSC involvement might be of greatest value, for example, by mandating a response to climate change in Council authorisation of peacekeeping operations and other missions; addressing the needs of island member states directly affected by rising sea levels; or recognising capacity and resource gaps in carrying out programs like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The resources to create and to carry out planning and decision-making scenarios would come from interested UN member states, agencies, regional groupings, think tanks, and civil society. Where such resources and scenarios exist or are already in use, establishment by the UNSC of a "lessons learned, recommendations made" repository might facilitate wider use of scenario findings and greater awareness of the operational challenges of preventing, responding to, and managing emerging climate crises and their aftermath.

Looking forward

We know that threats to the peace as defined in the UN Charter generated by climate events will occur more frequently in the future. Engagement with this reality across public and private sectors and international borders is already taking place, but more will be required. Although the Security Council has paid greater attention to issues of climate security in recent years, when and how it might act if called upon to do so by member states or the Secretary General remains an open question. Multifaceted scenarios can help to clarify the range of appropriate action that the Council can take. The political will of its permanent members, and indeed, of all UN members, will be critical.

Understanding the cost-benefits of a range of possible actions because they have been studied and tested in a variety of scenarios may help build the will to act, and the best use of UN resources, in a real-world climate crisis. Like our ancestors, the peoples of the United Nations look to political leaders for protection against calamity. Today's leaders must have a clear understanding of the simultaneously global and local impacts of climate change if they are to provide that protection, and the UNSC's creative use of scenarios may be one way to build that understanding. Increased numbers of players have been mobilized by events like the Climate Action Summit, but their actions will have limited effect unless they can connect with others to address this truly global challenge.

Image credit: [United Nations Photo/Flickr](#).

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