

The United Nations and the Threat of Climate Change

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This article is published as part of [Fridays With MUNPlanet](#) and its special series dedicated to world politics. The aim of this series is to bring you the analysis of global affairs by the established and upcoming scholars, decision-makers and policy analysts from various world regions. This week, [Lucile Maertens](#) (University of Geneva/Global Studies Institute and Sciences Po Paris/CERI) writes about climate change and the process of its becoming a security issue in the United Nations system. Climate change has presented a source of divides among great powers since the 1990s, but, as the author argues, in 2015 "the UN not only draws attention to the dangers of climate change but also creates hope" and "fully acknowledging the security risks caused by climate change, the United Nations is also trying to turn these dangers into opportunities for diplomatic cooperation."

Introduction

"The facts are clear: climate change is real and accelerating in a dangerous manner," he said, declaring that it "not only exacerbates threats to international peace and security; it is a threat to international peace and security" ([UN, 2011](#)). In 2011, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, reiterated a statement that has been communicated several times in the organisation's reports. Since the 1990s, the United Nations (UN) has increased its discourse on climate threats, including, for example, discussion of it within the framework of the Security Council. Even though, member states are deeply divided over the presence of the subject on the Security Council's agenda, it keeps the security implications of climate change at the forefront of the major powers' minds, something which the UN tries to transform into diplomatic means.

The UN's role in the construction of climate threats

The UN, whose purpose is to “maintain international peace and security,” (UN Charter, 26 June 1945, [art. 1](#)) has drawn the attention of its member states to the dangers of climate imbalances for a number of years. The organisation plays a fundamental role in constructing climate change as a threat at the international level, participating in a process of securitization of climate change.

The concept of securitization has been developed in the 1990s to demonstrate the role of political elites in constructing and labeling security issues. Indeed, the work of the Copenhagen School has fundamentally challenged traditional perceptions of security by arguing that security is, above all, a social construction which they call the process of securitization. For Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde “[...] *the exact definition and criteria of securitization is constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects*” ([Buzan, Wæver, De Wilde, 1998](#), p. 25). In other words, it concerns the designation of a threat to survival and the recognition of it (intersubjectivity) in order to treat it with the exceptional and urgent measures which, for them, characterize the security field. Thus securitization, according to them, is a speech act. Although heavily criticised, particularly for their narrow definition of securitization as a speech act, and supplemented by more sociological approaches, this theory has influenced many works on the construction of environment as a security issue (for instance: [Trombetta, 2008](#); [Floyd, 2010](#)). This article studies the role of the United Nations in securitizing climate change.

According to the organization official publications, on the one hand, climate change could exacerbate, or even provoke, tensions between and within states. On the other hand, it could threaten the human security of the most vulnerable populations.

A classic security issue: from a threat multiplier to a direct threat to international security

First of all, the UN recognises climate change as a cause of conflicts. The United Nations Programme for the Environment (UNEP) published a post-conflict environmental evaluation of Sudan in 2007 stating desertification and regional climate changes as causes of poverty and conflicts ([UNEP, 2007](#), p. 9). Meanwhile, the member states of the Assembly General in 2009 also expressed their deep concern about the fact that “the adverse impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, could have possible security implications” ([UNGA, 2009](#)). Moreover, in 2011, the members of the Security Council agreed on a presidential statement which used similar language: “The Security Council expresses its concern that possible adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security” ([UNSC, 2011](#)).

It was also on this occasion that the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, asserted that climate change was not only a threat multiplier, an expression used in his 2009 report ([UNSG, 2009](#), p. 6), but also a threat to international security. This threat to security, however, does not only concern security issues between states.

Human security at risk

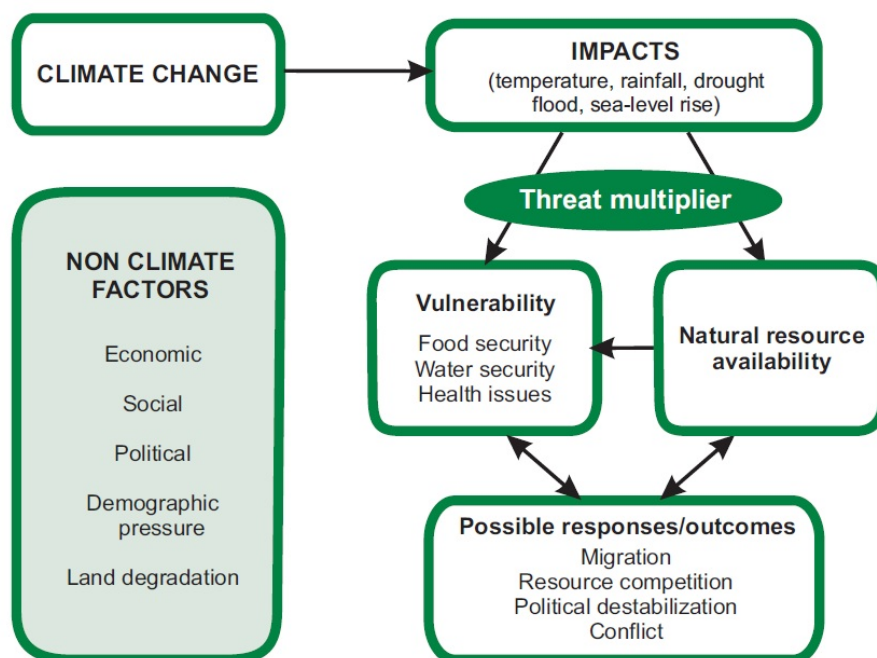
Following the statements of the first [World Climate Conference in 1979](#) which recognised climate change as a threat to the survival of humanity, the UN continues to draw attention to the threat of climate disturbances to human security. For example, in 2008, the *UN High-Commissioner for Refugees* stated that: “Climate change is already undermining the livelihoods and security of many people, exacerbating income differentials and deepening inequalities” ([UNHCR, 2008](#), p. 3). Likewise, in the fifth version of the IPCC report dedicated to the analysis of climate change, Working Group II devotes a [full chapter to human security](#). Finally, Nicole

Detraz and Michele Betsill's work – a discursive study of texts related to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from 1995 to 2006 – has shown that international debates on climate change have mainly centered on threats to human beings (Detraz, Betsill, 2009, p. 309-310). The increase in extreme weather events caused by global warming are presented in these texts as a direct threat to the safety and lives of people living in areas at risk. Whilst it is true *that* the human security approach has been privileged within the UNFCCC's context, the UN first and foremost considers threats to be interdependent and identifies complex causal connections.

The interdependence of climate threats

UN discourse shows that the security implications of climate change are interdependent of one another. Even though a focus on climate change as a factor of political insecurity might also neglect other causes such as the responsibility of public actors, like the Sudanese government in the conflict in Darfur[1] (Hartmann, 2013, 93), some UN publications insist on the complexity and interdependence of the causal relations. UNEP summarises the links between climate change and security in the following diagram which includes elements from within both human security ("vulnerabilities" and "migration") and classic security ("conflict" and "political destabilization") (UNEP, 2011, 14).

The links between climate change and security, as described by UNEP¹



The UN, its agencies through their official publications but also its member states through the General Assembly and the Security Council thus contribute to the process of securitization of climate change by using a multifaceted discourse. The various dimensions of the security discourse used by UN actors can be found in debates from the Security Council.

¹ UNEP. Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel. Geneva: UNEP, 2011. p. 14.

Climate change at the Security Council

Climate change was discussed at the Security Council in 2007, 2011 and 2013, and although it was approached from multiple angles (Webersik, 2012), it was dominated by apocalyptic discourse (Methmann, Rothe, 2013). Whilst each of the discussions piqued the interest of numerous States keen to intervene, the chosen meeting method in 2013 – a confidential and informal meeting known as the [Arria-formula](#) – is an indication of how the debates have stagnated.

On [17 April 2007](#), under the British Presidency, the Council debated the potential impacts of climate change on international security. Three more specific, although still very broad, topics were selected to steer the debate: the potential consequences over the causes of conflicts particularly related to access to energy, water and food and other rare resources; population movement; and border management. No agreement was reached following the debate which saw a sharp divide between the North and South. Pakistan, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, expressed developing countries' opposition to discuss climate change in the Council's, arguing that climate change falls under the mandate of universal UN bodies, particularly the General Assembly and UNFCCC.

The same division occurred on [20 July 2011](#) when, following a request from Germany, the Security Council again considered climate change. Despite this split, a [presidential statement](#) describing the member states' recognition of the importance of potential security issues caused by climate change, was agreed upon.

Finally, on 15 February 2013, an Arria-formula meeting organised by Pakistan and the United Kingdom, was devoted to the consideration of the consequences of climate change on international security[2]. Again, the Group of 77 and China refused to consider climate change as a legitimate concern for the Council, instead [defining it as a development issue](#). The choice of the Arria-formula for this meeting indicates a move away from public, officially-documented debates, towards confidential meetings which do not involve a vote on a presidential statement or a resolution.

Nonetheless, on 30 July 2015, the Security Council once again discussed climate change, considered as one of the main “problems of small developing States which affects international peace and security” for which the Council had met ([UN, 2015](#)). This meeting reveals the reconfiguration of state positions with developing countries no longer uniting as a uniform whole. On the one hand emerging countries oppose the inclusion of climate change on the Security Council's agenda, on the other hand, the least developed countries and the most vulnerable ones promote the discussions in the Council. Indeed, having climate change on the Security Council agenda provides the most vulnerable countries with the power to put pressure on the most polluting states (so that they reduce their emissions) and the most developed states (so that they finance adaptation policies). The securitization of climate change within the UN can thus be considered a tool for foreign policy.

Extending the debate: from threat to opportunity

The UN not only draws attention to the dangers of climate change but also creates hope: according to the organization, climate change and the environment in general could provide platforms for cooperation. In other words, climate change could be used as a mediating tool ([DPA, UNEP, 2015](#)) between two conflicting parties, facilitating the dialogue on a subject of common interest, the construction of shared trust and the creation of more peaceful relations. This more positive discourse was notably present at the [Rio Earth Summit + 20](#) of which the official slogan was *The future we want*. Likewise, UNEP's Post-conflict and Disaster Management Branch dedicates a unit to “[Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding](#)” which

aims to transform environmental threats into opportunities for peace, development and international cooperation. Climate change is no longer just presented as a security threat but as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The organisation of a meeting by the Department of Political Affairs between local actors from warring parties in Western Sahara (SG, 2012, §19-20-23), a UNEP study on tensions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic over forest resources (UNEP, 2013) and the actions led by EnvSec Initiative in Central Asia to promote cooperation on the subject of transboundary water, are all examples of how the environment and climate change could create opportunities for dialogue. Whilst fully acknowledging the security risks caused by climate change, the United Nations is also trying to turn these dangers into opportunities for diplomatic cooperation.

[1] “A UN Environment Program (UNEP) report on Sudan, for example, draws on Homer-Dixon’s model and related research to make claims that overpopulation of both people and livestock, coupled with environmental stresses such as water shortages related to climate change, are at the root of conflict in the region (UNEP 2007). This analysis all but ignores the predatory policies of the Sudanese state – in fact, it actively supports them” (HARTMANN, 2013, 93).

[2] Direct observation (as part of a participant observation study within the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and of Field Support) of the discussions at the Security Council on security implications of climate change, Arria-Formula, New York, 15 February 2013.

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