



Climate Change And International Security: Assessing The Impact Of Environmental Degradation On Global Peace And Conflict

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Abstract

Climate change is no longer just about the environment, it has become a serious threat to global peace and security. This article examines how increased temperatures, natural disasters, and loss of resources such as water and land can result in conflict, migration, and instability. Climate change aggravates existing issues in the world, particularly among nations that are already politically unstable, or are facing other challenges. Through the use of actual examples in regions such as the Sahel region, Lake Chad, and Syria, this article shows how environment related problems may result in violence and unrest in the global arena.

The article also discusses the way international organizations like the United Nations, African Union, and European Union are starting to think of climate change as a matter of security. Treaties like the Paris Agreement and steps taken by certain nations are instances of this increasing consciousness. Furthermore, this article is particularly concerned with how these issues impact the Global South the most. It demands global action to lower climate threats, promote peace-building, and sustain development. To address these issues, we need to consider climate security as a vital component of international peace efforts.

Introduction

Before we jump into this research paper, let us understand what climate change is all about. As per the official United Nations website, climate change is understood as long-term changes in temperatures and weather patterns. These changes can be natural, as a result of changes in the activity of the sun or major volcanic eruptions. Yet, since the 1800s, human actions have accounted for the primary contribution to climate change, primarily by the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. The burning of fossil fuels produces greenhouse gas emissions that envelop the Earth in a blanket, trapping the sun's heat and heating the planet. The most dangerous greenhouse gases causing climate change are carbon dioxide and methane. These are caused by the combustion of gasoline to fuel a car or coal to warm a building, for example. Land clearing and deforestation can also release carbon dioxide. Agriculture, oil and gas production are major sources of methane emissions. Energy, industry, transport, buildings, agriculture and land use are some of the main sectors that contribute to greenhouse gases (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020).

With that, however, in this age, climate change, as broadly understood, is arguably the biggest challenge facing humanity today. Climate change, over time, has moved beyond the scope of environmental science to be a central topic in global security debates. With increased temperatures, changing weather patterns, and rising natural disasters, climate change now threatens serious human security, national stability, and global peace as well. These environmental issues do not stand alone, however, but rather intersect with economic, political, and social variables, frequently driving conflict and destabilization (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020). This article examines the important question: How does climate change affect global peace and conflict, and what is the role of environmental degradation in shaping international security threats?

The value of this research is that it aims to comprehend the effects of climate change on security. Although there are still conventional security risks like military conflict and terrorism, the 21st century has introduced unconventional threats in the form of environmental degradation. This research not only discusses the processes of resource scarcity, climate-driven migration, and state vulnerability but also underlines the importance of an integrated global response to counter these threats.

Climate Change as a Security Threat

In order to understand climate change as a security issue, one must move beyond traditional security definitions that primarily focus on state-centric threats like war and terrorism. Degradation of the environment, resource scarcity, and natural disasters are some of the non-traditional security threats that can cause instability in various regions and countries, this is rather related to climate than the traditional notions of security. Climate change acts as a "threat multiplier," often worsening preexisting vulnerabilities in food security, water access, and economic resilience. The impacts are particularly noticeable in regions already suffering from poverty, poor governance, and social-political instability (Margaret Beckett, 2007).

In April 2007, the UN Security Council conducted its inaugural discussion on climate change. It was started by the United Kingdom, where then Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett compared the impending climate crisis to the "gathering storm" that led to World War II: "An unstable climate threatens to exacerbate some of the drivers of conflict, for example, migration pressures and competition for resources," thereby increasing the risk of instability. However, the Chinese representative, Liu Zhenmin, challenged the notion, stating that "the Security Council lacks the professional expertise to address climate change, nor is it the appropriate forum for broad participation leading to widely acceptable solutions" (Margaret Beckett, 2007).

The Security Council debate suggests that global warming has risen to the very top of the world security agenda over the past few years, competing with the threat of war. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his final days in office, described climate change as a "threat to peace and security" and called on the international community to accord the same priority to climate change as to preventing war and weapons of mass destruction proliferation (Margaret Beckett, 2007).

Annan's successor, Ban Ki-moon, further warned that climate change could be a threat on the same level as war. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee emphasized the issue with its 2007 peace prize award to Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), stressing that drastic climate change "may trigger large-scale migration and make competition for resources of the planet more intense." This may generate an "intensified danger of violent conflict and wars within and between countries" (Scheffran, J., 2009). In conclusion, verifying that climate change does constitute a highly dominant security issue if left untouched.

Environmental Determinants of Conflict

The phrase "environmental determinants of conflict" refers to the manner in which environmental factors, like pollution, resource shortages, or climate change, can influence or exacerbate existing conflicts or even trigger the development of new ones. Through their impact on social relations, livelihoods, and resource availability, these factors can serve as stressors and contribute to instability, which may lead to violence or other forms of conflict. (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020).

Environmental forces have been known to be likely causes of conflict. As water, land, and food continue to dwindle, competition over these essential resources can result in social conflict as well as armed conflict. Environmental conflict theories explain that scarcity of resources, fueled by environmental degradation, can increase competition, grievances, and violence (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020). This happens in areas where droughts, desertification, and water shortages fuel wars among countries and communities over the dwindling resources.

In modern-day international landscape, we can see there are multiple conflicts taking place due to environmental determinants. Desertification and unpredictable rain trends in Sahel Region, West Africa is responsible for heightened tension among farmers, herders, and ethnic communities, causing conflict and violence. Amazon rainforest deforestation has been fueled by illegal logging, mining, and farming, leading to clashes between communities protecting their territory and the state or corporations that want to profit. Shrinking of Lake Chad as a result of climate change by over 90% since 1960's, results in local communities relying on the lake experiencing livelihood loss, which subsequently results in heightened tensions, insurgencies and migration within the region (Klein, 2014). These are just a few among a number of environment related conflicts of the world, which shows that environmental factors do result in conflicts.

In economics, it is a basic premise that human desires or wants are 'unlimited', however the means or resources to fulfill these wants are 'scarce'. This premise gives birth to the problem of scarcity, and subsequently to conflict of interest amongst parties (Karl Marx, 1867). If we heed from this basic premise, we can apply it to environmental dimensions as well as to international security dimensions. The degradation of natural resources will again result in still fewer resources, leading to yet another series of conflicts.

With increasing climate change, essential natural resources for human survival, like water and arable land, are becoming scarce. The problem of water scarcity is particularly acute, tending to lead to conflicts over common water sources. For instance, the Nile River that several countries in Africa depend on has been a source of conflict, with the upstream countries such as Ethiopia and downstream nations such as Egypt competing for access to the flow of the river. Similarly, the current scenario in Syria has been compounded by an extended drought that had a devastating effect on agricultural production and compelled rural communities to migrate, further exacerbating civil unrest (Klein, 2014).

Another one of the immediate consequences of climate change is the forced migration of populations. As the sea level rises, land becomes uncultivable, and more frequent high-impact weather events, millions are forced out of their homes. The people, known as "climate refugees," tend to move to adjacent areas or nations, which adds more pressure on already strained infrastructures, resources, and social systems. Climate-driven migration may result in instability in receiving areas, generating tension among the new residents and existing inhabitants. This is an emergent occurrence that has been particularly witnessed in the Sahel region, where desertification and drought have resulted in displacements of numerous people, deepening conflicts between agricultural communities and herders (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020).

Natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires are becoming more frequent and intense due to climate change. These disasters can wreak havoc on entire areas, resulting in economic damage, destruction of infrastructure, and displacement of people. In vulnerable countries with poor governance, such disasters can exceed the government's capacity to deliver crucial services and maintain stability, leading to even more unrest.

For instance, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti not only caused significant destruction but also further weakened an already unstable government, which escalated political turmoil and social unrest. In these situations, natural disasters can act as triggers for conflict, especially when governments fail to respond effectively (Pallardy, R., 2010). Hence, it stays highly vital to keep a check on the climatic conditions of the world.

International Responses to Climate-Security Nexus

The global community has acknowledged the intersection of climate change and security, with agencies like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) increasingly focusing on climate related security threats. The UNSC has conducted multiple debates as cited above, on climate change and its effects on peace and security, citing the necessity for globally coordinated action. In addition, the Paris Agreement, although mainly dedicated to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, recognizes the wider social and economic effects of climate change, including security threats (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020).

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) also has a crucial role in advancing international cooperation in climate action. The incorporation of climate security into wider peacekeeping and conflict prevention is also picking up momentum, especially in climate-vulnerable areas such as the Sahel (Reference 6).

United Nations Environment Programme Executive Director addressed a speech to the Security Council in a thematic debate that ended in the issuance of Security Council Presidential Statement S/PRST/2011/15 on climate change in 2011. This was an appeal for the Secretary General to provide vision on the likely security threats arising from climate change, particularly when such challenges have the potential to lead to conflict, challenging the enforcement of Council mandates, or threatening peace-building (UN Environment Programme, 2022). The next global turning point came with the publication of the "A New Climate for Peace" report, commissioned by G7 foreign ministries and published in June 2015 in New York. The report, which drew heavily on input from UNEP, sets out seven key climate and fragility risks that should inform joint action. These threats include competition for resources in the local area, livelihood insecurity and migration, unstable food prices and availability, control of transboundary water resources, and unintended effects of climate change policy (UN Environment Programme, 2022).

In 2017, UNEP acted immediately upon the G7 report by partnering with the EU for the purpose of improving the capacity of countries and global stakeholders in the identification of environmental and climate security threats at the global, national, and local levels, as well as developing responsive risk reduction strategies accordingly. This five-year project was one of the initial ones to consolidate climate change adaptation with peace related objectives in analysis, planning, and building resilience for conflict-affected regions. Moreover, the project was aimed to strengthen the ability of critical stakeholders at global as well as grassroots levels to perceive and address security risks arising due to climate (UN Environment Programme, 2022).

Regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) have sought to address the security dimensions of climate change. The AU has, for example, launched programs aimed at strengthening climate resilience and sustainable development across Africa, taking note of the link between environmental degradation and conflict. Similarly, the EU Global Strategy lays special emphasis on addressing climate linked security challenges within its foreign and security policy. At the global level, a lot of countries are incorporating climate risk analyses into their security policy. For instance, the United States Department of Defense has identified climate change as a significant threat to national security, and for the same, climate risks are being incorporated into military planning and operations. Germany and the United Kingdom are another two examples who have adopted policies that incorporate climate security into foreign policy and national defense (Klein, 2014).

The private sector and civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in responding to the climate-security nexus. Businesses, especially in the energy, agriculture, and water industries, have a role to play in minimizing their carbon footprint and adopting sustainable practices. Numerous businesses are also understanding the economic implications of climate change and are moving to adopting healthier routes within their supply chain and operations. Civil society organizations are also crucial in raising awareness of the security implications of climate change and often push for more ambitious climate action. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in conflict and climate-vulnerable areas tend to be instrumental in engaging local societies in peacebuilding initiatives and strengthening resilience at the local level. Their efforts are especially valuable in regions where state capacity is weak and external assistance is required to tackle the underlying drivers of environmental degradation and conflict (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020).

Conclusion

Taking all the above into consideration, as we see, in this article, we have examined the various manners in which climate change affects global security directly by emphasizing the part played by environmental degradation as a factor that exacerbates threats. Scarcity of resources, migration due to climate change, and natural disasters, all lead to a condition of instability and war in parts of the globe. Through theoretical exposition, this study underscores the mounting necessity for a harmonized worldwide response to address climate connected security threats. Overcoming these challenges involves not only curbing greenhouse gas emissions but also enhancing resilience in exposed areas, enhancing governance, and fostering sustainable development. Global cooperation, especially through multilateral institutions, is critical to reducing the security threats of climate change. Furthermore, the private sector and civil society must play a proactive role in supporting these efforts. As the impacts of climate change continue to emerge, the global community has to acknowledge that environmental security cannot be separated from international peace and stability. Future studies need to focus specifically into understanding this complex relationship between climate change and conflict, as well as how to innovate newer solutions to deal with the security implications of a world having a very noticeable climate related threat vulnerability.

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