



Governance issues and dissensus about 'climate security' in the United Nations

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I. The 'climate security' approach

In recent years, the links between climate change and peace/security have been increasingly recognised and have gained significant attention in many international fora and institutions, constituting a hot topic of the international agenda. While some impacts of climate change on security are direct and visible, others are more complicated and difficult to assess.[1] All these interconnections have now been summarised in the United Nations (UN) system by a specific concept: 'climate security', which consists in integrating climate science and peace/security issues. The concept is at the crossroads between the international action for climate and the international action for peace; in particular, it addresses how to integrate climate change adaptation initiatives and peacebuilding, conflict prevention and 'sustaining peace'[2] objectives. Logically, this 'climate security' approach has gained much importance in the UN system, raising disagreements between States on the governance of this strategic issue.

II. UN climate security initiatives beyond UNFCCC

In the UN Organization, the topic of climate security has been addressed by diverse institutions since the mid-2000s. Significantly, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), in charge of preventing conflict and building sustainable peace around the world, has included in its activities the impact of climate change on peace and security. The DPPA thus promotes approaches that combine peacebuilding with resilience and adaptation efforts, financing for instance climate-sensitive peacebuilding projects around the world. [3] The climate security approach is also followed by other UN institutions, in particular the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). DPPA, UNEP and UNDP launched together, in 2018, a joint initiative named the 'Climate Security Mechanism' (CSM). Its mandate is to strengthen the capacity of the UN system to analyse and address the adverse impacts of climate change on peace and security, and thus develop climate sensitive approaches in the UN sustaining peace action. [4]

These efforts, among others, [5] are undoubtedly significant. Are they the implementation of a global common vision about climate security? It is interesting to note that Germany and the Republic of Nauru jointly formed a 'UN Climate and Security friendship group' in 2018. It aims to develop cooperative solutions 'for the impact of climate change on security policy, raise

public awareness, and boost the involvement of the United Nations in this area'. Even though the number of participating States increased from 27 founding members to 59, reflecting a growing convergence, this is only a few of the 193 UN Member States.

While security issues are not directly considered in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), [6] it appears even more critical to analyse the way the Security Council (SC) addresses climatic aspects while 'maintaining international peace and security' on behalf of the international community. The impact of climate change on the maintenance of international peace and security was debated for the first time at the Security Council in 2007, after a vigorous exchange about whether such consideration was appropriate. A SC Presidential Statement was adopted in 2011 about the CS' consideration of the effects of climate change. [7] The SC also inserted in some resolutions about specific situations various references to climate, establishing a direct link between climate and security issues. [8] The resolution 2349, adopted unanimously in 2017, is emblematic in this regard, as the first recognition by the SC of the link between climate change and instability. [9] In 2018, the SC added environmental factors in the mandate of the peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Following that, the effects of climate change have been taken into account in SC resolutions on many other specific situations. [10]

However, a recent episode has called into question this progress made by the SC over the past 15 years.

III. 2021 clash in the Security Council: irreconcilable visions?

In December 2021, Niger and Ireland co-sponsored the project of a SC thematic resolution, [11] supported by 113 UN Member States, promoting the integration of climate-related security risk into UN conflict-prevention strategies. The aim was in particular, under the 'sustaining peace' approach, to take into consideration the risk of conflict relapse due to adverse effects of climate change. The draft resolution was rejected on 13 December: while 12 SC Members voted in favour of the text, India and Russia voted against it and China decided to abstain. Despite the overwhelming majority in favour of the text, the negative vote of Russia (permanent member of the SC with veto) was sufficient to block its adoption.

This resolution would not have changed the legal prerogatives of the SC. [12] But this episode has a deep political significance, as revealed by the motivation of their votes by the three States: [13]

China stressed the need to avoid securitization of climate issues. The draft resolution did not address the main aspects of the reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions down to net-zero emission and common but differentiated responsibilities. Instead of stating that developed countries have a responsibility to help build capacity and resilience in developing countries, the text 'could allow developed countries new excuses to shirk their historical responsibilities and commitments'.

According to India, the SC is not the place to discuss the issue. The draft resolution 'seeks to obfuscate the lack of progress on critical issues under the UNFCCC'. Such a SC resolution would constitute 'a step backward from collective resolve to combat climate change', especially since UNFCCC is a much more democratic place than the SC.

In the same vein, Russia also stated that the draft resolution represented a step back in trying to fight climate change and an attempt to divert attention from genuine deep-rooted reasons for

conflict in some countries on the agenda. Such debates should be carried out in the appropriate forum: the UNFCCC. Climate change is a scientific and socioeconomic issue which should not be turned into a politicized question.

In sum, even if the draft text recognised the central nature of UNFCCC, those States criticized this proposal in that it would establish a process separate from the UNFCCC and create a diversion. This rejection has thus revealed the depth of a long-lasting dissensus concerning the governance of climate security. [14] We can regret this step backward and hope that it does not announce that climate issues will no longer be considered by the SC in the maintenance of international peace and security in specific situations. The SC has an exclusive mandate in this respect, and is thus to play a decisive role, which is complementary to and supportive of other aspects considered in other instances. [15] We can recall what the UN Secretary General wisely stated at the SC session on climate change in July 2011:
'The Security Council can play a **vital role** in making clear the link between climate change, peace and security. The Members of this Council bear a **unique responsibility** to mobilize national and international action to confront the very real threat of climate change and the specific threats to international peace and security which derive from it.'

References

1. *UN Climate Security Mechanism, Briefing note, 2020.*

2. *The new UN 'sustaining peace' approach is defined as: 'a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development.' On 27 April 2016, the UN General Assembly and Security Council adopted parallel resolutions A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282 (2016).*

3. *DPPA website: https://dppa.un.org/en/climate-peace-security.*

4. *The CSM has for instance established the 'UN Community of Practice on Climate Security', an informal network of 30+ UN organs, open to all the interested members of the UN staff, to share information and knowledge about climate security. Also see its Progress Report for 2021.*

5. *For example, courses by the UN Staff College on 'Climate Sensitive Programming for Sustaining Peace'.*

6. *It is remarkable that neither 'peace' nor 'security' appear in the list of the 'topics' of the UNFCCC on its website.*

7. *Statement by the President of the Security Council S/PRST/2011/15, 20 July 2011.*

8. *For an overview: https://climate-security-expert-network.org/unsc-engagement. For a deep study: S Scott, Ch Ku (eds), Climate Change and the UN Security Council, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018, 272 p.*

9. *The SC 'Recognises the adverse effects of climate change and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of the Region(…) and emphasises the need for adequate risk assessments and risk management strategies by governments and the United Nations relating to these factors'.*

10. *List of special political missions and peacekeeping operations.*

11. *A thematic resolution is a generic resolution adopted about a global issue, without being related to a specific situation. This practice of the SC is well established. For example, such resolutions have been adopted about the protection of children or women in armed conflicts, youth in conflict prevention and resolution.*

12. *The main measures proposed were to ask the Secretary General to submit a report on the security implications of the adverse effects of climate change in countries or regions under his consideration, to encourage peacekeeping operations to take into account, within their existing mandates, the security implications of climate change, and to invite all relevant stakeholders to cooperate to enhance knowledge of climate-related security risks and to develop strategies for conflict prevention.*

13. *Minutes of the 8926th meeting, 13 December 2021: S/PV.8926. See also arguments of Kenya.*

14. *As highlighted by Russia, 80 UN Member States did not support the draft resolution (S/PV.8926, p. 9). On the controversies about the role of the SC, see P. Palchetti, « Débattre des changements climatiques au Conseil de sécurité : pour quoi faire ? », Questions of international law, 2022.*

15. *It is worth reminding that in a 2009 resolution (63/281 adopted by consensus) on 'Climate change and its possible security implications', the UN General Assembly 'Invite[d] the relevant organs of the United Nations, as appropriate and within their respective mandates, to intensify their efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications.'*