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Fears for militarisation of climate change

Should we be concerned?



Picking up large debris following Hurricane Harvey in Texas in 2017
© U.S. Army National Guard / Capt. Martha Nigrelle

The debate on how climate change and security are related is confronted by those fearing unnecessary securitisation and others being cautious about the topic of security stretching to issues beyond the abuse of power leading to deadly conflicts. Some fear climate change becoming an excuse for sending military personnel to areas that governments wish to be brought (back) under (state) control. Others are afraid of security actors getting their hands

on funding for climate mitigation and adaptation, with the result that such funding does not reach the people most in need nor achieve climate policy objectives. There is also a fear of climate change being presented as a threat multiplier just to get it higher up on the political agenda in the US, where securitisation has proven to be a recipe for elevating issues on the political agenda. On the contrary, in Europe, climate change policy, centred around the transition to a low

Clingendael Alert

carbon economy, is usually presented as an opportunity for economic innovation and for improving energy security. This contrasts with presenting climate change as a threat. Thus, the climate-security nexus has recently been framed more frequently as one that offers possibilities for peacebuilding.

Whereas there is a long-standing debate on how security and development are at times in conflict, such arguments are not often made explicit in the debate on securitisation of climate change. There is also a lack of evidence on how military or climate and development policy makers could have abused the security dimension of climate change to justify military intervention or suppression, or rather placing climate change higher on political agendas.

This Clingendael alert is a call for a more open debate on what lies behind fears for the securitisation of climate change, particularly on the opposition to engage the military.

Climate change certainly has a hard security dimension and it has become clear that a role for the military exists in this regard, but the question remains how, in what way and in what political and cultural contexts the military can be engaged, and how it can do so in a meaningful way.

Resistance to the threat narrative and military voices contributing to the debate

The framing of climate change as a threat multiplier that exacerbates other risk factors, and the consequent inclusion of climate-related challenges into the security sector, is subject to resistance, as it can serve other political or military agendas. The threat-multiplier discourse is generally not used by those most vulnerable to climate change and insecurity, but rather by those which consider the consequences of climate change a danger to themselves. For example, the narrative of climate change exacerbating droughts in the Middle East evokes the picture of migrants fleeing to Europe, whereas in reality migration is mostly the result of a mix of factors, including the prospective of a better life in the country of destination and a migration route being

affordable and available. If the hard security narrative of climate change legitimises (military) intervention in such regions, this could undermine national sovereignty and reinforce historical unequal relations between European, African and Middle Eastern nations.

At the same time, the threat-multiplier discourse has proven to be effective in raising awareness of the relationship between climate change and security among busy and sometimes sceptical political elites in the United States and to a lesser degree in Europe. It is exactly this strategic use of climate change securitisation that is much criticised by some academics,¹ who argue that the link with security in this regard is only misused as lobby strategy by environmentalists in order to move the need to act on climate change higher up the agenda. When climate change was recognised as a threat multiplier in the early 2000s this was linked to calls for emission reductions, but it was increasingly recognised that climate change was already undermining security in some places. Action to reduce risks could moreover not wait for emission reductions, since they stay in the atmosphere for decades and thus continue to cause climate impacts even when no longer emitted as of today.

Furthermore, there is criticism of the military being brought in as an objective, higher authoritative voice operating above the level of politics, while pointing to security threats is inherently political. Military leaders would tend to overemphasise the security threat of climate change, not acknowledging the complex relationship between climate change and security. The construction of such simple, one-sided 'threats' generally favours military forces, as threats are crucial to legitimating their existence.

¹ See Ole Wæver, *Securitization and desecuritization*, Copenhagen: Centre for Peace and Conflict Research, 1993. And also, Ingrid Boas, *Climate migration and security: Securitisation as a strategy in climate change politics*. Routledge, 2015.

Another reason to be cautious about the militarisation of climate change is that military tools are not always adequate to deal with the different socio-economic and political factors that affect the complex relationship between climate and security. For example, tensions over access to water and land between herders and farmers in the Sahel will not be solved only by increasing military presence. Good governance, economic development or education are needed to prevent climate change impacts and natural resource management from becoming a security concern. The hard-security narrative can thus potentially distract the debate away from the human security dimensions of the conflict and from understanding underlying factors that are key in mitigating and adapting to the actual risks. Moreover, the role and status of the military differs greatly between countries, and between cultural and social backgrounds. Including the military as an actor in climate-related discourses may have adverse effects in settings where the military is linked to repression and misconduct.

The military as 'last resort' for disaster response and in war situations

Despite legitimate concerns about engaging the military in the climate-security realm, the military is a key actor which cannot and should not be excluded, as it is often the only actor able to establish peace and stability in situations where climate change undermines security. In regions with limited state capacity, international military personnel might be the only external actors who can assist civil authorities, provide resources and services, and handle emergencies, especially in regions outside urban centres. Recent flooding in Sudan showed that foreign military forces, in this case from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, provided essential assistance for the delivery of humanitarian aid as they are trained and equipped to be readily deployed. Coordination between civil organisations, aid workers and the military is therefore essential in order to optimise the assistance offered during extreme

weather events that occur more frequently due to climate change.² It is less clear what contribution military forces can make in cases where climate change gradually undermines the living conditions and the security situation.

Because of increased calls for military assistance due to extreme weather events, several military organisations have climate change on their radar. They also realise that their own installations and military equipment are increasingly at risk of floods, hurricanes and heat waves. In addition to calls for domestic assistance, climate change is furthermore affecting the international security environment, such as for instance contributing to rising tensions in the Arctic. Nevertheless, in several military organisations there is still scepticism about climate change being a factor that significantly alters their main tasks or affects their ability to defend their country. This view is confirmed by three out of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council³ who again, in July 2020, refused to discuss a resolution on climate change as a security risk, even though they had accepted it in specific regions and UN missions.

Engaging the military with accountability checks

One of the biggest concerns about engaging the military seems to be that climate change impacts are used as an excuse to deploy force against the people who protest because of their suffering. If policy analysts point to a link between climate change and protests or conflict, this may divert attention from other explanatory factors, such as severe human rights violations. For instance, at the outbreak of the protests in Syria in 2011, President Assad acknowledged that the

2 For an overview of 11 military organisations dealing with climate change see: Louise van Schaik, Dick Zandee, Tobias von Lossow, Brigitte Dekker, Zola van der Maas and Ahmad Halima, *Ready for Take Off: Military Responses to Climate Change*, Clingendael Report, 2020.

3 China, Russia and the US.

Clingendael Alert

drought of the preceding years had resulted in high food prices that people protested against. The same happened a decade earlier in Sudan where Bashir accepted the link between climate change and conflict and thereby implicitly used it to justify his oppression of the population.

Acknowledging the role of climate change as a conflict driver should therefore be approached carefully and cannot be a justification to oppress local populations. Climate-related security risks are, and could more often be, recognised in the mandates of UN and EU missions, for instance with regard to including this aspect in on-the-ground risk assessments – although they are unlikely to be the overarching reason for military intervention. Holding the military to account and not allowing military organisations to misuse extreme weather or droughts to justify intervention needs to be part of the broader debate on how to hold military interventions subject to democratic checks and balances.

Not forgetting the military resources and carbon footprint

Despite its high carbon dioxide emissions, the military carbon footprint is not receiving a lot of attention in comparison to other sectors. The US military, for example, relies on an extensive network of container ships and cargo planes to operate its global combat and humanitarian missions. In some countries, such as in Indonesia and Brazil, the military is running its own unsustainable businesses, for example leading or protecting illegal logging. However, pointing solely to the carbon footprint of the military may be problematic as it could lower their willingness to act on climate change and to help in reducing security risks related to climate change. Yet, there is more that can be done other than involving the military in generic emission reduction policies. For example, focusing on using the military as a testbed for innovative low carbon technologies and synergies to be less dependent on vulnerable diesel supply lines are promising steps towards greening military forces.

Moreover, it is important that military organisations become more aware of their own contribution to the exploitation of natural resources in theatres of operation. In this field there are many commonalities with the work of humanitarian organisations, which also seek ways to minimise their water, energy, food and carbon footprint when operating in the field.

Securitising climate change: the good, the bad and the unavoidable

Whether appreciated or not, in several cases where climate change has invoked insecurity, involving the military is unavoidable. There is definitely a need to engage the military in the field of climate change, and in reducing climate-related security risks more specifically. Furthermore, the military should be called upon more explicitly to contribute to the global emission reduction effort. However, this does not mean that this engagement is per se positive and should go unchecked. The occurrence of extreme weather events or protests linked to climate-induced natural resource scarcity should not be used as an excuse for oppression of people or military interventions. In less affluent regions, the human security perspective should always be kept in mind.

In conclusion, more should be done to redefine the roles of military organisations in vulnerable areas with regard to reducing and addressing insecurity related to climate change. They could pay more attention to their resource-use and carbon footprint, take natural resource scarcity aggravated by climate change into account in on-the-ground risk assessment, enter into dialogue with military actors that seek to misuse climate change for unjustified military intervention or are otherwise engaged in unsustainable businesses. EU and UN military missions could try more often to create a safe operating space for environmental peacebuilding and mediation efforts by diplomats, and also to increase climate resilience through protecting local actors, development donors, and investors in climate adaptation and

Clingendael Alert

mitigation. The military should step up its engagement, and development and climate change experts should encourage them to do so while advising on the right direction to take. Rather than being concerned about militarisation, securitisation or hard security approaches becoming dominant, climate change experts should become more explicit about cases where climate-related insecurity has been misused in order to address these specific cases and should build on lessons learned for future situations.

About the Planetary Security Initiative

The Planetary Security Initiative sets out best practice, strategic entry points and new approaches to reducing climate-related risks to conflict and stability, thus promoting sustainable peace in a changing climate. The PSI is operated by the Clingendael Institute in partnership with Free Press Unlimited and The Hague Center for Strategic Studies.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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