

Should the Security Council Engage with Implications of Climate Change? Let's Look at the Scientific Evidence

June 8, 2023 by Halvard Buhaug, Cedric de Coning, and Nina von Uexkull

A wide view of the United Nations Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security, with a focus on sea-level rise and its implications for international peace and security, Feb. 14, 2023. (UN Photo/Lorey Felipe)

Climate change is a controversial topic at the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The Council has adopted over 70 resolutions and presidential statements that address aspects of climate-related peace and security implications. However, a few members strongly oppose adding climate change to the Security Council agenda. When a thematic resolution on the security implications of climate change came up for a vote in December 2021, Russia went so far as to veto it. India also voted against it, while China abstained. But twelve Council members voted in favor, and 113 non-members co-sponsored the resolution—the second highest number of co-sponsors in Security Council history.

Although motives for opposing the climate security agenda in the Council vary, one important argument rests on a perception that the scientific evidence for a connection between climate and conflict is limited. For example, letters to Council members circulated by Russia, India, and China ahead of the December 2021 vote **claimed** that there is “no clear scientific background for equating climate change with security concerns.” Similarly, in an open debate preceding the vote, India **stated** that “the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change clearly states that the effect of climate variability on violence is contested.” While several newly elected member states have **pledged** to champion climate security in the Council, those opposed continue to reject it, and similar claims about the lack of evidence are also now being made in the Peacebuilding Commission.

Establishing a shared understanding of the state of the scientific evidence could be an important step in reducing tensions over this topic. To that end, this article looks at five key insights (and related sources of confusion) found in the second part (WGII) of the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which offers an unparalleled assessment of observed climate change impacts and future risks. Contrary to perceptions, there is compelling scientific evidence in the AR6 report that climate change constitutes a risk to peace and security.

Five Insights from the IPCC on Climate, Peace and Security

Climate change contributes to conflict risk. The Sixth Assessment Report states clearly that climate change-related hazards can have adverse impacts on conflict. For example, the executive summary of **chapter 7** states, “Climate hazards are a [...] contributing factor to violent conflict” whereas **chapter 9** writes, “There is increasing evidence linking increased temperatures and drought to conflict risk in Africa.” **Chapter 18** offers additional details: “Climate change undermines human livelihoods and security, because it increases the population’s vulnerabilities [sic], grievances and political tensions through an array of indirect—at times nonlinear—pathways, thereby increasing human insecurity and the risk of violent conflict.”

Conflict contributes to climate change risk. A second key insight concerns how conflict is a major driver of vulnerability to climate change. According to the overarching AR6 **Synthesis Report**, “Vulnerability is higher in locations with poverty, governance challenges and limited access to basic services and resources, violent conflict and high levels of climate-sensitive livelihoods.” Several underlying chapters make similar observations, including **chapter 8**: “Populations of concern, who are extremely vulnerable to climate change impacts with limited capacity to adapt, are those displaced and resettled in the course of conflict or disaster, either internally or across borders.” We have written at length **elsewhere** about the two-way relationship between climate and conflict, which also includes how climate hazards may accentuate ongoing conflict.

Climate change will become a more influential conflict driver in the future. Although the average climate effect on conflict is judged to be **modest** at present, more devastating extreme events and loss of habitability mean that climate-driven risks will rise in prominence with climate change. This is highlighted in the AR6 WGII **Summary for Policymakers**: “At higher global warming levels, impacts of weather and climate extremes... will increasingly affect violent intrastate conflict.” Likewise, **chapter 16** finds, “Literature concludes with *medium confidence* that risks to peace will increase with warming, with the largest impacts expected in weather-sensitive communities with low resilience to climate extremes and high prevalence of underlying risk factors.” “*Medium confidence*” is an indication of **scientific uncertainty**, which reflects the quality of underlying evidence and degree of agreement among studies. In this case, confidence was judged as medium due to few (but consistent) studies of future conflict risk.

Climate-conflict interactions will produce increasingly complex risks in the future. Climate change and associated extreme events not only are expected to produce greater challenges to peace but they also will worsen humanitarian consequences of ongoing armed conflict. This is another important insight from AR6 elevated to the **Synthesis Report**: “In addition, multiple climatic and non-climatic risk drivers such as biodiversity loss or violent conflict will interact, resulting in compounding overall risk and risks cascading across sectors and regions.” **Chapter 8** further states, “Even with moderate climate change people in vulnerable regions will experience a further erosion of livelihood security that can interact with humanitarian crises, such as [...] violent conflict, and lead to social tipping points.”

Climate change responses can be beneficial for peace. Lastly, AR6 highlights how key international policy frameworks relevant for climate change, such as the **Sustainable Development Goals** and the **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction**, can have important favorable effects on peace and security. This is again mentioned in the **Synthesis Report**: “If achieved, these agreements would reduce climate change, and the impacts on health, wellbeing, migration, and conflict, among others.” Conversely, poorly planned or managed adaptation and mitigation interventions can further accentuate risk, as pointed to in **chapter 8**: “Poor institutional responses [to climate change] can directly drive violence, and there is robust evidence that inequitable responses further exacerbate marginalization, exclusion or disenfranchisement of some populations, which are commonly recognized drivers of violent conflict.”

In other words, actions to adapt to the effects of climate change may contribute to sustaining peace; and, vice versa, peacebuilding initiatives can **strengthen** the capacity of communities to adapt to climate change.

Sources of Confusion

Considering the documented evidence connecting climate change, peace and security, what might explain the misinterpretation of the research findings on this topic in the UN Security Council and Peacebuilding Commission? We believe this may be partly ascribed to the manner in which climate-conflict research is communicated in AR6 and the larger body of scientific literature.

First, studies usually stress **indirect and context-dependent associations** between climate and conflict. This does not mean that climate is causally unrelated to conflict, nor does it mean that a statistically significant correlation between some climate factor and a conflict outcome cannot be established. However, it does mean that the strength of a correlation (and plausibility of a causal link) varies across cases, depending on prevailing societal and environmental characteristics. Such variability is not unique to climate-related risks; indeed, we are unaware of any conflict driver that retains equal relevance and potency across contexts. This is partly because it is always up to the people exposed to climate change hazards to **choose competition or cooperation**. Affected communities’ capacity to make positive choices can be enhanced by investing in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, which can greatly strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity.

Second, research (including AR6) often concludes that the climate effect on conflict is weak when compared to other major socioeconomic and political drivers. This is an important insight that merits policy attention. However, it should not lead to a conclusion that climate always plays a peripheral role, thereby dismissing it from analysis on security risks. Precisely because of the contextual nature of the climate-conflict relationship, the relative importance of climatic factors in shaping conflict can vary widely, even if the average effect across a large number of conflicts is found to be weak.

Causal complexity also makes it hard to isolate and quantify the climate effect, leading scholars to conclude that they are **less confident** about the “true” role of climate in shaping conflict than they are for more proximate drivers (in other words, the effect could be larger than available results indicate, especially in relation to future risk). Climate change is thus not the only, and may not be the most important, factor to consider, depending on context, but simply excluding any consideration of climate-related effects on peace and security risks omitting potentially important information in reporting to the Council, and from the Council’s subsequent analysis and decisions.

A third potential source of confusion relates to the focus and framing of findings in the AR6 high-level documents compared to the underlying chapters of the report. Only the most important findings are elevated to the Summary for Policy Makers and the Synthesis Report—typically those associated with significant climate-related risk for which there is high scientific agreement. Although all five climate-conflict insights discussed above are supported by the Summary for Policy Makers, high-level statements contain a lot of condensed information, often at the expense of clarity.

Moreover, both the Synthesis Report and the Summary for Policymakers undergo government review and approval, unlike the underlying chapters. This process results in modifications of wording through repeated rounds of negotiations between governments and scientists. **Politically salient issues may receive limited coverage** if a consensus between stakeholders proves elusive. Accordingly, the clearest and most relevant statements on evidence for climate-conflict links are often found in chapters and not in the condensed, policy-oriented summaries, which receive the most attention from policymakers and the press.

Conclusion

The ongoing controversy in the Security Council, and now increasingly also in the UN Peacebuilding Commission, over whether there is sufficient scientific evidence to link climate change with peace and security risks reflects a misreading of the state of science. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, which provides the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment of climate-conflict research to date, concludes that climate change is associated with increased conflict risk, and that conflict is a major driver of vulnerability to climate change. The report also concludes that the influence of climatic effects on conflict risk will increase with further climate change, and more severe climate hazards in combination with ongoing conflict will increase the risk of complex emergencies and cascading impacts in the future.

These scientific findings and documented effects show that climate-related peace and security risks should be taken into consideration by those responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, both when decisions are made by the UN Security Council and by those implementing the Council’s resolutions in the affected countries.

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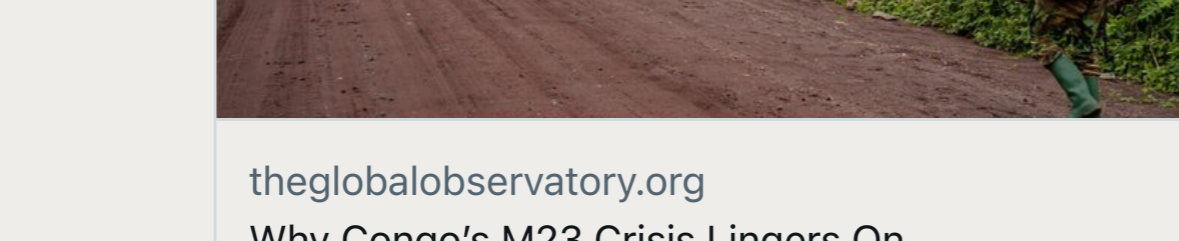
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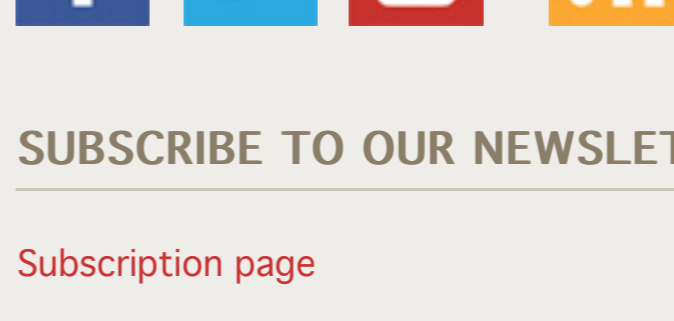
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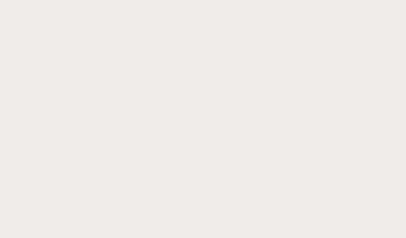


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