Chatham House COP26
Diplomatic Briefing Series:
Climate Change and National Security

Event date: 25 March 2020
Introduction
The third event in the Chatham House COP26 Diplomatic Briefing Series – ‘Climate Change and National Security’ – took place on Wednesday 25 March 2020. Due to the spread of COVID-19, the event took the form of a webinar. Glada Lahn, Senior Research Fellow in the Energy, Environment and Resources Programme at Chatham House, chaired the briefing, and the panel consisted of:

- Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, Vice Dean (Public Policy) Engineering Sciences at University College London (UCL) and Associate Fellow at Chatham House
- Professor Yacob Mulugetta, Professor of Energy and Development Policy at UCL
- Lieutenant General Richard Nugee, Departmental Lead for Climate Change and Sustainability at the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD)
- Dr Patricia Lewis, Research Director for Conflict, Science and Technology, and Director of the International Security Programme at Chatham House

The attendees mainly consisted of members of the diplomatic community and representatives from the UK government. Please note that the event was held before the 26th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26) had been postponed.

Key messages

- Climate change normally acts as a threat multiplier, rather than a direct cause of conflict. It is distinct from other drivers of instability since its impacts are felt through numerous channels simultaneously. A climate change-related, localized shock often has global repercussions due to the interconnectedness of the world.

- It is critical that governments and other stakeholders understand the risks posed by climate change. This will enable more effective responses to be developed but also increases the pressure to act, which could have implications for the degree of ambition in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted under the Paris Agreement.

- The security community needs to engage as part of a wider governmental and societal process. In the UK, the MoD incorporates climate change in its ‘horizon-scanning’ exercises. It is formulating a vision, as well as a supporting strategy, to enable the armed forces to operate globally in a changing climate. Efforts are also being made to reduce the carbon footprint of the MoD and the armed forces.

How does climate change affect national security?
Neil Morisetti emphasized that climate change normally acts as a threat multiplier rather than a direct cause of conflict, and that there is a need to focus on second- and third-order consequences. When temperatures increase, sea levels rise and oceans become more acidic, livelihoods will be affected, as will the availability of resources. Often, these stresses are most prevalent in countries within the equatorial belt which may already be under significant pressure (including from population growth), and in which governments may lack the capacity and resilience to meet the needs of their people. These challenges are further compounded when conditions force people to relocate (as this may put pressure on the receiving communities), or when those who cannot move are unable to provide for themselves and their families, as so-called ‘trapped populations’ are more likely to engage in crime or join extremist organizations.
Morisetti noted that tensions often have repercussions far beyond the countries in which they occur, with global supply chain disruptions, volatility in the prices of raw materials, and suppressed demand in affected regions being three possible effects. Climate change differs from other types of threats since its impacts are felt through multiple channels simultaneously.

**More than a theory**

Morisetti highlighted that climate change is considered to have been one of the contributing factors behind the Arab Spring and the Syrian war. In 2010, Russia suffered a heatwave that, in addition to wet weather in Canada and Australia, reduced the global supply of wheat. This, in turn, caused a sharp rise in the price of bread, which was one of the factors that triggered riots in Tunisia. In Syria, rural–urban migration driven by prolonged drought put pressure on urban areas, exacerbating existing societal and political tensions and contributing to unrest.

Yacob Mulugetta reflected on the situation in Africa, a continent that is expected to be – and already is – severely affected by climate change. While population growth, urbanization and changing lifestyles will increase the demand for resources, climate change is likely to constitute a constraining factor. This may have implications for food and human security, and Mulugetta underscored the point that even a rise of 1.5°C in the global average temperature could pose a significant threat to food production in Africa. The chain of events caused by climate change, such as increased migration and higher prevalence of malaria, would lead risk analysts in the security community to describe it as a risk multiplier, according to Mulugetta. The security implications of a changing climate are already evident on the continent. In Somalia, climate change has amplified disputes over already scarce resources, has contributed to the proliferation of illegal armed groups, and has made migration more complex. The fact that Africa is a net importer of food and agricultural products constitutes another potentially destabilizing factor, given that climate change is expected to increase the frequency of global food price spikes and push up the prices of basic food commodities. Moreover, climate mitigation measures in other parts of the world could affect livelihoods, politics and security in Africa. Shifts in demand for minerals and land were mentioned specifically in this context.

**What should be done?**

Morisetti stressed that there isn’t a hard security solution to the problem. The security community needs to be involved, but as part of a wider governmental and societal process. Ultimately, the issue comes down to risk management. Governments and other stakeholders need to understand the risks posed by climate change, and develop solutions accordingly. Better knowledge enables more effective measures to be undertaken, but also increases the pressure to act, which could have implications for the level of ambition in the NDCs submitted under the Paris Agreement. The security community should formulate a coherent strategic message as part of a wider narrative, so that the totality of the risks posed by climate change can be adequately assessed. Climate change should be regarded as a mainstream issue, according to Morisetti.

Patricia Lewis emphasized that climate change, as a long-term phenomenon, must be factored into all decision-making, and that there is a need to understand both how climate change will complicate existing security problems and how existing security challenges will complicate action on climate change. The UK government’s new Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review provides an opportunity to consider climate change aspects in a way that hasn’t been done previously. There is, however, a need to include a mechanism that enables adaptation and adjustment over time. Lewis further underscored the need to respond collectively, through the United Nations and the Commonwealth as well as through the European Union, the African Union and other regional bodies. She also emphasized that it would be useful to identify resilience-building mechanisms that could address a diverse range of threats; such an approach was influential in the 1990s, but has lost traction in recent years.
Richard Nugee’s remarks focused on how the MoD and the UK’s armed forces are considering and addressing climate change in their analyses, processes and operations. The MoD currently undertakes ‘horizon-scanning’ exercises to assess the security implications of a changing climate, along with other threats. This is done in cooperation with other government departments both in the UK and foreign states. Climate change is regarded as a threat multiplier by the MoD, and it is recognized that it will have very significant direct and indirect effects. According to Nugee, the MoD and the armed forces should address climate change in two different but complementary ways. First, they should decrease their own carbon footprints.\(^1\) Second, they should analyse how climate change affects UK security. The latter is complex, given the influence of unknown factors. To illustrate the point, the UK’s Joint Intelligence Committee recently refrained from making a prediction about the potential impact of climate change in 2030 due to the high degree of complexity. Despite this, Nugee emphasized that the armed forces must adapt so that they are able to operate globally in a changing climate; a vision, along with a supporting strategy, is being developed to guide this endeavour. Nugee himself is currently leading the development of a Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy for the MoD. In the future, he predicts that the impacts of a changing climate, including increased migration, supply chain disruptions, diseases and resource depletion, may well increase demands on the military, which the armed forces and the MoD must prepare for and adapt to. Further cooperation across government, and with other states, is crucial for success.

**Discussion**

The discussion following the speakers’ presentations was held under the Chatham House Rule, and highlighted further measures that could be undertaken. One speaker emphasized the need to include the development dimension in the climate security discourse; countries are interested in the climate agenda, if it addresses their development-related concerns. The speaker also highlighted the need to create opportunities for people to remain in rural areas, in order to stem climate change-induced rural–urban migration and to build resilience in urban settlements. Another speaker noted that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a useful framework through which to integrate security, climate change and other concerns, and that this approach could be deployed in the UK’s Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review. The desirability of a potential omnibus resolution on climate and security was also discussed. In this context, a parallel was drawn to Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution has, at least at a rhetorical level, garnered widespread support but leaves out certain elements and is taken relatively lightly by some countries. However, resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council are of a different nature, as states tend to take these seriously and report against them.

The role of NATO in addressing climate and security aspects was also discussed. In this context, one speaker commented that the alliance might face difficulties in addressing climate and security aspects, given the position of one of its major members on climate change. There are, however, a multitude of other international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), through which the agenda can be advanced.

When referring to COP26, one speaker mentioned that the regional security conferences that take place before Glasgow, and which explore climate and security dimensions, could play an important role in influencing government positions ahead of the conference. It is also important to get foreign and defence ministers engaged, as these officials tend to have greater leverage within governments than climate and environment ministers do. Climate and defence attachés at the London-based embassies and high commissions can play a role by, *inter alia*, cooperating and conveying a joint message to their capitals.

\(^1\) According to Nugee, many important measures have already been undertaken within this area: sustainability considerations are, for instance, incorporated into procurement processes and capability planning, and efforts are being made to use clean forms of energy.