

Global warming is a clear instability factor and adverse phenomena are a challenge to national security

# Climate change and security

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**C**LIMATE change is currently considered the greatest challenge facing humanity due to its impact on the environment, the economy, and national and international security. It is also a source of pressure in the current trends of globalisation, demographics, geopolitical tensions and the increasing use of natural resources.

Ever since 2007, when the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon connected the origin of the conflict in Darfur with climate change, the link between this event and the generation of conflicts has become increasingly evident, especially in the poorest, most fragile countries and those most vulnerable to climate change. However, this relationship, far from being direct, is conditioned by numerous factors, such as the political, economic and social context of the regions affected by the phenomena related to global warming.

Climate change is a global phenomenon and no region is immune to its effects. In fragile regions, the relationship between climate change and security is very complex, especially when other factors coexist, such as the unsustainable use of natural resources or weak governance. Climate change has therefore been considered a risk multiplier.

For instance, it is estimated that in 2025 between 80 and 100 million more people are likely to suffer from water stress due to temperature rise and reduced river flows and groundwater recharge. This situation could contribute to situations of food insecurity and poverty that may increase the vulnerability of populations and cause humanitarian crises, population displacement, conflicts, increased ethnic tensions or recruitment by terrorist groups, as is the case of the Sahel.

Situations of confrontation over resources, such as water and land, can arise when populations lose their livelihood and are forced

to move. This is the case of the conflicts between the nomads and farmers in the Lake Chad region, compounded by the presence of Islamist groups in the region.

## **NATIONAL SECURITY**

From a national security approach, climate change also poses major challenges as a result of more frequent and severe adverse weather events, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, prolonged droughts or rising sea levels. These direct impacts, which we are already suffering today, will adversely affect the ecosystems of countries and their critical infrastructures, including military facilities.

Scientific evidence shows that the number of natural disasters has doubled worldwide, and has even tripled in the Middle East and North Africa. The most extreme case occurs in the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), at risk of disappearing throughout this century due to rising sea levels, resulting in statelessness among their inhabitants. Southeast Asia will also be severely affected by flooding. In the specific case of Bangladesh, one fifth of its national territory could disappear by the middle of the 21st century due to flooding.

## **GEOPOLITICAL RISKS**

A novel aspect that is currently being included in climate change risk assessment documents by the Defence Departments of some countries, such as the UK and the US, is a new type of security risk arising from global warming: geopolitical risks.

*As early as 2007, the UN linked the origin of the conflict in Darfur to extreme weather*

Such risks do not refer to the physical impact of climate change, but to the reconfiguration of the global order we are immersed in as a result of the decarbonisation of economies. On the one hand, traditional oil-exporting countries will have to make a transition towards new low-carbon economic models which, if not carried out properly, can generate geopolitical tensions. On the other hand, the electrification of mobility and the green and digital transition will be associated with an increase in demand for some minerals, such as rare earth or lithium, for which the International Energy Agency estimates a 90 per cent increase. This demand pull for these minerals is already disrupting production and supply chains and, therefore, trade relations between the great powers. The lack of cooperation in the exploitation of shared resources sensitive to climate change, such as water, can also pose risks to international security. Especially in transboundary basins where the hydro-hegemon carries out unilateral actions, as could be the case of China in rivers originating in the Himalayan system, where climate change is leading to a reduction in the mass of glaciers and a decrease in the availability of water reserves.

The Arctic is another focus of potential geopolitical conflict related to climate change. In this region, the temperature is rising twice as fast as in the rest of the planet, causing almost 40 per cent of its surface to melt. This melting has given rise to the establishment of new trade routes and the exploitation of natural resources, mainly gas and minerals. As a result, the Arctic may become a source of conflict in the coming years, as there are multiple and divergent interests in the area, not only from neighbouring countries but also from more distant powers such as China.

### THE UN AND NATO

The UN Security Council clearly recognizes the complexity resulting from the need to address climate change from a security perspective, in numerous scenarios and dealing with the specific vulnerabilities of countries. Thus far, member states have been unable to adopt



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a resolution explicitly stating the impact of climate change on the emergence of conflicts. This issue has been the subject of numerous debates in the Council, but the end result has always been a veto by Russia and China. These countries are against adopting a resolution on this matter because they consider that there are already other bodies within the UN that specifically deal with climate change.

However, these discrepancies have not prevented the adoption of certain resolutions that have considered climate change a contributing factor to the worsening of several conflicts, such as in the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, Mali, Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq and Cyprus. The most recent two resolutions (2561 and 2587, respectively) are the first cases in which the Council has recognised the

effects of climate change in non-African contexts.

From a defence standpoint, climate change is also altering the operational and tactical scenario with important implications for Defence and the Armed Forces, as evidenced by the increased involvement of the Military Emergency Unit (UME) in countering natural phenomena.

NATO is also increasingly interested in dealing with the security implications of climate change and the consequences for the Armed Forces of the various countries. For NATO, it is essential to face the new operational and tactical scenario in which the Armed Forces will be used as a result of the impact of climate change and the mitigation policies implemented.

Another major step in this process is the decarbonisation of defence. With its Action Plan approved in June 2021, NATO aims to approach climate change by assessing its impact on the strategic environment, adapting its capabilities and mitigating and disseminating its effects to contribute to the global response to climate change.



Pepe Diaz

At international level, Defence Departments are pursuing cooperative initiatives to address the complex impact of climate change on the operational and tactical scenario of the Armed Forces. In this regard, attention should also be drawn to the Climate Change and the Armed Forces Initiative launched on 12 November 2021 at the proposal of France. This initiative, signed by twenty-five countries, including Spain, aims to promote collaboration in four areas: risk anticipation, adaptation, mitigation and cooperation.

### **ADAPTATION AS A STABILITY FACTOR**

Having established the need to consider the challenge of climate change from the security and defence perspective —either as a potential generating factor of conflicts or its impact on the new operational and tactical scenarios requiring the use of the Armed Forces— it is advisable to advance in the development of one of the most effective and most neglected measures in recent years, namely the adaptation to climate change. And this was precisely one of the most important conclusions of the COP26 Climate Change Summit held last November in Glasgow: the need to finance adaptation as an

essential part of climate change-related policies and to put it at the same level as mitigation.

This is a novel approach which, from a security and defence perspective, opens up important avenues for stabilising regions particularly vulnerable to climate change and which, for structural reasons, are prone to conflict. Adaptation thus emerges as a lever to bring peace and stability to our immediate surroundings, such as the Sahel, helping to consolidate all the efforts made in military stabilisation missions.

But, in order for the resources offered for adaptation to achieve the desired results, it is essential that the governments of those countries —generally fragile and vulnerable— be aware of the problems related to the weakness of their populations. Only this way will they be able to deal effectively with the social, economic and environmental consequences of climate change. This is the only way to break the dangerous and dramatic vicious circle between environmental degradation and conflict.