

Six Reasons Why the UN Security Council Should Not Discuss Climate Change

Written by Dhanasree Jayaram

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DHANASREE JAYARAM, APR 26 2013

Pakistan, which has been adversely affected by climate change in addition to many other challenges, convened a special meeting to discuss 'security implications of climate change' in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on February 15, 2013. As the Chairman of the UNSC, Pakistan took this step along with the United Kingdom (UK) that was the first country to convene a meeting on it in 2007. Surprisingly, Pakistan had earlier questioned the introduction of the issue in the UNSC on the grounds of "ever-increasing encroachment of the Security Council on the roles and responsibilities of the other main organs of the United Nations". The threat of use of veto by China and Russia led to the issue being discussed as an "Arria-Formula" meeting instead of a formal meeting.

The interconnectedness between climate change and global security is one of the most debated and controversial subjects in the international security discourse. At the outset, it seems irrational to disconnect environment from security considering various factors including impact of natural disasters, sea-level rise, floods and droughts on human security. Quite contrary to this belief, international politics has transformed the obvious into a dubious, endless debate that has been exemplified by climate change negotiations.

What is problematic about the UNSC addressing the security implications of climate change?

First, the use of the term 'climate change' and its categorization as a 'security' threat is unacceptable to the majority of developing countries that aspire to achieve the existing standards of living in advanced countries. Poverty, resource scarcity and competition for energy are expected to lead to conflicts with equitable global distribution of resources having been put forth by developing countries as the solution to nullify this perceived inevitability. For these countries, adherence to the Rio principles, especially the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR), the "Agenda 21", the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol is the key to addressing climate change.

Second, why does the UNSC discuss security implications of climate change only and not environmental change? A host of phenomena such as cyclones, subsidence and tsunamis, and their implications for global security cannot be linked solely to climate change. These can broadly be classified as changes in 'environment' as a whole. Climate change is only a subset of environmental change and hence, the latter might be more agreeable to (at least) the rational minds.

Third, overriding socio-economic instabilities and disparities to label climate change as the cause for conflicts could be regarded as far-fetched. Environmental change was one among many other factors that could be identified as a cause for the Darfur crisis. However, to take this as a prototype for possible wars in the future due to climate change would be perceived as politically motivated attempts to further international military intervention or political interference in another country's internal affairs. To call climate change a 'threat multiplier' for an already persisting instability and not the 'cause' could be regarded as the right way forward. This has been proved in cases such as the conflict in Southern Ethiopia.

Similarly, the connection that is now being built between the Arab Spring and climate change based on spike in food

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prices leading from drought and wildfire in Russia and Eastern Europe needs to be looked at within the larger context of public discontent towards the regimes that existed in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Fourth, repeated attempts to brand climate change a 'developing country syndrome' dilute the 'global' nature of the problem/symptom. Take the case of migration. It is assumed that migration from Bangladesh and Maldives to India would impact India's security as India is considered to have 'weak' institutions. At the same time, possible migration from the islands of the South Pacific to Australia and New Zealand is not classified as a security threat to the latter countries at the UNSC, as observed by Dr. Prodipto Ghosh, member of the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change in India in a personal interview to the author.

Fifth, to define climate change as a potential threat to human security may be accurate but to expand it to inter-state conflicts has not gone down well with many countries, as indicated by Ambassador Chandrasekhar Dasgupta, one of the leading climate change negotiators, in a personal interview to the author. Claims made by several sources that India and Pakistan, India and China or other countries could go to war due to climate change without attending to conditions within those countries that result in water scarcity such as pollution, massive urbanisation, infrastructure development, increase in population, mismanagement etc would be inappropriate.

Sixth, as pointed out by Bolivia's representative in the UNSC when Germany introduced the topic in 2011, "climate change is a real threat to humanity and Mother Earth but the security implications of climate change should be dealt in a forum where the guilty parties do not have seats for life or the right to veto." Out of five countries that possess the veto power, four (the US, the UK, France and the Russian Federation) are Annex-I countries with historical responsibility and the fifth country (China) is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs).

The UNSC is a body increasingly being looked upon by countries such as India as one that is in dire need of reform. The relative decline of the victors of the Second World War and the rise of newly emerged and emerging powers have rendered the new international order multipolar. For the UNSC to become an effective body, it needs to become inclusive and egalitarian.

It was only in the 1990s that the UN began to pay equal amount of attention to the concept of 'human security' and therefore, intra-state affairs. There emerged a popular belief that the UN should demystify the idea of sovereignty and address individual, political and civil rights including access to food, water, healthcare and accommodation. In the past, the UNSC has been at the centre of controversy for its role in facilitating wars and imposition of sanctions against several countries unjustifiably.

Therefore, this might be the right time to shift attention from the UNSC to an alternative forum through which the implications of 'environmental change' could be discussed and solutions could be brainstormed. 'Transnational' bodies comprising all actors – both state and non-state – could bring consensus among the international community more than an 'international' organ like the UNSC that is dominated largely by parochial interests of states.

Until and unless the UNSC becomes fully equipped to handle intra-state issues impartially, the larger portion of the international community would continue to oppose the issue of climate change coming under its competency. Climate change should be restricted to other bodies of the UN or transnational forums to avoid polarisation and digression from the core issues related to environmental change that imperil global security.

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