Security Implications of Climate Change

Though climate change is not itself viewed as a primary driver of conflict, there is evidence that it can act as a threat multiplier,[1] and that climate-related disasters can also increase the likelihood of violence,[2] making this an important issue for present and future peace operations. Natural resource scarcities pose significant challenges to missions as they attempt to confront natural resource exploitation, improve governance over resources and the environment, and incorporate natural resources into peace and security objectives. The UN Security Council highlighted the nexus between climate change and conflict first in 2007 and then again in a July 2011 debate aiming to increase the Council's consideration of the issue.

Though direct linkages between climate change and conflict still lack clarity, indirect security impacts are already affecting many of the countries on the Security Council's agenda. The AU-UN Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) faces the potentially destabilizing effects of water and land scarcity, and works to increase water access through the distribution of high-capacity containers in order to mitigate security risks sustained by civilians traveling to collect water. Other missions, including the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) and the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), increasingly address competition over arable land as climate change exacerbates land degradation.

Operations themselves can put a strain on the environment through oil spills, production of waste and hazardous substances, and depletion of resources. The UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations engages in efforts to mitigate the security impacts of climate change, including through policy guidelines designed to assist mission staff in addressing environmental issues that could arise as a result of their mandates. The UN's Department of Political Affairs, along with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and other UN agencies, co-produced a set of manuals on natural resource management in 2012 as well as guidance notes for practitioners in 2010. The 2012 UNEP report *Greening the Blue Helmets* identified and highlighted environmental and natural resource considerations for UN peacekeeping. Following this report, UNEP announced that it would begin training for military, police, and civilian staff in peacekeeping missions on natural resource management.

Missions also engage in preventive activities. The UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) is mandated to work with regional governments to mitigate and prevent conflict arising from scarcity issues like water disputes. The UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) are also anticipating security challenges resulting from climate change by offering technical support to state authorities.

As the security implications of climate change grow clearer, the issue may become more firmly entrenched in Security Council deliberations and within UN field missions. Better awareness within the UN system, along with additional environmental staff with stronger capacities in the field, will help increase the success of mitigating these security implications. Climate change, however, does not occur in isolation, and a comprehensive approach that considers other political, social, and economic factors will ultimately be key.

Notes: 1. UNEP, *Greening the Blue Helmets: Environment, Natural Resources, and Peacekeeping Operations,* Geneva, 2012, http://www.unep.org/disastersandconflicts/Introduction/EnvironmentalCooperationforPeacebuilding/GreeningtheBlueHelmetsReport/tabid/101797/Default.aspx.
2. UNDP, "UN Disaster Risk Reduction Chief Commends Efforts to Tackle Disasters," 22 November 2011, http://www.tl.undp.org/undp/UN%20disaster%20risk%20reduction%20chief%20commends%20efforts%20to%20tackle%20disasters.htm.