opinion

Rethinking climate change as a security threat

■ CORINNE SCHOCH

> *Once upon a time climate change was a strictly environment and development issue. Today it has become a matter of national and international security. Efforts to link climate change with violent conflict may not be based on solid evidence, but they have certainly captured the attention of governments. They have played a vital role in raising the much-needed awareness of climate change as an issue that deserves global action. But at what cost? Focusing on climate change as a security threat alone risks devolving humanitarian responsibilities to the military, ignoring key challenges and losing sight of those climate-vulnerable communities that stand most in need of protection.*

Over the past five years, climate change has moved from being a purely environment and development issue to being a matter of national and international security.

For years we have understood that civil wars generally break out as a result of political instability, a poor national economy, weakened infrastructures and, in the case of African states, the collapse of the Cold War. Now it seems that environmental shocks can be added to that list — journalists, academics, policymakers, security institutions and heads of states repeatedly tell us that the impacts of climate change pose a grave security threat.

As a result, the idea that prolonged heat waves, rising sea levels, more variable climates and more frequent disasters such as cyclones or droughts will result in more civil conflicts has taken firm root in the public's imagination. The popular belief that climate change will soon spark 'water wars' between water-scarce regions and countries is just one example.

But while the notion that climate change could lead to conflict is widespread, it is based on very little evidence and questionable sources. The debate tends to be characterised by conjecture, extrapolations and a limited set of facts that make assumptions about how the climate will change in years to come, and how people will respond — for example, that increased climate variability automatically causes inter- and intrastate migration, or that a drop in rainfall is what

led to the Darfur crisis. The links between what causes conflict have been simplified.

The truth is that there are, as yet, no concrete examples of violent conflicts induced by climate change, and a limited understanding of what the future holds. Take the example of water wars: many researchers argue that it is not climate change that is to blame, but rather it is issues such as poor governance of water resources that are the driving factor behind such conflicts.

Just how useful is it to reframe the climate change debate as a security issue?

A seat at the table

The debate on links between climate change, diminishing resources, violent conflict and security is not new but it wasn't until the fall of the Soviet Union that discussions around them really became possible.

Up until the early 1990s security agendas on both sides of the Atlantic were dominated by measures to protect the state and support military institutions. But in the aftermath of the Cold War, the new political landscape demanded a broader, wider approach to the term 'security'. A 1994 report by the UN Development Programme articulated this need and gave birth to the term 'human security', shifting the emphasis away from a state-centric approach towards one that focuses on securing individual people.

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This created the space to incorporate 'non-traditional' threats — such as the environment, health and human rights — into the security agenda, alongside long-standing issues of military defence and state interests. In this way, climate change was 'securitised'.

Attaching a security label to climate change has certain advantages. For a start, it gives the state or government power over the issue and can end up mobilising vast amounts of political and financial resources to address it.

But perhaps the biggest 'win' in securitising climate change has been raising awareness of this environmental issue and capturing the attention of Northern countries. There is little doubt that climate change is now firmly in the sights of decision makers at all levels — in a way that would have been much harder to achieve with an environment and development framework alone. Prominent leaders, including Barack Obama, Al Gore, Nicolas Sarkozy and Ban Ki-moon, have all cited climate change as an international security threat.

Within the global security community, climate change has also been given a seat at the table — it was discussed within the UN Security Council, both in 2007 and 2011. On both occasions the push to include climate change under the council's remit met with fierce opposition from China, Russia and much of the developing world.

At what cost?

Despite the reticence from some countries, the world has embarked upon a path that will be difficult to turn back on. It is true that securitisation can, in theory, be 'reversed'. But in practice, because security institutions such as NATO and others have begun actively engaging in the debate, new political power dynamics are taking shape that will make it hard to simply take climate change off the security agenda.

By turning climate change into a security issue, advocates may have got the attention of governments, but the question we must ask is: at what cost?

Climate change is filled with uncertainty. As with other highly politicised debates, uncertainty tends to breed anxiety, which could lead to fear and result in a set of policies that merely mirror sensationalist academic and media headlines.

The military of Northern countries argue that the world cannot afford to wait for 100 per cent certainty before it acts to diminish the climate change security threat. But what form that action should take is already being discussed in many forums, such as the annual UN climate negotiations. Bypassing these to bring enforceable action through the UN Security Council would leave many of the most climate-vulnerable countries, who are not part of the council, out of the decision-making process.

Focus on people

There are other risks associated with turning climate change into a security issue, particularly when it comes to addressing the full spectrum of challenges posed by climate change. Deciding action based on the engagement of a limited pool of security institutions risks sidelining or missing out completely issues such as adaptation, mitigation, development, economic growth, equity, justice and resilience, which do not figure as priorities on the security agenda but which are integral to addressing climate change.

In today's world — filled with talk about 'human-induced climate change', 'compensation', 'responsibility' and 'global justice' — it is also important to ask ourselves to what extent the reframed climate-security debate is tackling the real drivers of climate change.

And we must similarly ask ourselves whose interests we are serving. The impacts of climate change will be felt first and foremost by some of the most vulnerable communities across the globe. The IPCC, for example, warns that Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change: agricultural yields could fall by up to 50 per cent by 2050 in some countries and, by 2020, up to 250 million people are projected to face increased water stress due to climate change.

Will steps to involve security institutions and the military protect the interests of the most vulnerable — or merely the interests of the powerful? To what extent are we prepared to devolve responsibilities of a humanitarian or developmental nature to these new actors? Ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected is not just a moral obligation but is a question of justice and equity. There is surely a great risk that the human security needs of the most vulnerable could be undermined.

Next steps

Perhaps the first step in moving forward must be to gather more evidence about the links between climate change and violent conflict. Stepping up the research in this area would enable policymakers, heads of state and security institutions to garner a much more accurate understanding of the issues at hand and allow for more informed decision making.

There is also a clear need to reshape the climate change and security debate to focus on protecting not ourselves but those most vulnerable to future impacts.

Climate change is not the first issue to be linked to security: issues such as HIV/AIDS and migration have both also been cast as a security matter in the past. Reflecting on these experiences — teasing out what worked, where and why, the impacts on different stakeholders, the political ramifications — could provide important lessons for ensuring the success of securitising climate change.

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