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Closing the Governance Gap in
**CLIMATE, SECURITY,
AND PEACEBUILDING**

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This series, inspired by the Working Group on Global Governance Innovation and Renewal meeting held on 15 December 2019 at the Doha Forum, seeks to highlight authors writing on topics that stimulate debate and influence: (1) the UN 75 Political Declaration, (2) the 21 September 2020 UN 75 Leaders Summit in New York and its follow-through, and (3) follow-up activities such as a proposed 2023 UN Conference on Multipolar Governance and Global Institutions, as recommended in the 2019 Doha Forum Report.* Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of The Stimson Center, its Board of Directors, any of the partners who supported this project.

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* *Reimagining Governance in a Multipolar World*. The Doha Forum, 2019. Accessed June 3, 2020. https://dohaforum.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/reimagining-governance_doha_forum-for-print.pdf.

Abstract

The past decade has brought about major achievements in global climate governance, as well as significant new challenges. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has produced objective, science-based evidence needed to understand the planet's current situation and to forecast likely scenarios. Moreover, the Paris Climate Agreement succeeded against major odds in bringing together nearly all countries to agree that climate change is driven by human behavior and that collective action is necessary to stop it. Yet the full range of impacts of climate change are only beginning to be understood, and global governance is lagging behind. In some cases, it is undergoing reversals. One of the areas requiring urgent action—not only in terms of diagnostics of the problems faced, but also of the solutions required—concerns the relationship between climate and security. While some strides have been made in this area, the UN's approach requires a broader understanding of how climate multiplies human security risks—and vice versa. This paper provides an overview of the first decade of climate and security at the United Nations and offers a number of recommendations on how global governance can become more effective in addressing the multiple challenges related to this nexus. The recommendations focus on four key areas: mainstreaming the issue across the UN system, boosting the role of regional organizations, reframing the debate so as to better incorporate peacebuilding, and making the decision-making process more inclusive, especially through meaningful participation by subnational governments, civil society, and the private sector.

Introduction

As the United Nations (UN) commemorates its 75th anniversary, marking the occasion amidst the worst pandemic in a century, the question of “what comes next?” is being asked more often. Answers are being solicited from around the planet. The Secretariat, member states, civil society, and the private sector have launched a series of debates around what changes need to occur within the system of global governance in order to make it more “fit for purpose.” In other words, what measures would render the UN system more capable of effectively tackling (and, in some instances, even anticipating) major challenges? Those issues include not only the persistent issues of the past decades, such as sharp socioeconomic inequalities, widespread environmental destruction, and nuclear weapons proliferation, but also emerging ones, such the impacts of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) on work and privacy issues emerging from new technologies. The biggest challenges, cutting across all of those areas, relate to climate change.

The past decade has brought about major achievements in global climate governance, as well as significant challenges. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has produced objective, science-based evidence needed to understand the planet's current situation and to forecast likely scenarios. Moreover, the Paris Climate Agreement succeeded against major odds in bringing together nearly all countries to agree that climate change is driven by human behavior and that collective action is necessary to stop it. Yet the full range of impacts of climate change are only beginning to be understood, and global governance is lagging behind. In some cases, it is undergoing reversals. One of the areas requiring urgent action—not only in terms of diagnostics of the problems faced, but also of the solutions required—concerns the complex relationship between climate and security.

Humanity faces the possibility of a temperature increase of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in global temperatures by 2030-2051 if current warming rates are maintained.¹ Given this scenario, the tasks of developing effective frameworks, decision-making processes, and mechanisms to tackle emerging climate risks, including those related to security, have acquired greater urgency. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the possibility of future outbreaks facilitated by the continuing

destruction of the environment, underscore the importance of prevention. Yet “old approaches,” such as the creation of yet another organization or a “fourth pillar” of the United Nations, would only reinforce the silo problem, which represents a major hurdle towards a more coherent, comprehensive approach by the UN system.

More than the creation of any single new body or dedicated framework, the main challenge in addressing issues related to climate and security is to mainstream a preventive approach, developing adequate risk assessment mechanisms, and responses at multiple levels, from the local and national to the regional and global. In addition, boosting global governance in this area requires the political will and corresponding resources required to foster change at multiple levels, from the local to the global. It involves moving beyond a narrow “hard security” understanding of climate-security dynamics so as to better reflect the human security aspects of climate risks—a shift that has institutional implications for the UN system, since climate and security has already moved beyond the confines of the Security Council.

At the normative level, while it is essential to strengthen the links between climate and security and, on the other hand, preventive frameworks, great caution should be taken with respect to the inclusion of climate within the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm, so as to avoid providing unfair justifications for military interventionism. Losing sight of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through an excessive focus on hard security would lead the UN system to neglect the development, human rights, and peacebuilding dynamics that mediate the relationship between climate and security.

This paper provides an overview of the first decade of climate and security at the United Nations and offers a number of recommendations on how global governance can become more effective in addressing the multiple challenges related to this nexus. Recommendations focus on four key areas: mainstreaming the issue across the UN system, boosting the role of regional organizations; reframing the debate so as to better incorporate peacebuilding, and making the decision-making process more inclusive, especially through meaningful participation by subnational governments, civil society, and the private sector.

Climate and Security at the United Nations: The First Decade

Although the scholarship on how climate influences security (and vice versa) is not new, over the past years, research on—and debates about—the relationship between climate and security has expanded, both within research communities and in policy circles, especially at the UN and partner organizations, such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and the Pacific Forum. With respect to the evidence base, research shows that the links between climate and security are complex and indirect.² In many contexts, research indicates that climate change can multiply insecurity by compounding risks related to food, water, and energy insecurity, especially in areas of low socioeconomic development and limited state capability. Security risks can be augmented not only through sudden-onset crises, such as extreme weather events, but also through more incremental changes, such as slow loss of soil productivity, soil erosion, and sea-level rise. In almost all cases explored, food, water and/or energy security are key elements in the climate-security relationship. Some of the end-of-chain outcomes explored by this burgeoning literature are violence, crime, open conflict, and violent extremism.

Although in the 2000s debates within the UN Security Council and the General Assembly occasionally addressed the relationship between climate and security, only during the following decade did those discussions begin to gain momentum within the UN system. In addition to activism by specific member states, as shown below, the topic has also gained visibility due to engagement by top leadership at the Secretariat. Secretary-General António Guterres has given speeches recognizing the need to address the links between climate and security. For instance, in September 2018, he delivered remarks acknowledging that climate poses “an existential threat” and stating that

“keeping our planet’s warming to well below 2 degrees is essential for global prosperity, people’s well-being and the security of nations.”³

During this decade, the gradual incorporation of climate and security into the United Nations’ agenda has been marked by three key characteristics. The first is an initial focus on hard security issues, associated with the debate’s emergence within the context of the Security Council, followed by a slow and as-yet incomplete broadening to other parts of the system. Debates at the Security Council, anchored not only in the security implications of the scenarios projected by the IPCC but also in analyses of particular states and subregions in Africa, have concerned recurring or protracted open conflict, especially in contexts marked by violent extremism. A series of Arria formula meetings,⁴ briefings, and a statement by the Council president⁵ put the topic of climate and security repeatedly in the spotlight, and the theme featured prominently among the priorities of two non-permanent members—Sweden and Germany—during their respective mandates (2017-2018 for Sweden, and 2019-2020 for Germany). By 2020, climate and security emerged as a key priority for several candidates for non-permanent seats for the 2021-2022 term: Norway, Kenya, and Canada.⁶

Starting in March 2017, seven resolutions issued by the Security Council have acknowledged the relevance of climate change to peace and security.⁷ The first resolution, on Lake Chad,⁸ recognized that

the adverse effects of climate change and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of the Region, including through water scarcity, drought, desertification, land degradation and food insecurity, and emphasizes the need for adequate risk assessments and risk management strategies by governments and the United Nations relating to these factors.

Subsequent resolutions on West Africa and the Sahel (2018), Somalia (2018), Mali (2018), Darfur (2018), and Africa (2019) have also acknowledged the role of climate in exacerbating instability and called for more climate-sensitive risk assessments and responses. A high-level debate held in July 2020 also included a briefing on climate and security issues facing the Pacific.⁹

However, after this initial decade, in which climate-security debates at the United Nations were firmly ensconced within the Security Council, several initiatives have sought to mainstream the topic across the system. Those efforts arose in part due to concerns voiced by some member states that restricting the debate about climate and security narrowly to within the confines of the Security Council could lead to securitization—that is, a narrow framing of climate change as a hard security topic, one that could potentially serve as the basis for justifying military interventionism.¹⁰

Starting in 2018, a series of new institutional arrangements sought to provide further momentum to these mainstreaming efforts. In October of that year, the Climate and Security Mechanism (CSM) was established, originally with the support of the Government of Sweden and housed within the UN’s Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). The CSM, which is now also staffed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), represents an important move towards mainstreaming the climate and security issues across the UN system and links the efforts to broader reform initiatives launched by the Secretary-General. At the same time, through the creation and expansion of the Group of Friends on Climate and Security, which comprises over forty member states to-date, the array of countries supporting the deepening of this debate within the UN system has enlarged,¹¹ although such configurations at the United Nations often end up working in a loose, ad hoc manner.¹² In addition, an independent Climate Security Expert Network was established, also with support from Sweden and later from Germany, to help inform the UN system on how to improve its climate-security risk assessments and responses.¹³

The second general trend in this “first decade of Climate and Security at the UN” is a clear preponderance of rich countries as norm entrepreneurs as well as financial backers. In other words, by and large the terms of the debate—its key concepts, definitions, and geographic reach—have been set by the Global North. This gap is also reflected in, and sometimes reinforced by, the reluctance of many Global South member states to engage with the topic, and even to see it become an official theme of the Security Council. This hesitation is not recent. Back in 2007, when the first debate took place within the Security Council, the G77 issued a statement saying that inclusion of all environmental issues, including climate change, represented a violation of the UN Charter.¹⁴ In February 2013, the G77 and China reiterated the position that “the United Nations Security Council is not the appropriate forum for this discussion,” insisting that climate change is assigned to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Although the G77 has not formulated a public position on the issue in the past couple of years, there has been a modest expansion of support among individual developing countries. The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and a number of other developing countries began to actively demand greater attention to the losses and damages incurred through climate change, as well as their security implications.¹⁵ At the Security Council, Angola and Lithuania co-sponsored an Arria Formula meeting on Illicit Arms Transfers and Poaching in Africa that touched on the climate-security link, and Senegal sponsored one on Water, Peace and Security. Egypt, along with Spain, issued a briefing on the Sahel that looked at the impact of Climate Change and Desertification, and Bolivia issued a briefing on Preventive Diplomacy and Transboundary Waters. Since then, Peru, the Maldives and Morocco, Ivory Coast, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, and Kuwait have all sponsored or co-sponsored other initiatives at the Security Council that incorporated some aspect of the climate and security debate.

However, many member states continue to question the appropriateness of the debates within the Security Council, citing concerns with the erosion of national sovereignty.¹⁶ Attempts to bring environmental issues into discussions of widening the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have also come under criticism, through arguments that echo recommendations issued by civil society entities in the 2000s.¹⁷ Especially for countries that fall outside the Security Council agenda, the 2030 Agenda—insofar as it offers a more comprehensive framework for the UN’s prevention efforts—is a far more appropriate framework for organizing efforts geared at addressing climate and security risks.

The third feature of this period of emergence of the climate and security debate at the United Nations is a heavy focus on African countries and subregions, as reflected in the UNSC debates, briefings, and resolutions. The initial mission by the CSM to the Lake Chad region also reflected this geographic focus. Yet consideration of the climate-security risks has slowly been broadening to other parts of the world, both at the Security Council, which has recently debated threats to the Pacific, and in other parts of the UN System. The CSM has held another mission to the Pacific, as reflected in the July 2020 briefing at the Security Council. In a briefing to the Security Council, Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia, and the Americas called attention to emerging or recurring threats in Central Asia, a region marked by complex transboundary water issues.¹⁸ However, the dynamics of climate and security in other regions—not just Latin America and the Caribbean, but also richer regions such as North America and Europe—are largely being overlooked.

These broad characteristics of how the climate-security issue has been treated at the United Nations—and the heavy focus on diagnostics and risk assessments, rather than also the design of appropriate responses—suggest that the discussion must be not just strengthened, but also better balanced in terms of geography, its presence across the entire UN system, and inclusion of subnational governments, civil society entities, and private sector actors, as explained below. The next part of this brief provides some suggestions on how to go about this complex task.

The Next Decade: Moving Ahead in Climate, Security, and Peacebuilding

While the past decade has brought about an incremental yet uneven broadening of the climate and security agenda along thematic, organizational, and geographic dimensions, more strategic change and leadership is needed to tackle the challenges ahead. The sine qua non to boosting governance in this area is strengthening the commitments to the agreements that have already been reached, notably the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Climate Agreement. The latter, in particular, has come under threat by nationalist populist governments, especially those whose leaderships deny climate change.¹⁹ Linking such commitments to other areas of international cooperation, especially trade, is essential to give the regime some “teeth.” Major reversals in those agreements threaten to undermine any efforts specific to climate and security. In addition to shoring up the regimes that are already in place, below are five areas in which more effort is needed to make the UN system more fit for purpose.

Mainstreaming across the system

In order to further mainstream climate and security across the UN system, institutional “anchors” are needed to launch debates, convene stakeholders, and promote normative innovations, initiatives, and policies. Advancing on this front requires a two-pronged approach.

Different agencies, programs, and funds of the UN system from all three pillars of the architecture—development, human rights, and peace and security—have expressed concern about, and interest in, the relationship between climate and security. However, plenty of confusion remains about how to go about incorporating climate and security into development, human rights, humanitarian, peacebuilding, and peace and security efforts. While the CSM has begun developing new methodologies to make risk assessments more climate and conflict sensitive, there is a need to engage more deeply and systematically across the system, including through capacity expansion (from introductory sessions to workshops on risk assessment and especially, response design).²⁰ As of July 2020, the entire CSM staff stands at six individuals. While the idea is to keep the CSM as an agile instrument—capable of working across the system as well as in the field, whether through missions or through collaboration with country teams—and even though the CSM engages with a network of independent climate-security experts, more internal capacity is needed, including through additional personnel. Greater reach and faster response to emerging situations could also be achieved through the development of a “Climate and Security Mobile Training Unit” that would circulate within the UN system, not only at the Secretariat, but also within regional bodies and, according to demand, national and local contexts in partnership with specific agencies.

Yet these are far from the only strategic spaces for mainstreaming climate and security. The reforms launched by Secretary-General António Guterres,²¹ including the broadening of the former Department of Political Affairs into the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and efforts to boost the role of Resident Coordinators (RCs), offer an opportunity to build climate and security not only into UN structures at the Secretariat level, but also at the country level.

At the Secretariat, the first key step for institutionalization would consist of an annual Secretary-General’s report on Climate and Security with inputs from across the system. Such a report would help the United Nations track of how different components of the system are addressing climate and security, whether through policy frameworks, responses, or cooperation arrangements—and

therefore, where major gaps remain. Special Envoy positions, such as that already proposed for the African Union, can also provide a focal point for climate and security at a regional level.²²

Older, recurring reform themes should also address climate and security, especially debates surrounding Security Council reform, insofar as those discussions encompass not only procedural matters but also substantive ones, such as the meaning of the body's mandate. Proposals to strengthen the Peacebuilding Architecture, including the idea of transforming the Peacebuilding Commission into a Peacebuilding Council, also dovetail with the need to make the UN's approach to climate and security more preventive. Other bodies, including UNGA, ECOSOC, and the Human Rights Council, should also address the topic, promoting non-military means to tackle the emerging challenges.

At the country level, the empowerment of Resident Coordinators and the incorporation of joint analyses and planning offer strategic entry points for embedding climate and security stressors into UN initiatives across the policy cycle, from diagnostics to response design to impact assessment. In addition to providing inputs on the specific dynamics of that particular context, teams in conflict-affected states could help to identify how addressing climate and security issues can promote positive peace. Finally, stronger engagement on the part of country teams with the theme of climate and security can take place through policy dialogues and other exchanges with national and subnational governments, as well as civil society entities and private sector actors.

The role of regional organizations

Discussion of the links between climate and security is already taking place in some regional organizations, but in a highly uneven fashion. At the African Union (AU), the Peace and Security Council (PSC) has highlighted climate change and its effects on security as a significant issue for member states, noting impacts on infrastructure, access to vital resources, impacts on vulnerable populations, and forced displacement; it has called on member states and sub-regional organizations to advance adaptation strategies.²³ The Pacific Islands Forum's Boe Declaration on Regional Security (September 2018) incorporates the concept of regional security to cover climate change, environment, and resources, including human security, humanitarian responses, and transnational crime. ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN plus China, South Korea, and Japan) has discussed the security implications of climate change across the Asia-Pacific region.²⁴ The European Union (EU)'s 2016 Global Strategy recognizes that managing climate change risk is fundamental for Europe's security as well as prosperity, and the organization has put into place related concrete programs and mechanisms, as well as incorporated risk assessments via the European External Action Service (EEAS).²⁵

In the Americas, however, nearly all regional organizations have yet to make significant strides in this direction, even though several, including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OTCA), encompass areas—such as the Usumacinta Basin, the Amazon Basin, the Cerrado region, and the Andes—that are at once affected by poverty and violence and highly vulnerable to climate change. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has approached the topic from the perspective of disaster resilience and response,²⁶ but there is plenty of space within its strategic planning to address security risks.

A concerted effort is needed to engage regional organizations more systematically on this topic across all regions, tailoring the discussion and initiatives to the regional contexts. Member states that comprise the Group of Friends may become important channels for linking discussions at the regional and global levels, but civil society networks should also be harnessed. The offices linking the UN Secretariat and those organizations can also help foster dialogue, and the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) may be mobilized to fuel exchanges across countries and organizations from different regions.

Reframing the debate: Bringing in peacebuilding

Terms such as “climate and security,” “climate-security nexus,” “climate-security risks,” and “climate-fragility” connote a direct relationship between climate and security. However, research in this area shows that these links are mediated by many factors, including state capacity, infrastructure, and socioeconomic inequality. By stressing only the climate and security aspects of this relationship, such terms may lead stakeholders to neglect or understate the role of those mediating forces. This gap is meaningful if it leads to responses being designed that fail to incorporate, for instance, development, human rights, peacebuilding, and humanitarian dimensions.

For this reason, the term “peacebuilding,” which removes the focus from narrow military approaches to instability and conflict, should be stressed in discussions of climate and security.²⁷ Far from a merely semantic issue, the reframing of the debate as “Climate, Security and Peacebuilding” brings attention to the human security aspects of the relationship, rather than simply to open conflict.

Moreover, stressing peacebuilding opens up opportunities to debate and act upon the positive side of the relationship. Conflict-sensitive adaptation provides a change to promote prevention, including through inclusive processes of building resilience based on human rights. This potential is especially relevant to dimensions of the debate that are gaining momentum, such as the gender aspects of climate action.²⁸ Incorporating the dimension of peacebuilding would also make the topic more relevant and attractive to a broader set of actors, including stakeholders (whether member states or non-state actors) who fear that the idea of a “hard nexus” might lead to securitization, militarization, and interventionism.

Another component of the reframing effort relates to the need to recognize that the complex links between climate change and security/peace are not unidirectional. Climate magnifies security risks and vice versa. While UN efforts have been heavily focused on the ways in which climate multiplies security risks, more work is needed on how insecurity contributes to climate change—not only in terms of research, but also with respect to policy responses. Massive deforestation, a major source of carbon emissions, is overwhelmingly a product of organized environmental crime,²⁹ yet this remains a major gap in UN debates and responses on climate, security, and peacebuilding.

Building an inclusive approach

Just as important as building and expanding governance structures is the need to make the climate, security, and peacebuilding a more inclusive field of debate and action. So far, the emerging agenda is largely driven primarily by rich countries, whereas the focus of risk assessments and responses concentrates on poor, conflict-affected states. The CSM staff includes no members from the Global South, although some of the debates at the Security Council have been co-sponsored by developing country non-permanent seat holders and the Group of Friends on Climate and Security has become more geographically diversified.

Another way in which the agenda must become inclusive is in its geographic reach. The UN has engaged rather little with this climate and security in Latin America and the Caribbean, yet research has shown that climate influences security outcomes ranging from human security dynamics, including food and water security, to patterns of violent and organized crime.³⁰ Likewise, aside from geopolitical analysis of the Arctic region and some debate about threats to defense assets, there has been little discussion of how climate and security are interrelated in the Northern Hemisphere.

Yet climate change affects security—and therefore, presents new possibilities for prevention and peacebuilding—across the entire planet. Leaving out the global nature of the climate and security

challenge may reinforce suspicions among some Global South players that this is yet another North-driven agenda meant to advance the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of global powers. It may also lead the international community to overlook opportunities to incorporate climate action into regional and national strategic planning.

Finally, there is a need for greater inclusion in the types of stakeholders that are involved. At the level of practice and the design of responses, the most knowledgeable actors in the climate, security, and peacebuilding area are those closest to the ground—often, local government, civil society entities, and private sector actors. There is an incipient yet growing body of literature on gender, climate, and security, which sheds light not only on the disproportionate impacts felt by women and girls, but also on the key roles they play and their vast potential for climate peacebuilding.

In order for discussions at the Secretariat to have real impact on the ground and for real-life experiences to be heard in New York and Geneva, it is necessary to enhance and institutionalize better mechanisms for participation by a broader range of stakeholders, who can help shape more effective responses on the ground as well as provide input into key normative debates at the national, regional, and global levels. This task will entail, for instance, creating a focal point for meaningful and sustained engagement by civil society; better coordination between the Secretariat and regional organizations on climate-security risk assessments and responses, as well as peacebuilding possibilities; and working with subnational governments, civil society and the private sector to promote local solutions that are aligned with key agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security agendas.

Concluding thoughts

Given the growing evidence showing that, in the absence of adequate collective action, the “point of no return” on climate change is approaching, making global and regional governance structures better equipped for addressing climate and security risks, and their associated prevention and peacebuilding possibilities, has never been more urgent.

Yet, this task also faces formidable challenges. International climate regimes, not least the Paris Agreement, have come under attack from populist nationalists and have experienced reversals as key players either withdraw or lag behind in commitments, and/or seek to undermine the progress of negotiations and implementation. In a vivid sign that the agenda can get stuck at crucial moments, COP-25 in 2019 showed little progress on negotiations. Wavering commitment on the part of some member states to the Paris Agreement has spilled over into other areas; for instance, a reference to the Paris Agreement became the main stumbling block for finalizing the text of the UN75 Declaration.³¹

The recommendations included here are meant to embed climate and security across global governance, without adding unnecessary organizational complexity to a global governance system that is already marked by considerable institutional inertia. Mainstreaming climate and security is needed to promote and institutionalize a true “culture of prevention” that adequately addresses climate risks. Boosting the role of regional organizations is necessary so that the debates and initiatives taking place in New York can reverberate in other parts of the world, and so that lessons may be learned from those regions. Reframing the debate away from the narrow focus on a climate and security “nexus,” and incorporating a peacebuilding lens, will help the international community to design preventive responses, beyond the purview of the Security Council. And finally, making the decision-making process more inclusive, especially through meaningful

participation by subnational governments, civil society, and the private sector, will make those debates more effective, more tailored to context, and more credible to actors that are on the front lines of climate and security.

The UN's 75th anniversary offers a chance to boost the credibility and relevance of the system through new ideas to improve global governance. Addressing the issues related to the complex links among climate and security, including a renewed focus on how peacebuilding can address this relationship, will be an essential part of the challenge in making the UN fit for purpose in the Anthropocene.

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