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Beyond the UN Security Council: Can the UN General Assembly tackle the climate-security challenge?



The UN General Assembly meets on protracted conflicts in GUAM area. Photo credit: UN Photo

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Dr Adam Day and Dr Florian Krampe

The wildfires raging in Canada are yet another reminder that climate change is already having an impact on all our lives. As the smoke clears around the United Nations building in New York, we are likely to see a renewed push for the UN Security Council to tackle the security risks posed by climate change, including in the upcoming New Agenda for Peace [policy brief](#) from UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [reports](#), supported by a growing body of scientific evidence, reach the inescapable conclusion that climate change is a meaningful factor in the risks of violent conflict. In fact, one group of experts recently [suggested](#) that only a ‘misreading of the state of science’ could allow any doubt over the links between climate change and insecurity.

Despite the evidence, and despite the Security Council having already passed more than 70 resolutions and statements on climate-related security risks, efforts to make climate change a standing item on the Security Council’s agenda [have so far failed](#). While some permanent and elected members favour broadening the Security Council’s mandate to cover responses to all ‘threats to peace and security’, including climate change, others—notably China and Russia—

want to keep Security Council business restricted to deploying peace operations, imposing sanctions, authorizing the use of military force and creating tribunals. These mechanisms are not sufficient to address the plethora of climate-related security challenges societies around the world are facing.

The Security Council seems likely to continue its incremental approach, recognizing some country-specific climate–security links in resolutions (e.g. mentioning [climate-driven recruitment into an armed group](#)) without tackling the broader security impacts of the climate crisis. Even this limited scope offers [some real opportunities](#) for addressing climate-related security issues in conflict settings that are already on the Security Council’s agenda. Nevertheless, it is time to ask whether more can be achieved within the UN system on broader climate–security challenges outside the Security Council chamber, in particular through the UN General Assembly.

There are many instances where the General Assembly has acted when the Security Council has become deadlocked. [United Nations General Assembly Resolution 377](#)—also known as the 1950 Uniting for Peace resolution—allows the General Assembly to call emergency sessions on threats to peace and security when this happens. After laying unused for 25 years, the resolution was invoked in February 2022 [in relation to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine](#). Furthermore, there is a surprisingly [rich history](#) of the General Assembly adopting a wide range of actions on security matters linked to human rights violations. We here consider some of the arguments for the General Assembly taking a bigger role in addressing climate–security challenges.

A more inclusive forum

One of the objections to the Security Council’s role on climate–security (and indeed more generally) is that it is not an inclusive or meaningfully representative body. The 10 elected members have only two years to shape an issue, after which they rotate off the Council. Thus, most of the time, the 188 UN member states without permanent Security Council seats have no say in the Council’s agenda. With every member state represented, the General Assembly is arguably a more representative forum for negotiating responses to a global issue such as climate change and its ensuing security risks.

Better access to the science

The scientific knowledge base on climate change and its impacts is developing fast. To design appropriate and timely multilateral responses, member states need regular access to the latest

evidence, and this is another area in which the General Assembly's offers important opportunities.

The Security Council could theoretically invite any scientist or expert to brief it on climate-related security risks, but in practice it has offered little access. The situation has [improved significantly](#) in the past five years thanks to the Climate Security Mechanism and the Informal Expert Group on Climate Security. Also, efforts by the Peacebuilding Commission to [broaden](#) the climate–security discussion and introduce more evidence have only partially succeeded thus far.

The General Assembly has a more open and potentially dynamic set of processes for bringing in the latest climate and political science, and is able to consider evidence across the development, humanitarian and human rights arenas—where many of the human security impacts of climate change are most acutely felt. In addition, its inclusive format means it can increase visibility of evidence coming from the most affected regions.

Generating new stimulus

Finally, the General Assembly can potentially galvanize a much broader range of integrated action across the UN system than can the Security Council. This is a distinct advantage, as the complex and dynamic ways in which climate-related security risks take shape mean that lasting solutions to them require coordinated responses across sectors. In addition, engagement on climate-related security risks in the General Assembly could generate important new stimulus for the UN Climate Change Conferences as well as international financial institutions.

How could the General Assembly take up the climate–security challenge?

The General Assembly has plenty of shortcomings. On contentious issues, it tends to issue fairly toothless statements, and it has struggled to generate action on some of the most pressing issues of our time. That said, a more concerted effort to activate the General Assembly on climate, peace and security could have a broader impact across the system, including potentially within the Security Council. As the General Assembly considers [how to revitalize its work](#), we offer four possible entry points:

- 1. Put climate–security challenges on the agenda.** It is worth noting that when Ireland and Niger attempted to pass a [resolution on climate and security](#) in the Security Council in 2021, it was co-sponsored by 113 member states beyond the Council. This demonstrates the

widespread support for tackling climate-related security issues at the multilateral level. During the next General Assembly session, which starts in September, the General Assembly's new president, Dennis Francis, could play a crucial role in building on this support. Holding open debates on climate, peace and security and offering opportunities for high-level events in September could help to consolidate member states' views. And pushing for the co-facilitators of the Summit of the Future to include climate, peace and security would also help to keep member states focused on the issue.

- **Build on the new right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.** Last year's landmark General Assembly [resolution](#) (UN General Assembly Resolution A/76/L.75) establishing the human right to a clean, healthy, sustainable environment offers an important entry point for climate-related security issues. The strong links between human rights violations and violent conflict are [well documented](#) and could offer an important role for the Human Rights Council to take up this issue as well. The General Assembly's recognition of environmental human rights should lead to greater focus on how violations can lead to risks of violence, and could be the basis for targeted actions such as investigations into violations of the right to a clean environment, or a call by the General Assembly for the Security Council to place climate on its agenda as a standing item.
- **Amplify the evidence.** The General Assembly is [able](#) to establish commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions on any issue it deems necessary. While in the past it has tended to create such bodies to address [serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law](#), there is no reason the General Assembly could not also demand fact-finding around the security risks posed by climate change. Indeed, even the process of trying to establish such a commission could help to highlight the issue in a way that could also put pressure on the Security Council to act.
- **Mandate other bodies and enable financing.** The General Assembly has an extraordinarily powerful role in setting the mandates of other bodies in the multilateral system. For example, it oversees the work of the Peacebuilding Commission and could consider [expanding the commission's mandate](#) to include climate-related risks more explicitly. The General Assembly could also push for the IPCC to have a dedicated scientific track on climate, peace and security. In addition, the General Assembly's Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) could catalyse an increase in funding dedicated to climate, peace and security, in peace operations and beyond.

Ultimately, the General Assembly cannot be the only forum for advancing multilateral action on

climate-related security risks. But greater activity within the General Assembly could have a ripple effect across the system, potentially driving action on other fronts, and even pressuring the Security Council to take up the issue more directly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)



Dr Adam Day (United States/United Kingdom) is the Head of the UN University Centre for Policy Research in Geneva and leads programming on peacebuilding, climate security, human rights, global governance and emerging risks.



Dr Florian Krampe is the Director of Studies, Peace and Development, at SIPRI.

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Stockholm International Peace
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SIPRI, Signalistgatan 9
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Sweden

Telephone/switchboard
+46 8 655 97 00