



ADAPTING TO NEW SECURITY REALITIES IN A CLIMATE-DISRUPTED WORLD

Date: November 26, 2021

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KEY EVENTS

On November 26, 2021, Ms. Carol Dumaine, Nonresident Senior Fellow at Atlantic Council, presented *Adapting to New Security Realities in a Climate-Disrupted World* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The primary concepts of Ms. Dumaine's presentation centered on how climate change and the global pandemic are becoming significant issues of national security, and how it is vital that our concept of national security be reframed to understand and address climate change as a security issue. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period and a breakout room session with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Ms. Dumaine's presentation focused on how the climate crisis poses new security realities that challenge traditional concepts of national security and how national security organizations need to look at the climate change challenge through broader frames. A particular focus was how the climate crisis disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations that are already impacted by economic inequality, conflict, and food insecurity. Ms. Dumaine also discussed how the methods for addressing the climate change problem have centered on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) but stressed that their initiatives were not as successful as expected. After highlighting the disadvantages of traditional frameworks to address climate change, Ms. Dumaine outlined alternative solutions to improve such frameworks.

Question Period

The question period highlighted the issues posed by the lack of consensus on ‘security’ in the context of climate change and how climate change security conditions have changed. The participation of younger generations in the climate debate was also discussed.

Breakout Room Discussion

The breakout room discussion focused on the need to amend international refugee policy to account for the new climate challenges being faced around the world, as well as the need to develop an international forum to bring parties together to specifically look at climate acts. The level of responsibility of the developed world to fight climate change was also discussed.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Ms. Dumaine’s presentation began by highlighting how disasters such as the recent wildfires, heat waves, and flooding in British Columbia can have ripple effects across the globe and increase insecurity all over the world due to interconnected systems of public health, biodiversity, finances, and transportation, among others. Although many people refer to the climate crisis and global pandemic as separate issues, Ms. Dumaine clarified that they are, in fact, related. The rise in global temperature increases the likelihood of disease outbreaks and pandemics.

As can be seen with COVID-19, pandemics can exacerbate security related vulnerabilities, which weakens society’s capacity for resilience in the face of climate change. For example, we are now seeing global economic contraction; millions of people’s education and work prospects derailed; hundreds of millions of people thrown into extreme poverty; reversal of international development gains; untold future public health effects and costs; greater vulnerabilities for women in low-income areas; and a widening wealth inequality. These impacts are happening everywhere, but they are particularly afflicting the most vulnerable populations already impacted by economic inequality, conflict, and food insecurity. The effects of climate change in the future are expected to be unimaginably worse.

At this point in the presentation, Ms. Dumaine emphasized the need for a new paradigm of global security cooperation that spans intergenerational needs, boundaries, and disciplines. She stressed that this paradigm needs to recognize that we are already in an uncharted world of rapid environmental changes. Moreover, she described climate change as a “threat multiplier,” in that climate change has amplified hardships all around the world. However, national security is more focused on the consequences of the climate crisis and the need to respond, as opposed to the root causes.

Historically, national security has been viewed as state-centric threats and threats emanating outside of national boundaries; however, Ms. Dumaine argued that this concept is poorly suited to assess and confront a world of accelerating societally novel disruptions. Failing to take a comprehensive view of the impacts of climate change on security is leading to underestimations of risk. For instance, sea level rise, the impact on the global food chain and spread of invasive species, and the rise of heat related disease and deaths will increasingly impact the stability of the economies of individual nations and the global economy.

To get a good handle on what is needed for the future, we need to look into the Earth’s distant past to gain some insight. Unfortunately, there remains a poorly understood temporal aspect regarding climate change impacts. As a result, we fail to see the immediate threat of seemingly gradual change when, in fact, greenhouse gas emissions have occurred on an unprecedentedly rapid timeline. Traditional security thinking may also fail to see the irreversibility of climate changes once certain tipping points are crossed. Scientists warn that a 1.5-degree Celsius rise in global temperature is the greatest threat to global public health, which will be impossible to reverse.

Ms. Dumaine noted that the current method for addressing these problems have centred around the UNFCCC, but global carbon dioxide emissions are now about 60% higher than they were when the UNFCCC started. Research by climate scientists has found that a key impediment to successful climate mitigation over the last three decades is the pervasive failure to question many of the core tenets of modern industrialized societies. Traditional national security doctrine, priorities, and operations have not evolved to meet this kind of challenge.

Ms. Dumaine emphasized that the traditional geopolitical framing is so narrow that it will miss most security-related implications of climate change, including its immediacy as a threat. However, some of the potential frameworks that

could help anticipate the security-related consequences of climate change would encompass ecological security, global public health, intergenerational security, Indigenous knowledge cultures, and palaeoclimatology. Such reframing compels us to ask: whose security protection gets priority over others' security protection and why? What does national security seek to protect and defend in a climate change-disrupted age? And who decides what "security" means in these unprecedented times?

To conclude, Ms. Dumaine stressed that we require a better understanding of the root causes, effects, and influences of this crisis. Disinformation that hinders public awareness and climate crisis readiness has security-related implications that must be made explicit in a reframing of national security. Necessary adaptations include educational initiatives to emphasize Earth systems science and climate literacy in traditional security; public safety and public health analysis and planning; and methods for more anticipatory assessment capabilities, which would use prehistoric geological epochs as baselines and employ systems and transdisciplinary thinking. In addition, new security thinking would emphasize public transparency on the new security realities posed by pandemics and climate change in our globally interconnected world.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, the audience highlighted that there is a lack of consensus on security in the context of climate change and asked what issues have been posed by this lack of consensus. Ms. Dumaine stressed that there are many issues that are impacted by this lack of consensus, and we are long overdue to start considering these effects. When pursuing climate change as a national security issue through a more traditional geopolitical lens, taking initiative or planning to ameliorate the circumstances of people caught in the midst of climate crises is often neglected. There are many "spill-over" effects like this that exacerbate security as a whole but are often missed due to the narrow focus of the national security framework.

In order to better address the issue, this global level of analysis needs to coalesce outside the traditional security organizations. Younger generations, along with the Global South and indigenous communities, need to engage the public by having a conversation that would shift views on whose security we are trying to defend. Ms. Dumaine referred to the recent devastation caused by natural disasters in the Greater Vancouver area, noting that it is hard to imagine a foreign adversary causing such damage. This draws attention to the clear

security ramifications caused when a city or port is cut off from the rest of the country as a direct result of the climate crisis.

Ms. Dumaine also noted that human induced climate change is threatening the viability of human society and the diversity that makes the human economy possible, so now there is a much higher urgency to address it. Over the past several decades, leading scientists from around the world have joined to provide a consensus opinion on climate change; however, the resulting opinion is too conservative compared to what is occurring empirically. Additionally, because climate change has been so politicized, the focus on these issues in the security community has tended to wax and wane depending on the politics of the situation.

Breakout Room Discussion

During the breakout session, a particular interest was placed on climate migrants and the failure of international law to recognize those displaced by climate as refugees. Ms. Dumaine asserted that it is necessary to reimagine international refugee policies to account for the new challenges we are facing. Current policies date back to World War II and pertain to those fleeing from persecution.

At this point in the discussion, the audience inquired whether there were other avenues that could be pursued to achieve a more global framework to tackle the climate crisis. Ms. Dumaine opined that there would be a substantial benefit to creating a forum that brings parties together to specifically look at human-caused climate changes and the human rights of those who are most affected. Ms. Dumaine reminded the audience that even though we are not at the 1.5-degree tipping point yet, so many people around the globe have already been severely affected by climate change.

To conclude the breakout session, Ms. Dumaine was asked her opinion on whether developed nations should have more responsibilities towards global warming and should be subjected to stricter standards. In response, Ms. Dumaine noted that the developed world has known that carbon emissions would have this effect for at least 5 decades. In fact, in the 60s and 70s, scientists from developed countries were able to accurately project the effects greenhouse gases would have on global warming up to the present date. In short, Ms. Dumaine agreed that there certainly has to be more responsibility taken by developed countries. We have a collective security and social responsibility to prevent harm and keep each other safe.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The COVID-19 pandemic is a harbinger of a new epoch of globalized security vulnerabilities that traditional national security frameworks are poorly suited to address.
- Disasters such as the unprecedented flooding in British Columbia are symptomatic of the increased vulnerability and insecurity of people all over the world in the face of the impacts of environmental degradation, especially climate change.
- A more thorough understanding of the root causes, effects, and influences of the climate change crisis is critical to better address it.
- A traditional geopolitical framing is so narrow that it will miss most security-related implications of climate change, including its immediacy as a threat.
- National security organizations need to look at the climate change challenge through broader frames, such as ecological and intergenerational security, and institute necessary adaptations including emphasizing Earth systems science and climate literacy.

Question Period

- When pursuing climate change as a national security issue through a more traditional geopolitical lens, we start to lose sight of the peripheral effects. As such, a new paradigm of global security cooperation is needed that spans intergenerational needs, boundaries, disciplines and the so-called Global North and Global South.
- Human induced climate change is threatening the viability of human society, as well as the diversity that makes the human economy possible.
- The best science in the world is proving to be too conservative and lacking behind empirical reality so there is an urgency that we have never had before.

Breakout Room Discussion

- It is necessary to reimagine international refugee policy to account for the new challenges we are facing regarding climate migrants.

- One possibility to achieve a more global framework could be to establish a forum that brings parties together to specifically look at human-caused climate changes and the human rights of those who are most affected.
- We have a collective security and social responsibility to prevent harm and keep each other safe, which should involve a higher level of responsibility placed on those in developed worlds.



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