

THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION AND CLIMATE-RELATED SECURITY RISKS: A MORE FAVOURABLE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT?

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I. Introduction

Climate change is a multidimensional, cross-cutting challenge that affects the work of multiple United Nations bodies. At the operational level, the UN system is engaged in mitigation, adaptation, development and conflict-prevention measures, and in addressing security-related dimensions of climate change. At the political level, member states continue to debate which UN decision-making organs should take the lead in addressing climate-related security risks, and what approaches are most appropriate. The 2016 Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provide frameworks for the international community to limit global temperature rise and to address the developmental consequences of climate change, respectively.¹ On the implementation of these frameworks, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) have lead roles as fora for member states to take decisions and monitor progress. However, these bodies do not address the intersection of climate change with peace and security. The UN Security Council is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, but many member states—both on and outside the council—have concerns about its role with regard to addressing the effects of climate change. Clearly delineating where the responsibility of one UN organ ends and another begins is difficult because of the lack of agreement among member states.²

In this context—and if given the opportunity—the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) seems well placed to complement and advance discussions on climate-related security risks in other UN bodies, including the Security

¹ Paris Agreement, opened for signature 16 Feb. 2016, entered into force 4 Nov. 2016; and United Nations, *Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (United Nations: New York, 2015).

² Interview with UN diplomat no. 15, May 2020.

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SUMMARY

● Climate change and the associated climate-related security risks increase instability and have significant adverse effects on peacebuilding. Within the United Nations, there is a lack of consensus on which organs are most appropriate to respond to climate-related security risks. The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) has demonstrated a growing role as a forum for member state discussions on this issue. The PBC, with an emphasis on national ownership, has a mandate to work across the peace and security, development and human rights pillars of the UN; bring together the Security Council, Economic and Social Council, General Assembly and other organs of the UN; and convene relevant stakeholders from within and outside the UN system. This study shows that these attributes combine to make the PBC uniquely positioned as a forum for states to seek international support in relation to emerging climate-related security challenges.

**Box 1. Key concepts and definitions****Climate-related security risks**

Climate-related security risks are here defined using a comprehensive security approach that encompasses human, community, state and international security. Such a broad approach is needed because climate-related security risks are multifaceted (i.e. they involve different consequences, such as drought, flooding and sea-level rise), and can simultaneously undermine the security of different reference objects (e.g. humans, communities, states, the international system, the environment and ecology). Moreover, climate-related security risks span different policy areas, such as foreign, military, development, economic and environmental policy. This multifaceted and multidimensional character of climate-related security risks calls for scrutiny of how security is framed at the organizational level—that is, analyses of how organizations are responding to climate-related security risks should also investigate how these risks are understood in the organization because this is likely to explain different policy outcomes.^a

Climate change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change explains the term as follows:

Climate change refers to a change in the state of the climate that can be identified (e.g. by using statistical tests) by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. Climate change may be due to natural internal processes or external forcings such as modulations of the solar cycles, volcanic eruptions and persistent anthropogenic changes in the composition of the atmosphere or in land use. Note that the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in its Article 1, defines climate change as: ‘a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods’. The UNFCCC thus makes a distinction between climate change attributable to human activities altering the atmospheric composition and climate variability attributable to natural causes.^b

Peacebuilding and ‘sustaining peace’

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2282 and General Assembly Resolution 70/262 both state as follows:

Recognizing that ‘sustaining peace’, as drawn from the Advisory Group of Experts report, should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development, and *emphasizing* that sustaining peace is a shared task and responsibility that needs to be fulfilled by the government and all other national stakeholders, and should flow through all three pillars of the United Nations’ engagement at all stages of conflict, and in all its dimensions, and needs sustained international attention and assistance.^c

^aKrampe, F. and Mobjörk, M., ‘Responding to climate-related security risks: Reviewing regional organizations in Asia and Africa’, *Current Climate Change Reports*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2018), pp. 330–37.

^bIntergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty* (IPCC: Geneva, 2018), Annex I, Glossary.

^cUN Security Council Resolution 2282, 27 Apr. 2016, pp. 1–2; and UN General Assembly Resolution 70/262, 12 May 2016, p. 2.

Council. Its potentially considerable advantage comparative to other UN bodies lies with its mandate to promote integrated, strategic and coherent approaches to peacebuilding across the areas of security, development and human rights, to convene principal organs of the UN, and to take a longer-term perspective on prevention to address structural drivers of conflict.



The PBC format and the nature of its agenda, in which member states voluntarily seek PBC engagement, may provide a more accessible and acceptable forum than the Security Council. This is because countries affected by climate-related security risks can generate high-level political attention and mobilize funding. The PBC's diverse membership provides a broad range of perspectives on climate-related security risks, which may enable it to navigate political and organizational obstacles to addressing these risks more effectively than the Security Council—despite some of the strongest opponents to this issue in the council also being PBC members. PBC engagement is based on national ownership and partnership—that is, countries themselves choose to come to the PBC to discuss peacebuilding priorities determined and driven by national stakeholders—which can ease barriers for discussing thematic issues that are otherwise contentious.

Within this context, this study aims to (a) identify areas and ways in which the PBC is currently engaged in the prevention and mitigation of climate-related security risks; (b) map out the political positions of PBC members on climate-related security risks; and (c) make recommendations to strengthen PBC member engagement on climate-related security issues. Section II examines how climate change is rapidly transforming the peacebuilding landscape, section III the mandate and structure of the PBC, and section IV the evolution of discussions on climate-related security risks, including divisions among member states, and how these are influenced by principles of consensus and national ownership. Section V identifies several opportunities for the PBC to strengthen its engagement on climate-related security issues, including in the context of the 2020 review of the UN's peacebuilding architecture, and to strengthen its climate-risk analysis, as well as creative approaches the PBC can take to capitalize on its advisory role. Section VI concludes that a gradual but steady approach to addressing climate-related security risks is likely to encourage more countries to seek support from the PBC on these issues.

The study draws on 21 interviews conducted between March and May 2020: 15 with expert-level diplomats from current PBC member states and countries considered by the PBC, and 6 with officials from the UN. All interviews were conducted virtually or by telephone due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and on the condition of anonymity.

II. Climate change, peacebuilding and sustaining peace

Climate change and the associated climate-related security risks (see box 1) are increasingly transforming the security, socio-economic and political landscape in which peacebuilding and peacebuilding actors operate.³ Indeed, the 11 countries discussed by the PBC in the past two years (i.e. between June 2018 and June 2020) are located in areas highly exposed to climate change—that is, their natural ecosystems are exposed, in both nature and degree, to significant climate change (see figure 1 and table 1).

The key challenge that climate change poses to peacebuilding stems from its systemic, multidimensional impact. That means the potential climate

³ Krampe, F., 'Climate change, peacebuilding and sustaining peace', SIPRI Policy Brief, June 2019; and Diehl, P., 'Mainstreaming climate change adaptation into peace missions', eds S. Scott and C. Ku, *Climate Change and the UN Security Council* (Edward Elgar: Cheltenham, UK, 2018), 131–46.

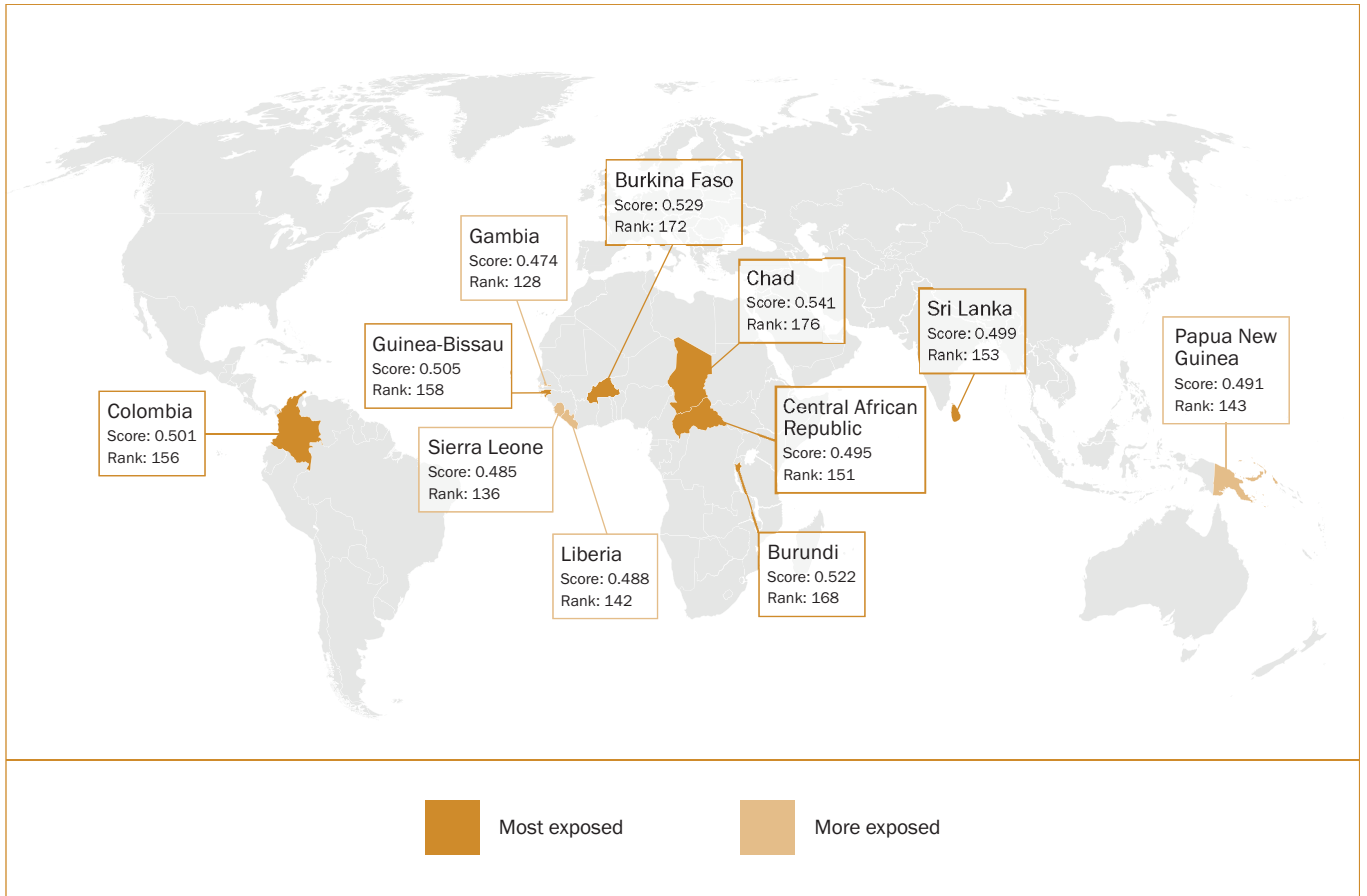


Figure 1. Selected countries discussed in the Peacebuilding Commission in June 2018–June 2020 (not including regional discussions) and their exposure to climate change

Notes: See table 1 for an explanation of exposure ‘score’ and ‘rank’.

The boundaries used in this map do not imply any endorsement or acceptance by SIPRI.

Source: Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, ‘ND-GAIN Country Index’, 2018.

impacts—such as unpredictable weather patterns, more frequent and stronger droughts, more frequent floods and higher sea-level rise—affect not just one part of the social–ecological system but the entire system.⁴ This leads to new socio-economic challenges, such as direct impacts on people’s livelihoods, and also compounds existing social, political and economic challenges, such as poverty, lack of social cohesion or marginalization, and governance. The consequence is an increase in climate-related risks to human security and development, including violent conflict.⁵ While more research is needed

⁴ Downing, S. A. et al., Global Resilience Partnership (Stockholm Resilience Centre and Centre for Complex Systems in Transition), ‘Resilience and sustainable peace: Managing conflict related security and development risks in the Anthropocene’, Background Paper for UN75 Meeting on Multilateral Cooperation to Address Climate Related Security and Development Risks in Africa, Dakar, 3–4 Mar. 2020; de Coning, C. and Krampe, F., *Multilateral Cooperation in the Area of Climate-Related Security and Development Risks in Africa*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) Report no. 4/2020 (NUPI: Oslo, 2020); and van Baalen, S. and Mobjörk, M., ‘Climate change and violent conflict in East Africa: Integrating qualitative and quantitative research to probe the mechanisms’, *International Studies Review*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Dec. 2018).

⁵ Scheffran, J., ‘Climate extremes and conflict dynamics’, eds J. Sillmann, S. Sippel and S. Russo, *Climate Extremes and Their Implications for Impact and Risk Assessment* (Elsevier: Amsterdam, 2019); van Baalen and Mobjörk (note 4); Moran, A. et al., *The Intersection of Global Fragility and Climate Risks* (United States Agency for International Development: Washington, DC, Sep. 2018);



Table 1. Selected countries discussed in the Peacebuilding Commission in June 2018–June 2020 (not including regional discussions) and their exposure to climate change

Focus country	ND-Gain Exposure ^a		
	Exposure score	Exposure country rank	Relative level of exposure ^b
Burkina Faso	0.529	172	Most exposed
Burundi (CSC)	0.522	168	Most exposed
CAR (PKO/CSC)	0.495	151	Most exposed
Chad	0.541	176	Most exposed
Colombia	0.501	156	Most exposed
Gambia	0.474	128	More exposed
Guinea-Bissau (CSC)	0.505	158	Most exposed
Liberia (CSC)	0.488	142	More exposed
Papua New Guinea	0.491	143	More exposed
Sierra Leone	0.485	136	More exposed
Sri Lanka	0.499	153	Most exposed

CAR = Central African Republic; CSC = country-specific configuration; PKO = peacekeeping operation.

^a ND-Gain Exposure 'is the degree to which a system is exposed to significant climate change from a biophysical perspective. It is a component of vulnerability independent of socioeconomic context. Exposure indicators are projected impacts for the coming decades and are therefore invariant overtime [sic] in ND-GAIN.' Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 'Methodology', [n.d.].

^b Countries were grouped into 4 tiers of exposure level based on their exposure rank relative to the 192 countries covered. 'Most exposed' = rank > 144; 'More exposed' = rank 97–144; 'Less exposed' = rank 49–96; 'Least exposed' = rank < 49.

Source: Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 'ND-GAIN Country Index', 2018.

across more regions, there is context-specific evidence that climate change can have an effect on the causes and dynamics of violent conflict in the region when: (a) it leads to a deterioration in people's livelihoods; (b) it influences the tactical considerations of armed groups; (c) elites use it to exploit social vulnerabilities and resources; and (d) it displaces people and increases levels of migration.⁶ As such, while there is an increasing recognition that today's climate-related security and development risks contribute to tomorrow's hard security risks, there are no hard security solutions to counter these encroaching impacts of climate change.

Impacts on peacebuilding efforts

Initial research indicates that climate-related security risks also impact the efficacy of peacebuilding efforts. That is because, as a systemic risk factor, climate-related security risks hinder the implementation of peace processes and undermine efforts to strengthen governance and justice as well as social and economic development.⁷ The increasing frequency of extreme weather as a consequence of climate change in Somalia, for example, has reduced livelihood options and increased migration. Both droughts and floods have affected harvests as well as destroyed people's land and thus their livelihood, directly displacing them or forcing them to leave to seek a living elsewhere.

and Koubi, V., 'Climate change and conflict', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 22, no. 1 (May 2019).

⁶ For detailed references to each of the pathways see van Baalen and Mobjörk (note 4).

⁷ Krampe (note 3); and Eklöv, K. and Krampe, F., *Climate-Related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Somalia*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 53 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2019).



As such, the impacts of climate change have left significant parts of an already vulnerable population in a worse condition, less able to cope with further shocks such as armed conflict. This increased inequality and fragility has given rise to grievances, which have hindered the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) in its efforts to provide peace and security and to establish functioning governance and judicial systems in Somalia. There are indications that climate-related migration and displacement have not only aided the recruitment of al-Shabab among disenfranchised poor youth but also undermined peace agreements, as in the case of Baidoa.⁸

Across the Sahel, desertification, drought, higher temperatures and variability of rainfall have exacerbated food insecurity and intercommunity conflict over land, with the impacts of these changes often most heavily borne by marginalized groups.⁹ Moreover, there is indication that the inability of governments to adequately respond to the needs of these communities may help drive recruitment by insurgent groups.¹⁰ In north-western Afghanistan, drought affected a large proportion of the local population in 2018 in areas that are predominantly dependent on agriculture. The lack of water was compounded by the completion of the Salma dam, a development project to increase the region's irrigation capacity as well as to produce energy. The lack of water led to issues surrounding water allocation between neighbouring villages, resulting in low-level violence. The lack of water and the ensuing community tensions had negative effects beyond the communities, as they affected people's perception of the legitimacy of local state institutions (which failed to mitigate or mediate the conflict) and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.¹¹

Climate change is increasingly impacting the operation of some peacekeeping missions. For example, frequent sandstorms as well as flooding hinder operative objectives and important logistics of the peacekeeping troops of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and of government forces.¹²

Increasing institutional response

Many UN country teams (UNCTs) and some peace operations are actively searching for means to respond to the new challenges that emerge from climate change and the ensuing climate-related security risks.¹³ These risks are increasingly being incorporated into UNCTs' sustainable development cooperation frameworks for supporting national partners, often drawing on the advice of UN peace and development advisers. While mission mandates appear sufficient to allow responses, it seems missions still struggle

⁸ Eklöv and Krampe (note 7).

⁹ De Coning and Krampe (note 4).

¹⁰ Day, A. and Caus, J., *Conflict Prevention in the Sahel: Emerging Practice Across the UN* (United Nations University: New York, 2019).

¹¹ Krampe, F., Smith, E. and Hamidi, M. D., 'Security implications of climate development: Local level boomerang effects from rural hydropower development for Afghan farmers', Unpublished research paper (shared with the authors in 2020).

¹² Krampe, F., Hegazi, F. and Smith, E., *Climate-related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Mali* (SIPRI: Stockholm, forthcoming 2021).

¹³ United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, A/74/976–S/2020/773, Advanced unedited version, Aug. 2020.



to integrate climate issues as they are already overburdened with the complexity of intersecting crises and unable to tackle (or deprioritize) climate-related security risks as well.¹⁴ UNSOM is among the few missions that have responded to the growing impact of climate-related change. It has learned lessons from previous challenges—notably the 2011 drought—and has created innovative and effective initiatives. An example is the Drought Operations Coordination Center, an effort to harmonize humanitarian relief efforts by facilitating a coordinated response of UN, intergovernmental and government actors during the drought-related famine in 2016 and 2017.¹⁵ Another positive development has been the appointment of an environmental security adviser within UNSOM to analyse how environmental issues may affect implementation of its mandate and the dynamics of politics, security and conflicts in Somalia. While there is still room for improvement, UNSOM's new initiatives may help to deliver a set of responses that meet the short-term need for a rapid humanitarian response and the long-term objective of achieving a sustainable and resilient society.

Several initiatives within the UN have started to include climate-related security risks in their work

Institutionally, several initiatives in New York within the UN have also started to include climate-related security risks in their work. The joint Climate Security Mechanism (CSM) of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) was established in 2018 to strengthen UN capacity for the systematic prevention of and response to climate-related security risks, including through targeted support of Peace and Development Advisers and field missions. The CSM has released a guidance package on integrated risk analysis and response, and established a UN Community of Practice to facilitate information exchange on this topic between the different parts of the system. In addition, the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) has initiated funding of \$63.4 million to be used towards climate security through 29 projects in 20 countries, including in the South Pacific, Colombia, the border region between Mali and Niger, and the border region between Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR).¹⁶

While context remains a critical component for when and how climate change will impact conflict and peacebuilding, it is becoming increasingly clear that leaving climate change and environmental impacts out of conflict analysis and risk assessments will leave peacebuilders ill-equipped to tackle broad and intersecting conditions in ever more complex conflict environments. The problem is that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between conflict and climate change: climate change impacts conflict and peace processes, while conflict and insecurity hinders climate adaptation efforts, further reinforcing the adverse impacts of climate change in these fragile contexts.

One way around this lies in recognizing that climate adaptation can in fact support peacebuilding goals and create synergies between the two—

¹⁴ Discussed at the Climate-related Security Risks and Their Implications for Peacebuilding in Somalia International Peace Institute (IPI) event co-hosted by IPI, the Swedish Mission to the UN, the Somali Mission to the UN and SIPRI, New York, 24 Feb. 2020.

¹⁵ Eklöv and Krampe (note 7).

¹⁶ UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), 'Climate security and peacebuilding', Report, 27 July 2020.

**Box 2. The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission Mandate**

The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) was established by twin resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council in December 2005 with a mandate:^a

- To bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery;
- To focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery from conflict and to support the development of integrated strategies in order to lay the foundation for sustainable development; and
- To provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations, to develop best practices, to help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and to extend the period of attention given by the international community to post-conflict recovery.^b

In 2016 the General Assembly and the Security Council, in resolutions 70/262 and 2282, also stressed the importance of the PBC:

- To bring sustained international attention to sustaining peace, and to provide political accompaniment and advocacy to countries affected by conflict, with their consent;
- To promote an integrated, strategic and coherent approach to peacebuilding, noting that security, development and human rights are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing;
- To serve a bridging role among the principal organs and relevant entities of the United Nations by sharing advice on peacebuilding needs and priorities, in line with the respective competencies and responsibilities of these bodies; and
- To serve as a platform to convene all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations, including from Member States, national authorities, United Nations missions and country teams, international, regional and subregional organizations, international financial institutions, civil society, women's groups, youth organizations and, where relevant, the private sector and national human rights institutions, in order to provide recommendations and information to improve their coordination, to develop and share good practices in peacebuilding, including on institution-building, and to ensure predictable financing to peacebuilding.^c

^a Peacebuilding Commission, 'United Nations Peacebuilding: Mandate', [n.d.].

^b UN General Assembly Resolution 60/180, 30 Dec. 2005, para. 2; and UN Security Council Resolution 1645, 20 Dec. 2005, para. 2.

^c UN General Assembly Resolution 70/262, 12 May 2016, para. 4; and UN Security Council Resolution 2282, 27 Apr. 2016, para. 4.

preventing the vicious cycle that causes climate change and conflict to exacerbate each other will at the same time increase synergetic responses that limit both the financial and staffing needs for peacebuilding efforts.¹⁷

III. The role of the Peacebuilding Commission

The PBC is uniquely situated to advance approaches for peacebuilding that integrate climate risk. Its cross-regional diversity in membership and the voluntary nature of its agenda arguably provide a forum for countries affected by climate change to generate high-level political attention and mobilize funding.

This unique role arises from its creation in 2005 as an intergovernmental advisory body 'to maintain international attention to post-conflict countries

¹⁷ Krampe (note 3).



and prevent their relapse into conflict'.¹⁸ The PBC's agenda, according to its founding resolutions (see box 2), is based on requests for advice from the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, ECOSOC, the UN Secretariat, or a member state at risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict.¹⁹ Throughout the first decade of the PBC's existence, its agenda was limited to country-specific configurations (CSCs) that have focused on six countries: Burundi, CAR, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone.²⁰

Following the 2015 peacebuilding review, the Security Council and the General Assembly passed twin resolutions on sustaining peace.²¹ Together, these resolutions 'expanded the understanding of peacebuilding as activities to be undertaken not only in post-conflict situations but also in order to prevent conflict in the first place, as well as during peacemaking and peace-keeping'.²² Five of the six countries on the PBC's agenda were on that of the Security Council as well (with the notable exception of Guinea which is the only CSC initiated at the request of a government). Since that review, the PBC has expanded its focus beyond the established CSCs to include discussions on the regions of the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, African Great Lakes, Mano River Union, Central Africa, and the Pacific Islands; on a broader range of countries (including Burkina Faso, Chad, Colombia, Gambia, Kyrgyzstan, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Somalia and Sri Lanka) at the request of those countries; and on cross-cutting thematic issues (such as institution-building, financing, gender, youth, national ownership and COVID-19).

The PBC has 31 members that compose its Organizational Committee (see table 2). CSCs have included PBC members and other partners—including countries from the region of the CSC's focus country and major donors. CSC meetings are held 'with the consent and in consultation with the countries concerned'.²³ Most of the PBC's meetings are open, informal meetings, to which outside observers are invited, although it also holds formal meetings, notably to adopt its annual report and elect the chair and vice-chairs, and occasional closed meetings at the expert and ambassadorial level. The PBC provides advice to the Security Council on specific matters, engages in 'informal interactive dialogues' (IIDs) with both the General Assembly and the Security Council, and organizes an annual joint meeting with ECOSOC, as well as with the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU).²⁴

¹⁸ Security Council Report (SCR), *The Peacebuilding Commission and the Security Council: From Cynicism to Synergy?*, Research Report no. 5/2017 (SCR: New York, 22 Nov. 2017), p. 3.

¹⁹ UN General Assembly Resolution 60/180, 30 Dec. 2005; and UN Security Council Resolution 1645, 20 Dec. 2005.

²⁰ Security Council Report (note 18), pp. 3–4. Note that the CSC on Guinea ended in early 2017.

²¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 70/262, 12 May 2016; and UN Security Council Resolution 2282, 27 Apr. 2016.

²² Security Council Report (note 18), p. 2.

²³ Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), 'Provisional annual workplan of the PBC, 2020', 4 Mar. 2020, p. 2.

²⁴ See e.g. United Nations, Security Council President and Peacebuilding Commission Chair, Joint Summary of Key Outcomes of the Informal Interactive Dialogue between Members of the Security Council and the PBC Chair and Vice-Chairs, 29 June 2018; United Nations, 'Statement by H.E. Mrs. Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly', Informal Interactive Dialogue of the General Assembly and the Peacebuilding Commission, 26 Mar. 2019; United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 'ECOSOC and the Peacebuilding Commission', [n.d.]; and PBC, 'United Nations–African Union Partnership in Peacebuilding', [n.d.].

**Table 2.** Peacebuilding Commission membership, 2020

Source of PBC membership ^a	No. of members	Member countries
<i>UN electing body</i>		
General Assembly	7	Egypt, Guatemala, Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Slovakia
ECOSOC	7	Brazil, Colombia, Iran, Ireland, Mali, Republic of Korea ^e
Security Council ^b	7	China, Dominican Republic, France, Niger, Russia, United Kingdom, United States
<i>Contribution type</i>		
Troops or police ^c	5	Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Rwanda
Financial contributors ^d	5	Canada, Germany, Japan, Norway, Sweden

PBC = Peacebuilding Commission; UN = United Nations; ECOSOC = UN Economic and Social Council.

^a Members are either elected by 1 of 3 UN bodies or qualify through their contributions to the UN.

^b The 5 permanent members of the Security Council have permanent seats in the PBC; 2 elected members of the council are selected to fill the other 2 seats.

^c These are the top 5 countries that contribute troops or police to peacekeeping.

^d These are the top 5 assessed and voluntary financial donors to the UN.

^e One seat is currently vacant.

Source: United Nations, Peacebuilding Commission, ‘31 members for 2020’, [n.d.].

IV. Climate-related security risks in the Peacebuilding Commission

Within the UN, the lead role in organizing member states to limit greenhouse gas emissions lies with the UNFCCC, efforts to adapt to climate change and invest in low-carbon development lie with the ECOSOC, and responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security lies with the Security Council. However, these organs do not specifically address the intersection of climate change with peace and security, although the issue of climate-related security risks has featured on the agenda of the Security Council since 2007.²⁵ A growing number of UN member states acknowledge the impact of climate change on peace and security, but many have concerns about the Security Council’s role in this area, despite its recurrent engagement on the issue.²⁶ Some member states argue that the impacts of climate change are primarily a development issue, and that the Security Council’s involvement risks securitizing the international response and detracts from efforts at mitigation and adaptation. For others, the Security Council does not have legitimacy to address the issue, since its five permanent members (P5) are not representative of all regions and are all major emitters of greenhouse gases.²⁷

Although the PBC does not have an explicit mandate to focus on the linkage between climate change and conflict, its foundational resolutions emphasize the role of the PBC in promoting an integrated approach that bridges the UN’s work in peace and security, human rights and development. As such, the PBC has increasingly become a forum in which climate change is raised

²⁵ Born, C., Eklöv, K. and Mobjörk, M., ‘Advancing United Nations responses to climate-related security risks’, SIPRI Policy Brief, Sep. 2019.

²⁶ Born, Eklöv and Mobjörk (note 25); Sherman, J., ‘How can the Security Council engage on climate change, peace and security?’, *IPI Global Observatory*, 20 June 2019; and Hardt, J. N., ‘A climate for change in the UNSC? Member states’ approaches to the climate–security nexus’, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) Policy Brief no. 05/20, June 2020.

²⁷ Sherman (note 26).



in the context of its consequences for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly in regional discussions on the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin and most recently the Pacific Islands.

Yet the political sensitivities and divisions that have characterized debates on the relationship between climate change and security that are so visible among UN member states in the Security Council are also apparent in the PBC. These divisions do not follow clear global North/South boundaries: European countries like France, Germany and Sweden have diverse allies in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific in being strong supporters of the PBC taking a more active role on climate-related security issues. Instead, these divisions reflect contested views about the mandate of respective UN legislative bodies; the most appropriate tools for the UN to respond; and, for a very small minority of countries, the causes of climate change and their relationship to phenomena such as drought and land degradation. The following sections set out how, taken together, these divergent concerns determine the extent to which the PBC is able to set its agenda, and the ways in which it can discuss climate-related issues.

The politics of discussing climate-related security risks in the PBC

The extent to which the PBC is able to become a forum for discussions on climate-related security risks and to provide climate-related advice to other member state bodies is influenced by its members' views on the mandate of the commission; their position on the causes (if not reality) of climate change, including whether and how these influence insecurity and violence; and their opinions on the most appropriate forms of response by the UN.

One factor that influences the ability of the PBC to address climate-related security risks to peacebuilding is its mandate. Before the commission discusses any topic, whether geographic or thematic, PBC members are very careful about first ensuring that the PBC has a mandate to do so. PBC diplomats, particularly those from China and Russia, have emphasized the importance, for them, of the Security Council maintaining its prerogative on international peace and security, and that the PBC retains its advisory role on such issues. For example, they argue that the PBC should only provide the Security Council, on its request, with information and analysis that is not included in the Secretary-General's reports, particularly the perspective of the host country.²⁸ Both China and Russia have also been wary of discussing climate change in the Security Council, arguing that it is a development issue and should be dealt with elsewhere—through ECOSOC, the Second Committee of the General Assembly and the UNFCCC.

In practice, such arguments about mandate are one lever for controlling the agenda of the PBC. Arguing that 'climate change' is the mandate of one body and 'security' is that of another can be used to make discussions on the linkages difficult. As one Chinese diplomat explained: 'Climate change is the primary responsibility of ECOSOC and the Second Committee when talking about climate generally; when talking about climate and security, then it is the responsibility of the Security Council . . . [T]he PBC is an advisory body—

²⁸ Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 12, 13 and 14, Apr.–May 2020.



it can make suggestions to the Security Council, to the [General Assembly], and to ECOSOC.²⁹

Other permanent and elected members of the Security Council, including France, Germany and Sweden (which served on the council for 2017–18), have taken a more proactive approach to using the PBC’s advisory role. France is represented in the PBC as one of the P5. Germany and Sweden, both current members of the PBC, also served back-to-back terms on the Security Council. In both bodies, they have sought to strengthen the PBC’s advisory role, including through the ongoing 2020 review of the peacebuilding architecture and thematic consultations, and pushed for greater attention to climate-related security risks, including through the addition of climate-specific language in several peace operation mandates.³⁰

The PBC recently has taken a more active role in providing advice to the Security Council, including on climate-related security risks, in the context of the mandate for the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). In late 2019, drawing on previous resolutions and presidential statements of the Security Council, and ongoing engagement on West Africa and the Sahel, the PBC provided written advice on the UNOWAS mandate—the first time the body did so on a regional mandate, and the first instance outside a CSC.³¹ One PBC diplomat involved in drafting the advice described the initiative as a ‘surprise attack’ by the PBC, which built on CSCs in countries in West

The PBC has taken a more active role in providing advice to the Security Council on climate-related security risks

Africa and on the PBC’s Sahel-specific regional mandate.³² Development of the PBC’s advice in this matter benefited from strong engagement by Côte d’Ivoire, a member of both the PBC and the Security Council in 2019 and co-penholder (i.e. the country taking the lead in drafting a resolution, in this case together with Belgium) on the UNOWAS mandate renewal. Russia and China both accepted the approach. One diplomat acknowledged that the issue was sensitive, but that the PBC advice to the Security Council was important—while emphasizing that the decision-making responsibility lies with the council.³³ Another diplomat commented that ‘in some cases—Mali, Sahel in general, CAR—it is absolutely right that the Council look at climate dimensions of conflict’.³⁴ However, he warned that: ‘Given these examples, European countries are trying to present it as a generic example. From our side, we are opposed to that.’³⁵

Many member states, including some countries severely exposed to impacts of climate change and conflict, view greater engagement by the PBC on climate-related security risks as a means to build acceptance among those that are wary of the issue. For some, this also means legitimizing discussion in the Security Council. One African PBC member said that, in

²⁹ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 14, May 2020.

³⁰ E.g. Germany and France convened a thematic consultation on the topic ‘Linkages between Climate Change and Challenges to Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace’ on 23 Apr. 2020. See PBC, ‘Regional and thematic consultations’, <<https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/regional-and-thematic-consultations>>.

³¹ UN Security Council resolutions 1645 (note 19) and 2282 (note 21); and UN Security Council, Statements by the President, S/PRST/2017/2, 20 Jan. 2017, and S/PRST/2018/3, 30 Jan. 2018.

³² Interview with PBC diplomat no. 5, Apr. 2020.

³³ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 14, May 2020.

³⁴ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 12, May 2020.

³⁵ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 12, May 2020.



view of Russian and American opposition, council engagement on the issue was dead, and added:

[T]he PBC is another outlet to push that agenda [of addressing climate-related security risks], to use it to lobby and get buy-in from others. It's not about the policy, but the cultural movement to push change, raise awareness—then those countries [Russia and the United States] will have to come on board. It exposes their reticence . . . making a push in the PBC is an opportunity and could be carried over into the [Security] Council . . .³⁶

Many member states within the PBC are supportive of its role in examining the impacts of climate on security, identifying good practices and mobilizing support. However these states are still wary of the linkage to the Security Council. They value the PBC's role in its own right and worry that using the PBC in the larger battle over the Security Council risks undermining the agenda in both fora. As one PBC diplomat noted: 'The idea of finding different fora to discuss [the nexus of] climate and security is puzzling. What we see are problems bringing this agenda to the Security Council, so now the focus of some member states is shifting to the PBC. It's forum shopping.'³⁷

Emphasizing the different roles of the various UN organs and bodies, the diplomat added: 'Every organ of the UN should play a part . . . It's important not to overstep the mandates of those organs already doing climate, and to work in unison when it really represents a risk to security, either regionally or in specific countries.'³⁸ This view was echoed by most of the PBC diplomats interviewed, each of whom emphasized the multidimensional nature of climate change and the fact that while climate change poses challenges for sustainable development in all countries, in some countries it poses additional security and humanitarian challenges that require particular attention. Yet they also recognized that there may need to be greater clarity about the respective roles of the different UN organs, and how these inter-relate: 'The cake is big enough for everyone to have a piece, but you need to cut it first. You need to make the case that there is not one unified issue of "climate change".'³⁹

Beyond questions of the mandate of the PBC, an additional challenge is posed by influential countries such as Brazil and the United States questioning whether climate change exists or is caused by human behaviour. Under the administrations of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and US President Donald J. Trump, both countries have argued against a causal linkage between climate change and human activity. Both also acknowledge that the adverse impacts of 'weather-related phenomena' (drought, land degradation, shorter growing seasons etc.) pose country-specific security challenges. (This has provided an opening for countries to advance the role of the PBC, albeit indirectly, as discussed further below.)

Yet there are fundamental differences in the way these two countries approach climate change in the PBC, with consequences for its wider consideration of this issue. Brazil has questioned whether the PBC is even entitled to discuss climate change, since the body is not representative of all member states—a position that echoes its stance vis-à-vis the Security Council (not only on climate and security, but also as a point of principle).

³⁶ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 8, Apr. 2020.

³⁷ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 10, Apr. 2020.

³⁸ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 10, Apr. 2020.

³⁹ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 15, May 2020.



While recognizing that the PBC is more representative than the Security Council, one diplomat expressed caution that increased acceptance of discussing the linkage between climate and security in the PBC could legitimize such discussions in the Security Council, in contrast to the General Assembly with its universal membership.

Brazil echoes the position of many other countries in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in emphasizing that addressing the impact of environmental changes should be approached through a development lens—that is, focusing on mitigating the impact to livelihoods by strengthening resilience and providing alternatives, and strengthening state capacities to provide basic services. As one diplomat noted: ‘It is important to focus on peace rather than on security risks. Our focus is on prevention.’⁴⁰ In principle, this should provide an opening for the PBC; yet perceptions that the PBC agenda is still too tied to that of the Security Council, and that its advisory role is predominantly to the council, seems to militate against support for the PBC as the appropriate forum. Brazil’s position also reflects a concern that a focus on the short-term causes of conflict and violence will crowd out responses that address structural drivers, diverting funding from development activities to more interventionist military approaches that would infringe on state sovereignty. Other NAM diplomats, however, demonstrated more openness to the PBC discussing climate-related security risks, but nearly all of those interviewed stressed the need for a balanced, multidimensional approach.

By contrast, several diplomats described the approach of the USA under the Trump administration as keeping a low profile in the PBC—not only on climate-related issues, but generally.⁴¹ They contrasted this with US efforts in the Security Council to roll back language on climate-related risks in several peace operation mandates. At the same time, the USA has arguably never maintained a proactive role in the PBC, rarely weighing in on documents, advice and other outcomes, in contrast to China and Russia. The sense among other PBC diplomats is that these three countries all monitor discussions in the PBC, and weigh in only when issues arise that directly touch on their interests or run counter to established policy positions. This approach does not uniformly apply to all P5 members, however. France, while relatively disengaged from the PBC during its first decade of existence, has become increasingly active over the past several years, including on the climate file. For example, France co-hosted an informal consultation on climate and security with Germany as part of the 2020 review of the UN peacebuilding architecture. In contrast, the United Kingdom has been among the more active members of the PBC across its full agenda since its inception.

While diplomats across the PBC’s membership generally expressed support for the PBC taking a greater role in discussions on climate-related security risks, several diplomats from the ‘Western Europe and Others Group’ (WEOG) argued that few PBC member states openly advocate to include climate-related security issues in discussions, other than the ‘traditional’ European champions on the topic.⁴² For some of these WEOG

⁴⁰ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 4, Apr. 2020.

⁴¹ Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 5 and 16, Apr.–May 2020. US diplomats declined to be interviewed.

⁴² Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 1 and 3, Mar.–Apr. 2020; and Interview with UN official no. 4, May 2020.



countries, bilateral considerations take over, in that they are unwilling to take public positions on climate and security that could jeopardize their political relationship with, or invite retaliation from, China, Russia or the USA.

The PBC on its own has never been able to convene a thematic discussion on climate change. Several PBC members have argued that while climate change is a global issue, it impacts different countries differently, and therefore should not be generalized.⁴³ As one diplomat noted: ‘The PBC is a good platform for discussion on climate. But we prefer to discuss in country-specific [settings], not thematically. Climate is not a factor of conflict in all areas, so it is important to look at it on a country-specific basis.’⁴⁴ Consequently, diplomats said it was unlikely that the PBC would convene a formal meeting on climate change in the short term, despite the open calls by some member states for it to do so.⁴⁵ A diplomat from one P5 country described the situation: ‘Frankly, there are different views on this issue between [on one hand, the] USA, Russia, China and [on the other] Europe. It is very difficult to reach agreement within the PBC with the principle of consensus.’⁴⁶

The PBC on its own has never been able to convene a thematic discussion on climate change

The limitations of consensus politics

The PBC works on the basis of consensus.⁴⁷ According to many diplomats from PBC member states, in practice ‘consensus’ is understood as unanimity, and it can be difficult for countries to act if there is strong dissent. ‘For example, if the [chair] of the PBC wants to convene a meeting on climate-related security risks, and another country says that is not the right approach and objects to the title, then the chair cannot convene on that topic.’⁴⁸ In effect, this gives all 31 members of the Organizational Committee a veto over the PBC agenda.

When combined with political differences among PBC members, the consensus rule has made it extremely difficult for ‘climate change’ to be explicitly referenced in negotiated PBC documents—letters from the chair, statements on behalf of the PBC, letters and statements by chairs of CSCs, annual reports, press statements, political declarations, and written advice to the Security Council and other organs—all of which are adopted under the silence procedure. A member can break silence, requesting additional changes to text. Development of the PBC agenda often involves informal consultation behind the scenes by the chair of the commission and the UN’s Peacebuilding Support Office. According to one diplomat: ‘There is more difficulty because member states know that those documents are part of the official record, and therefore matter’.⁴⁹ Or, as a UN official put it: ‘The trouble is the PBC, once it starts to produce anything written, hits blockages. It can create space to raise issues, but converting to advice or into

⁴³ Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 7, 12, 13 and 14, Apr.–May 2020.

⁴⁴ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 14, May 2020.

⁴⁵ Author’s notes from PBC consultation on climate and security, Apr. 2020.

⁴⁶ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 14, May 2020.

⁴⁷ PBC Organization Committee, ‘Provisional rules of procedure of the Peacebuilding Committee’, PBC/1/OC/3/Rev.1, 5 Dec. 2012, rule 5.

⁴⁸ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 11, Apr. 2020.

⁴⁹ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 1, Apr. 2020.



a product is more difficult.⁵⁰ Since all PBC members need to agree on these final documents, they tend towards blandness—general language that steers clear of controversy. ‘The result is that in the PBC we end up with the lowest denominator text that everyone can accept’, according to one diplomat.⁵¹

Explicit reference to climate change and its adverse impacts on security is more feasible in outcomes that are not negotiated, like chair’s summaries of meetings and trip reports. (The former are negotiated if they include advice or are shared with the president of the General Assembly; otherwise, they are cleared by the PBC chair or, in cases where one of the vice-chairs has chaired a meeting, by the chair of the meeting.) Yet even here, chairs have exercised a degree of self-censorship, although this varies depending on the chair and their ‘risk appetite’.⁵² For example, the current chair (Canada) was described as an active chair, willing to test the boundaries on PBC outputs, including an increased number of press statements and letters to the Security Council on matters such as youth, peace and security.

There is more receptivity among certain member states to refer to the impacts of climate change—terms used include ‘environmental degradation’, ‘shorter growing seasons’, ‘drought’, ‘weather-related effects’ and ‘desertification’—than to climate change as a concept.⁵³ One PBC diplomat said: ‘Because of [the principle of] consensus, you need to find the right words—an acceptable way for it to be included in concept notes. It’s difficult to use “climate change”. Some member states will prejudge this and block the initiative . . . So we don’t make the discussion about “climate”.’⁵⁴ It is also

The PBC in its official documentation refers to climate change as a risk multiplier, rather than a primary cause

easier for the PBC in its official documentation to refer to climate change as part of a set of multidimensional factors, and as a risk multiplier, rather than a primary cause. In the context of discussions on the Sahel, for example, the impact of ‘climate-induced reductions in grazable land’ has been raised alongside water scarcity, food insecurity, socio-economic challenges, demographics, governance challenges and violent extremism.⁵⁵ Such an approach may enable discussions that would not otherwise take place, but it is not without tradeoffs. Raising climate-related security risks in the context of other issues can underscore the multidimensional nature of challenges faced by countries, but it can also dilute the importance of climate change as a risk and divert attention from the cause to symptoms. One diplomat also cautioned against conflating the willingness of some PBC members to discuss ‘climate-related risks’ with climate-related *security* risks, noting that many countries in the Group of 77 are more comfortable framing peacebuilding, and the impact of climate, in development rather than security terms. ‘The latter has

⁵⁰ Interview with UN official no. 4, Apr. 2020.

⁵¹ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 5, Mar. 2020.

⁵² Interview with UN official no. 4, Apr. 2020.

⁵³ Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 1, 2, 3, 7 and 12, Apr. 2020.

⁵⁴ PBC diplomat no. 2, Apr. 2020.

⁵⁵ UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and PBC, ‘The impact of cross-border trans-humance on sustainable peace and development in West Africa and the Sahel’, Concept note for the Joint Meeting of ECOSOC and PBC, 3 Dec. 2019, p. 1. See also ECOSOC and PBC, ‘Linkages between climate change and challenges to peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the Sahel’, Concept note for the Joint Meeting of ECOSOC and PBC, 13 Nov. 2018.



come up in a number of meetings mostly on the Sahel, as the countries in the region themselves see climate change as a security risk.⁵⁶

Given the PBC's emphasis on consensus and national ownership, any progress would depend on gradually winning over more conservative member states. Comparing climate change to another sensitive topic, one diplomat stressed that while the PBC may not be able to speak directly about human rights, it regularly discusses human rights-related issues such as inclusion, marginalization, reconciliation and transitional justice. 'We need to address the problem by calling it different things, finding different angles of approach, rather than coming straight at it.'⁵⁷

Regional approaches: Growing momentum on the Sahel and recent initiatives on the Pacific

Despite the differences among member states, the consequences of climate change have become a regular aspect of PBC discussions with a country-specific or regional focus—particularly where there is vocal support from the country's or region's governments—including in the CSCs and, since 2017, a series of meetings on the Sahel (see figure 2/table 3). With the participation of the countries in the region, UNOWAS, the AU, the European Union, the G5 Sahel and the UN system, the PBC's Sahel meetings 'have focused on ways to overcome the region's multi-dimensional challenges by addressing the root causes of crisis pertaining to social, economic and environmental factors'.⁵⁸

The Sahel is the only geographic area where the PBC has an explicit mandate to support efforts to adapt to the effects of climate change—specifically to implement the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS)—and has been the topic of IIDs with the Security Council in 2019 and 2017.⁵⁹ The 2017 IID on the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin was a turning point in the PBC's relationship with the Security Council, as it was the first substantive discussion between the two bodies on countries and regions, and the beginning of the PBC's engagement on climate-related risks in the Sahel. This meeting followed the Security Council's first field trip to the Lake Chad Basin in April 2017 and subsequent Resolution 2349 of 31 March 2017, which:

Recognizes the adverse effects of climate change and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of the Region [Lake Chad Basin], 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.⁶⁰

The 2017 IID directly influenced and provided political space for the joint annual meetings of the PBC and ECOSOC, which in 2018 explicitly focused on 'Linkages between Climate Change and Challenges to Peacebuilding and

⁵⁶ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 3, Apr. 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 1, Mar. 2020.

⁵⁸ PBC, 'Peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the Sahel region', Concept note for the PBC Annual Session, 12 Nov. 2018, p. 1.

⁵⁹ UN Security Council, Statement by the President, S/PRST/2017/2, 20 Jan. 2017. This mandate has been subsequently added to, most recently in UN Security Council, Statement by the President, S/PRST/2020/2, 11 Feb. 2020.

⁶⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 2349, 31 Mar. 2017, para. 26. See also 'Briefing on the PBC Annual Report and Informal Interactive Dialogue on regional peacebuilding challenges in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin', What's in Blue, 16 June 2017.

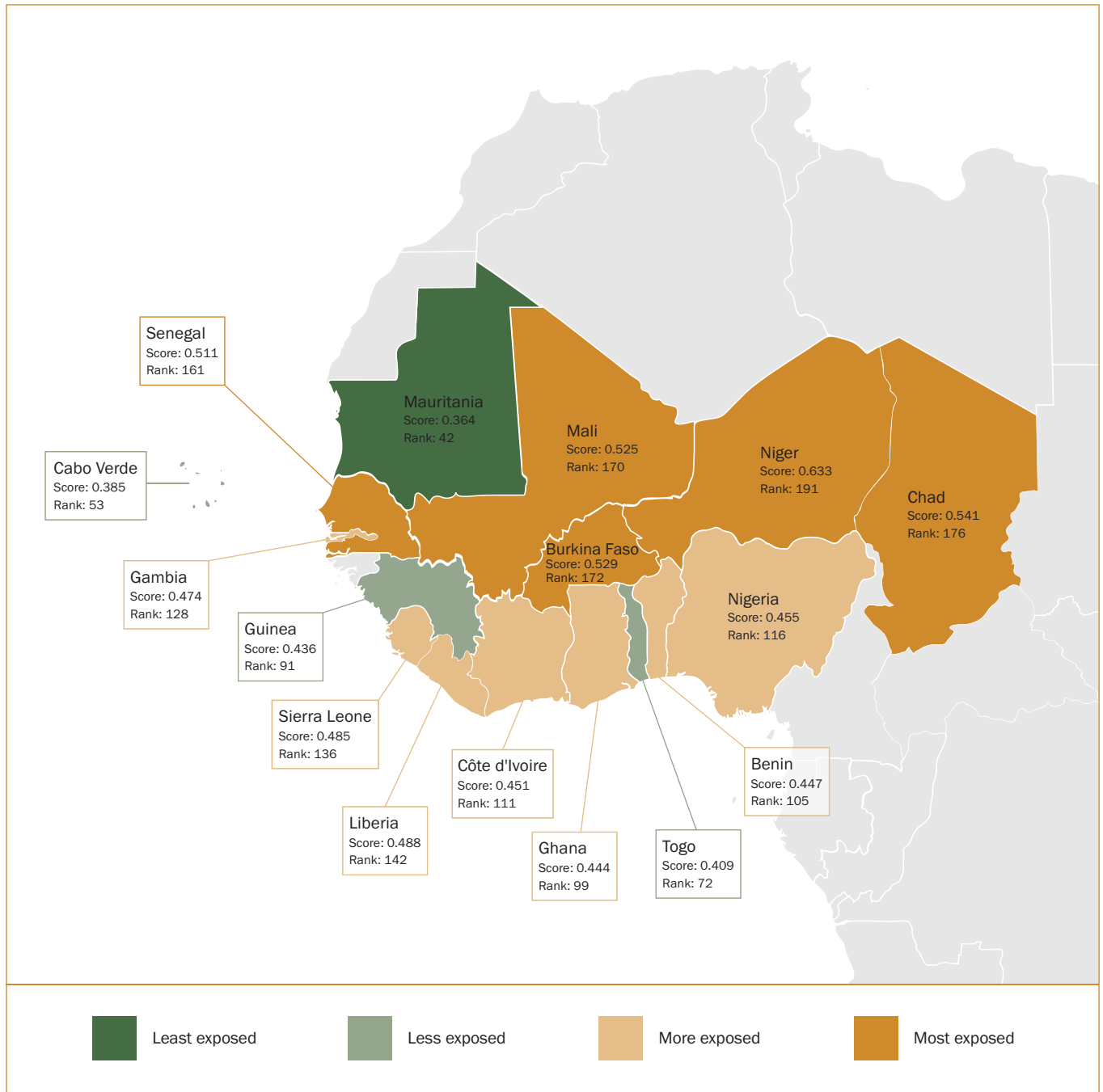


Figure 2. Sahel region countries and their exposure to climate change

Notes: See table 3 for a definition of the Sahel region and an explanation of exposure ‘score’ and ‘rank’.

The boundaries used in this map do not imply any endorsement or acceptance by SIPRI.

Source: Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, ‘ND-GAIN Country Index’, 2018.

Sustaining Peace in the Sahel’ and, in 2019, on ‘The Impact of Cross-border Transhumance on Sustainable Peace and Development in West Africa and the Sahel’.⁶¹ The concept note for the 2018 meeting was clear about the multidimensional impact of climate change on the region, including insecurity:

⁶¹ PBC/ECOSOC meeting 2018, concept note (note 55); and PBC/ECOSOC meeting 2019, concept note (note 55).

**Table 3.** Sahel region countries and their exposure to climate change^a

Country	ND-Gain Exposure ^b		Relative level of exposure ^c
	Exposure score	Exposure country rank	
Benin	0.447	105	More exposed
Burkina Faso	0.529	172	Most exposed
Cabo Verde	0.385	53	Less exposed
Chad	0.541	176	Most exposed
Côte d'Ivoire	0.451	111	More exposed
Gambia	0.474	128	More exposed
Ghana	0.444	99	More exposed
Guinea	0.436	91	Less exposed
Liberia	0.488	142	More exposed
Mali	0.525	170	Most exposed
Mauritania	0.364	42	Least exposed
Niger	0.633	191	Most exposed
Nigeria	0.455	116	More exposed
Senegal	0.511	161	Most exposed
Sierra Leone	0.485	136	More exposed
Togo	0.409	72	Less exposed

^a The Sahel region is here defined as states covered by the mandate of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

^b ND-Gain Exposure 'is the degree to which a system is exposed to significant climate change from a biophysical perspective. It is a component of vulnerability independent of socioeconomic context. Exposure indicators are projected impacts for the coming decades and are therefore invariant overtime [sic] in ND-GAIN.' Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 'Methodology', [n.d.].

^c Countries were grouped into 4 tiers of exposure level based on their exposure rank relative to the 192 countries covered. 'Most exposed' = rank > 144; 'More exposed' = rank 97–144; 'Less exposed' = rank 49–96; 'Least exposed' = rank < 49.

Source: Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 'ND-GAIN Country Index', 2018.

With temperature increases projected to be 1.5 times higher than in the rest of the world, and with 90 per cent of its economy reliant on agriculture and pastoralism, recurrent droughts in the region have devastating impacts on people who have little resilience and few coping strategies. Climate change has the potential to further contribute to land degradation and desertification, which leads to land disputes especially between farming and pastoralist communities competing for access to increasingly scarce resources. In the Sahel, the effects of climate change are compounded by persistent governance and security challenges that further contribute to the Sahel's dire humanitarian situation . . . [I]n the Lake Chad Basin area, which has been affected by extreme climatic conditions, 4 million people in 2018 have faced food insecurity with ongoing conflict and security issues a contributory factor.⁶²

According to one UN official involved in organizing the 2018 meeting: 'We managed to explicitly look at [climate change] by having a strong regional focus. It wasn't a thematic discussion. National ownership won over any pushback.'⁶³ A second UN official confided that, internally, there had been a push for the joint meeting to explicitly focus on climate and security, but that the idea was coolly received by some member states.⁶⁴ As discussed further

⁶² PBC/ECOSOC meeting 2018, concept note (note 55), p. 2.

⁶³ Interview with UN official no. 3, Apr. 2020.

⁶⁴ Interview with UN official no. 2, Apr. 2020.



below, the willingness of climate-affected states in the region to discuss their situation helped overcome opposition from other states within the PBC.

That meeting may have been a high-water mark for the ability of the PBC to address the consequences of climate change directly. Subsequent pushback on the part of a very small minority of countries within the PBC has constrained the space for direct dialogue on the consequences of climate change. Several PBC diplomats described the difficulty in including reference to climate change in the summary document, despite the title of the event, because of reservations expressed by Brazil. One PBC diplomat elaborated: ‘The 2018 joint PBC–ECOSOC meeting walked a thin line on what could be done within the mandate of the two bodies. A lot of member states wanted the meeting to take place, and it benefited from a strong chair during the negotiations, who was able to push for an outcome document, even if with watered down language.’⁶⁵

These shifts appeared to constrain discussions on climate-related risks within the PBC. During the next PBC–ECOSOC joint meeting, in 2019, the topic of transhumance was broad enough to permit some reference to climate-related security risks; the concept note for the meeting explicitly mentioned the impact of climate change on transhumance, and several delegations raised climate in the course of their statements during the meeting.⁶⁶ According to several diplomats who participated in the meeting, the summary of the discussion was able to refer to climate only implicitly, as part of the multidimensional factors affecting pastoralist-related conflict.⁶⁷ As part of its programme of work, the PBC has had to go through established CSCs and regional configurations—despite its discussions on the Sahel having expanded from those covered by UNISS to those covered by the UNOWAS mandate for the whole Sahel region, including West Africa.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has provided a new opening for the PBC to consider the impact of climate change. In the context of the PBC’s engagement on how the pandemic is impacting peacebuilding, it has organized regional meetings on Central Africa, the African Great Lakes region and the Pacific Islands.⁶⁸ The open meeting on the Pacific Islands, convened at the request of Fiji in close consultation with Tuvalu (the current chair of the Pacific Islands Forum), was among the most explicit discussions on climate-related security risks to date. A planned meeting on the Lake Chad Basin in September 2020 is also likely to emphasize the climate-related consequences for peace and development in the region.

⁶⁵ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 3, Apr. 2020. The chair at the time was the permanent representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, who was also chair of ECOSOC.

⁶⁶ The concept note for the meeting stated that ‘these arrangements have come under increasing pressure due to a multitude of factors, including climate change-induced reduction of grazable land, water scarcity, food insecurity, socioeconomic challenges, demographics, limitations of peripheral rule of law, and the influence of armed and violent extremist groups, further provoking cross-border population movements’. PBC/ECOSOC meeting 2019, concept note (note 55), p. 1.

⁶⁷ ECOSOC and PBC, ‘The impact of cross-border transhumance on sustainable peace and development in West Africa and the Sahel’, Informal summary for the Joint Meeting of ECOSOC and PBC, 3 Dec. 2019, p. 1. Although the concept note for the joint meeting identified ‘Increas[ing] international awareness of the complex challenges related to transhumance in countries and cross-border areas of West Africa and the Sahel, from a security, development peacebuilding and climate change perspective’ (note 55, p. 3), the official summary refers to climate only in the context of remarks by 2 guest briefers.

⁶⁸ PBC, ‘Virtual meetings of the Peacebuilding Commission’, 2020.



National ownership creates an opportunity

As PBC discussions on the Sahel demonstrate, climate-affected countries like Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have used the PBC's emphasis on national ownership to provide an entry point for discussion on these issues within the PBC. As one PBC diplomat stated: 'National ownership is the key . . . [T]here is a comparative advantage of the PBC because it makes countries more willing to share their experience because they don't feel anything will be imposed on them.'⁶⁹ National consent or ownership of the agenda provides a counterweight to the principle of consensus. If an affected country or group of countries requests to discuss a thematic issue in a country- or region-specific context, there is usually agreement among PBC members. This provides an opening for the commission to engage on more contentious issues, including climate-related security risks.

Strong national ownership also makes those countries already wary of discussing climate security in the PBC more cautious about directly opposing discussions or editing out their views from official outcome documents. A diplomat from one P5 country noted: 'We accept the views of host countries. It is reasonable to discuss this issue of climate in the country configuration. Our position is to respect national ownership.'⁷⁰ Several PBC diplomats pointed to the consultation on peace operation transitions organized by the UK as part of the 2020 peacebuilding architecture review, in which a senior Malian official raised the impact of climate change on peace and security in his country.⁷¹ While not an expected topic for the discussion, the official clearly articulated the relationship between climate change and the peacebuilding challenges Mali is likely to face in the context of an eventual transition of MINUSMA. During the recent PBC meeting on the Pacific Islands, a senior government official from Fiji similarly provided a first-hand account of how the pandemic was exacerbating climate-related vulnerabilities, noting that 'each climate shock makes each [small island state] less and less stable' and that the health systems of many islands in the region were already strained by climate-induced health pressures.⁷²

Providing a forum for such 'lived experience' squarely aligns with the PBC's mandate to mobilize national stakeholders. It can also carry greater weight than efforts by 'outside' countries. As a diplomat from one Sahel country acknowledged, it is more effective when an affected country makes the linkage between climate change and security:

Our position is very clear—other countries can talk about the link between climate and security, but we need it. Climate change won't wait. It's here, it's real, it's happening—and what happens in the Sahel has an impact on the rest of the world. [We] are the perfect example of everything that can go wrong.⁷³

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new opening for the PBC to consider the impact of climate change

⁶⁹ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 7, Apr. 2020.

⁷⁰ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 14, Apr. 2020.

⁷¹ Interviews with PBC diplomats nos 5 and 6, Apr. 2020.

⁷² PBC, 'Virtual meetings of the Peacebuilding Commission' (note 68), 'Meeting on the Pacific Islands', 28 July 2020.

⁷³ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 8, Apr. 2020.



V. Climate-related opportunities for the Peacebuilding Commission

Among PBC members and countries engaged with the commission, there is overwhelming recognition that climate change can exacerbate drivers of conflict and instability, undermining peacebuilding and development efforts. There are different views of what this means in practice. Some acknowledge climate change as a risk—in some cases, even a primary one—but do not regard it as *the* major threat to international peace and security. Rather, climate change needs to be taken as part of a package of risk multipliers that provides a more complete understanding of conflict dynamics in a given situation. Others argue that the impact of climate change on peace and security is indirect, pointing to its negative effects on development. What these views have in common is a recognition that the impacts of climate change are multidimensional, and that responses require a comprehensive, holistic approach. Opportunities that support such an approach include reinforcing the dimensions of the PBC’s mandate in the context of the 2020 peacebuilding architecture review and, regardless of the review’s outcome, strengthening climate-related risk analysis and reporting to the PBC, broadening the PBC’s advisory role to the Security Council, ECOSOC and the General Assembly, and exercising greater creativity in the PBC’s use of briefers.

Among PBC members, there is a recognition that the impacts of climate change are multidimensional

The 2020 peacebuilding architecture review

The UN’s peacebuilding architecture is undergoing review in 2020, following those in 2010 and 2015. In principle, the review provides member states with an assessment of how well the PBC is fulfilling its mandate, and an opportunity to adjust that mandate within a broader comprehensive review of the UN’s overall performance in building and sustaining peace. In recent years, the PBC has made significant progress in overcoming earlier limitations.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, several PBC diplomats expressed frustration with aspects of the commission, including the principle of consensus, its perceived mirroring of the Security Council’s agenda and the limits of its convening role. As one diplomat complained: ‘Debates are only debates. They are only a collection of statements, with no opportunity to interact or ask questions. The statements then get summarized in the report. They have no real use.’⁷⁵

Despite these frustrations, the 2020 review is unlikely to reopen the mandate of the PBC because champions of the sustaining-peace agenda have concerns that any attempt to draft a resolution to broaden the mandate could provoke a countereffort by certain countries seeking to limit the PBC’s role. Some also argue that, even without change, the existing PBC mandate provides sufficient coverage to engage robustly on a range of issues. Instead, the review has focused on assessing implementation of the sustaining-peace agenda at the country level. Many expect that, at most, the review will result in a new set of twin resolutions that reaffirm commitment to the agenda

⁷⁴ Security Council Report (note 18).

⁷⁵ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 11, Apr. 2020.



set out in the 2016 resolutions, while perhaps calling for further action in one or two areas and for the Secretary-General to continue reports on implementation.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, member states have organized a series of informal consultations in the context of the review to explore ways of improving the PBC's role in relation to several thematic issues—including a dedicated meeting on climate-related risks and peacebuilding, organized by Germany and France.⁷⁷ A 're-emphasis' on relevant existing aspects of the PBC mandate could provide the PBC with a clearer basis for discussion of climate-related security risks. For example, the review could encourage the PBC to consider 'multidimensional' drivers of conflict as part of its existing mandate 'to promote an integrated, strategic and coherent approach to peacebuilding', or could re-emphasize the PBC's role in convening and coordinating across the UN system.

Climate-related risk analysis

Unlike the Security Council, the PBC does not receive regular reporting from the UN Secretary-General on the situation in countries and regions on its agenda. (The Secretary-General is required to report to the General Assembly and Security Council on building and sustaining peace in the context of the review of the peacebuilding architecture.) Instead, the PBC relies on concept notes, often prepared with support from the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), and on invited briefers to inform discussion among its members. Concept notes have included analysis on climate-related security risks, where appropriate (e.g. in the context of the Sahel), alongside other multidimensional risks.

There is scope for the PBSO, with the support of other parts of the UN Secretariat, to include more climate-related risk analysis in its reports, concept notes and advice to the PBC. This might include helping to develop guiding questions ahead of meetings and identifying climate-related factors ahead of field visits. Such analysis would likely be acceptable to most PBC members 'as long as that analysis is incorporated in a holistic or integrated way [as] part of an analysis of "multidimensional challenges"'.⁷⁸ However, in accordance with the principle of consensus and emphasis on national ownership, the 'demand' for such analysis would need to come from members of the PBC and countries with which it engages. According to a representative of the PBSO: 'We will bring together whatever data and analysis is needed [but] there is a process to get there . . . We wouldn't collect data until there is consensus within the PBC.'⁷⁹ At the same time, if a country under consideration by the PBC was to actively ask for climate-related issues to be included in the concept note or preparatory documents for a meeting on its situation, it is unlikely that PBC members wary of climate-related security risks would block such a request.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ UN General Assembly resolutions 70/262 (note 21) and 72/276, 30 Apr. 2018; and UN Security Council resolutions 2282 (note 21) and 2413, 26 Apr. 2018.

⁷⁷ PBC, 'Regional and thematic consultations' (note 30).

⁷⁸ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 3, Apr. 2020.

⁷⁹ Interview with UN official no. 1, Apr. 2020.

⁸⁰ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 5, Apr. 2020.



Even if the PBC requested such analysis, there is currently limited capacity within the UN Secretariat to provide it. The PBSO acknowledged that, on its own, it would not have the capacity to provide analysis on the nexus of climate and security and would have to draw it from other parts of the UN system, like the CSM.

The CSM, established in 2018 and comprising a small team from the DPPA, UNDP and UNEP, is intended to strengthen the UN's ability to address the linkage between climate and security, including by supporting the design of climate-related risk assessments, early warning systems and prevention and management strategies, and by helping to increase the evidence base. Internally, the UN Secretariat has made progress on multidimensional risk analysis—for example, in the context of the regional monthly review process, through which director-level representatives of the UN system regional divisions assess developmental, political, humanitarian and human rights situations to identify 'evolving' situations that warrant closer discussion by the Deputies Committee. The aim is to consider climate dimensions, where relevant, more regularly; strengthening data collection and analysis at country level is a priority for the CSM. To date, the CSM has not focused on supporting the PBC. After a start-up period, the CSM is now increasing its focus on providing technical support to UN country presences to incorporate climate-related security risks into analytical and planning processes, including where the Security Council has requested climate-risk assessments, like UNOWAS in the Sahel. Like the PBSO, however, without additional capacities the CSM may struggle to assume greater responsibilities regarding the PBC.⁸¹

At the same time, improved analysis and reporting are not ends in themselves. The UN Secretariat has ramped up risk assessments in response to such requirements in several recent Security Council mandates, but one diplomat noted: 'It's currently not clear what, operationally, needs to be done if, for example, a report by the SG [UN Secretary-General] says we have a conflict here and the effects of climate change are a serious factor.'⁸² However, the diplomat stressed that assessing whether and how to adjust UN responses can be done only once the information gap has been filled.⁸³ Even without a nudge from the 2020 review, the PBC's existing mandate to promote integrated, strategic and coherent approaches to peacebuilding and coordinate across the UN system arguably gives the commission a role in examining how the UN system can best respond to climate-related security risks that may affect particular countries, or to help interested climate-affected countries to mobilize support and attention.

Given debates over the respective mandates of different UN bodies on climate change-related issues, there may be value in member states better delineating the respective responsibilities of the different UN organs, while recognizing that there will be overlap and grey areas. Within the UN, the CSM has undertaken to roughly map out the climate-related activities of different UN departments, offices, agencies, funds and programmes. But better delineating the respective responsibilities and mandates of the member state bodies—that is, identifying which organ has responsibility

⁸¹ Interview with UN official no. 5, Apr. 2020.

⁸² Interview with PBC diplomat no. 15, May 2020.

⁸³ Interview with PBC diplomat no. 15, May 2020.



for which aspects of climate action by the UN—would depend on a decision by member states themselves, an unlikely prospect because of the political sensitivities around climate change as well as broader geopolitical tensions. In the absence of such delineation, the PBC could leverage its cross-pillar role to help to coordinate the different approaches across the UNFCCC, ECOSOC, the Security Council and other bodies, and to help to make conceptual linkages for delegations.

Broadening the Peacebuilding Commission’s advisory role

The PBC is mandated to provide advice to the Security Council, ECOSOC, the General Assembly and the Secretariat. Much of the PBC’s advisory role to date has focused on the Security Council. The PBC chair’s letter to the Security Council on UNOWAS in December 2019 was the first instance of the PBC providing advice on mandate renewal outside a CSC, and the first on a regional level.⁸⁴ The letter notes that the multidimensional drivers of instability in the Sahel, which include climate change, require a comprehensive and regional approach. The Security Council recognized the role of the PBC in promoting integrated responses by the UN system, encouraging ‘joint annual reporting’ to the PBC on UNOWAS and other UN bodies on implementation of UNISS.⁸⁵ The PBC should seek to further leverage its advisory role, for example, by playing a similar role on Central Africa through the UN Regional Office for Central Africa mandate.

The Security Council has recognized the role of the PBC in promoting integrated responses by the UN system

Beyond the Security Council, the PBC should explore with ECOSOC how to deepen consultation and advice beyond their annual joint meeting. In July 2020, for example, Canada was invited as PBC chair to brief the annual ECOSOC Management Segment on the agenda item ‘African countries emerging from conflict’. Canada has also raised the appointment of informal PBC coordinators to ECOSOC and the General Assembly (as currently exist to the Security Council) in the PBC’s annual 2020 workplan. The recommendation, previously raised by Colombia as PBC chair in 2019, was welcomed by the Secretary-General’s forthcoming report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace.⁸⁶

More creative use of briefers to provide a climate perspective

Tactically, PBC members could be bolder in their choice of briefers. Instead of relying on senior national government and UN officials, they could invite local government officials, community leaders and civil society organizations experiencing the intersection of climate and security on the ground, as well as research institutes and academics able to provide empirical data and analysis to complement and strengthen such testimony. Through their choice of briefers, PBC members could also ensure that a climate lens is applied to other relevant thematic discussions, such as gender, youth,

⁸⁴ PBC, ‘Letter of the Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission to the Security Council on the UNOWAS mandate review’, 12 Dec. 2019.

⁸⁵ UN Security Council, Statement by the President, S/PRST/2020/2, 11 Feb. 2020, p. 3.

⁸⁶ PBC, ‘Provisional annual workplan of the PBC, 2020’ (note 23); and United Nations, A/74/976-S/2020/773 (note 13).



drivers of inequality that have links to instability, and governance of natural resources. The PBC could also play a greater role in mobilizing attention to ‘non-security’ issues like climate adaptation—as was included in the last UNOWAS mandate on reporting to the PBC on UNISS.

Outside of the UN, the PBC’s annual meeting with the AU’s Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) affords another opportunity to deepen collaboration on climate-related security risks, both at the institutional level and with African member states.⁸⁷ The AUPSC has ‘stressed that natural disasters and climate change contribute to exacerbating the existing tensions among communities’ and emphasized the need for member states to reinforce measures to address effects of climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters, particularly in conflict-affected areas.⁸⁸

Regular exchanges of views on the impact of climate change on peacebuilding, and on lessons learned, including in the context of the AU’s Agenda 2063 and its Silencing the Guns initiative, would provide opportunities for deeper engagement between the AU and the UN. In addition to including

The PBC has gradually increased the attention given to climate-related security risks

climate-related risk factors as part of their exchange of views on country- and region-specific situations on the agendas of the two bodies, the PBC and the AUPSC could hold a thematic discussion on the impact of climate-related risks on peacebuilding on the continent of Africa more broadly. At the working level, since February 2020 the UN–AU joint task force has highlighted climate security as a challenge in the continent. The planned creation of a UN–AU climate cluster could further leverage the work of the CSM, enhance knowledge-sharing and synergize operational responses.⁸⁹

VI. Conclusions: Move slowly, steadily—and forward

The PBC has demonstrated a growing role as a forum for member state discussions on climate-related security risks in its own right. In recent years, it has gradually increased the attention given to climate-related security risks across a range of countries; engaged in joint meetings with ECOSOC; provided advice to the Security Council; and provided a forum for affected states and champions of this issue to make statements that call attention to the real-life linkages between climate change and other drivers of instability.

The PBC’s mandate is to work across the peace and security, development and human rights pillars of the UN; to bridge the Security Council, ECOSOC, the General Assembly and other organs of the UN; and to bring together relevant stakeholders from within and outside the UN system. This mandate makes the PBC well placed to focus attention on the multi-dimensional challenges that climate change poses to peace—and to promote multidimensional responses that bring together the disparate parts of the UN system and its wider circle of partners, from regional organizations and

⁸⁷ See e.g. African Union, ‘Press Statement of the 893rd meeting of the AU, 11 November 2019, dedicated to the annual interaction with the UN Peacebuilding Commission (UNPBC)’, Press release, 11 Nov. 2019 (updated 6 Feb. 2020). The annual meetings were formalized in 2018, so are still relatively new.

⁸⁸ African Union, Peace and Security Council, ‘Press statement of the 864th PSC Meeting on Natural and Other Disasters on the Continent’, Press release, 11 Aug. 2019.

⁸⁹ Aminga, V. and Krampe, F., ‘Climate-related security risks and the African Union’, SIPRI Policy Brief, May 2020.



international financial institutions, to civil society and national government. In fact, the PBC's emphasis on the principle of national ownership may make it uniquely positioned as a forum for states to seek international support in relation to emerging climate-related security challenges and to share lessons on how they are responding on an equal footing with their peers—by enhancing national sovereignty, rather than undermining it. While thematic discussions might be mired in debates on the extent to which climate change is caused by human activity, or whether a given UN body is an appropriate forum, the PBC has demonstrated that country- and region-specific debates are more effective in highlighting the consequences of climate change on peace, security and development—especially when raised by the countries concerned. Indeed, the active role the PBC has played in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in different regions has drawn attention to the relationship between pandemics and climate vulnerabilities, and underscored the value of the PBC as a platform for convening across the UN's traditional silos.

While the PBC has emerged as a central forum in its own right for discussing climate-related security risks, there is a danger that efforts to advance this agenda too quickly—or to view it as a stepping stone to greater Security Council engagement on the issue—will backfire. Several countries have used this opening to try to make a 'big push' on climate, calling for thematic discussion in the PBC or for it to develop a climate strategy akin to its strategy on gender.⁹⁰ Yet the majority of PBC members favour a more gradual, more creative approach, which they see as likely to prove more constructive in the long run. This approach would encourage more countries to seek support from the PBC in relation to climate and security, providing a larger base of 'lived experience' and narrowing the political space for climate-change sceptics.

In coming years, climate change will continue to amplify drivers of violence, displacement, inequality and marginalization; such risks are likely to become more prevalent and affect a growing number of countries. As the UN marks its 75th anniversary in 2020, many of its institutions—including the Security Council—are showing signs of strain and are struggling to adequately respond to, and stay relevant in, a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world. As one of the more recent additions to the UN system, the PBC has taken time to find its place amid the constellation of other, more powerful, more established, or more operational entities. As the UN system adapts to climate-related security challenges, and to the needs of member states and their societies, the PBC will have a critical role to play.

⁹⁰ PBC, 'Peacebuilding Commission's Gender Strategy', Report, 7 Sep. 2016.

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THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION AND CLIMATE- RELATED SECURITY RISKS: A MORE FAVOURABLE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT?

JAKE SHERMAN (IPI) AND FLORIAN KRAMPE (SIPRI)

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