

From Underrepresentation to Action: Rethinking Western Climate Security Strategies through Integration and Cooperation

Jurre Kok

Keywords

Climate Security, NATO / EU Strategy, Supranational Integration, Geopolitics, International Relations



Information Author

Jurre Kok (21) is a MA European Policy student at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), Co-Lead of the YCS Research Team, and board-member of Volt Utrecht. He is mainly interested in (geo)politics, political extremism, NATO/EU defensive strategies and climate security.

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Information YCST

Climate change will be one of the largest security threats in the (near) future. Yet, in recent years, little to no attention was paid towards climate change in the security domain. We understand the importance of supplying future decision makers with knowledge and skills to understand climate change and negate the challenges which it will bring. Hence, YCST was created in November 2021. The YCS Research Team was founded in September 2023, to further build upon this project. The Research Team gives young professionals and students the opportunity to write about climate security related topics and put their articles into public discourse.

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Introduction

The geopolitical escalations in the 2020s, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the war in Sudan and the (re)emergence of the escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, have resulted in a strengthening of transatlantic relations. The West began to rethink their defensive capacities and geopolitical topics were to some extent reintroduced into political discourse. Whilst the escalations decreased global stability in general and are humanitarian disasters, they did force the West to rethink their geopolitical and defensive capabilities and priorities.

Western inter- and transnational cooperation is deemed necessary, now more than ever. Support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) within member-states has increased, Western nations have raised their defensive budgets, and in general, support for (total) European disintegration has shrunk in the European Union (EU) member-states.¹ Most Western governments, politicians and other influential actors have realized that inter- and transnational cooperation is necessary to strengthen one's position in contemporary geopolitics, and secure a future in which democracies are still able to thrive without the fear for an autocratic turn and loss of self-determination.

'But we must do everything we can to keep Europe's future in our own hands. We must work to ensure a resilient European Union and a powerful NATO Alliance. Standing strong on the world stage. For our norms and values. Shoulder to shoulder with our European family in the most difficult of times' –
Mark Rutte (2022)

However, there is a need to approach current Western strategies with a critical perspective. The lack of long-term defensive strategies on the changing climate and its negative consequences, e.g. domestic political turmoil, water shortages and extreme temperatures, on societies within the climate hotspots – regions where the effects of climate change are most detrimental – can evolve into harmful security challenges in the (near) future. In the worst-case scenario, climate change can result in wars, massive migration, and destabilization of the contemporary world order. Concrete long-term policies to tackle the security problems of climate change is neglected within major Western strategies, such as the NATO 2022 strategic concept and the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.²

Although NATO enlarged its ambitions regarding climate security in recent reports,³ the overall underrepresentation of climate security within Western global strategies, external policies and geopolitical discourse is an unacknowledged issue. Although there is a rise in attention on climate security in recent reports, concrete policies and long-term plans regarding security should be worked on more intensively by policymakers and politicians within NATO and the EU-institutions to prepare the liberal-democratic⁴ world for future security threats related to climate change.

¹ Jon Henley, "Support for leaving EU has fallen significantly across bloc since Brexit," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2023.

² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022, Strategic Concept*, Madrid, June 29, 2022. & European Union External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*, 2022.

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Steps up Work on Climate Change and Security," *NATO*, July 12, 2023.

⁴ *Liberal-democratic* in this paper does not refer to the political ideology of liberalism, but it refers to the concept of liberal democracy: A system which emphasizes the importance of the separation of powers, independent judiciary, and checks and balances between the branches of governments.

Reasons behind the underrepresentation of climate security

There are different reasons behind the neglect of long-term climate security planning within major Western security strategies. Among others, predicting the exact consequences and horrific disasters of climate change is near impossible, and therefore the correct response regarding security would differ depending on the context. The different varieties in which the climate can change, and thus the different possibilities regarding natural consequences, is extremely hard to grasp precisely. On top of this, the geopolitical context may be extremely different in the (near) future and predicting the world order is an almost impossible task. A nuclear conflict still is a possibility – even if the contemporary zeitgeist treats this occurrence as a historic one – or China could destabilize due to its domestic economic situation,⁵ resulting in a strengthening of the United States (US) as the world hegemony.

In sum, the exact consequences of the changing climate are uncertain, the world order can change drastically in different ways, and predicting the future is thus an impossible task can be considered as an unwise investment of time, money, and research.

Nonetheless, even if the future scenarios are hard to predict, it should not be an argument for the neglect of climate security within defensive strategies. Exact scenarios are indeed impossible to sketch with absolute certainty, but one should prepare for multiple outcomes depending on the probability of the outcomes, the level of disastrous effects for society, and other factors. The West should not be underprepared for security threats related to the different harmful possibilities of climate change, only because there could be variable potential outcomes.

Another problem which long-term climate security planning faces, is the possible loss of domestic political power which can result in rising national populism. Advocating for investments in the (far) future – in which a broad portion of the voting citizens will not live to see the results of the investment – will probably not be perceived as a popular proposal by an extensive part of the electorate. A stupendous amount of people tend to vote for parties which promise short term improvements, while not thinking about the possible negative future consequences these contemporary political choices have on the next generations, as shown by, among others, the recent victory of PVV in the Netherlands and the popularity of Trump in the US even after all the controversies.⁶ The recent rise of illiberal anti-establishment parties and national populism in the West can result in a complete blocking of climate security related policies.

On the EU level, climate security related policy proposals can encounter huge obstacles as well. One of the biggest hurdles is the veto power of the heads of state within the European Council within certain policy fields. New legislation in these areas – e.g. the common foreign and security policy – can only be adopted with unanimous support of the Council. This intergovernmental reminiscence gives the leaders of the EU member-states the power to block any form of new policy agreed upon by the European parliament and governments of almost all EU member-states. The veto-power is used extensively by nationalist populist leaders such as Orbán to stop new policy proposals, even those which are perceived as essential. This political tool can form an immense danger for the implementation of a common climate security strategy by the EU in the near future, due to the politicization of the concept of climate change in contemporary politics.

In essence, predicting the precise consequences of climate change is impossible, and writing long-term policy is therefore extremely difficult. Advocating for investments in the far future will most likely not result in domestic political popularity, which gives national populist parties – who are

⁵ BBVA Research Department, *China Economic Outlook*, September 2023.

⁶ FiveThirtyEight, “Latest Polls, President: General Election,” ABC News, December 19, 2023.

opposed to liberal-democratic international cooperation in areas such as climate change and security – more political power to block climate security related policy proposals and strategies which are beneficial for Western democracies regarding their security, stability, geopolitical position, and prosperity in general.

Nonetheless, climate security deserves more attention in public and political discourse as stated by Ytze de Vries in the previous article.⁷ There is a necessity for long-term policies and strategies on climate security, and more time, money, attention in public discourse, and research should be given to the topic of climate security to provide a safer future for the next generations. At this moment, the West is insufficiently prepared for the impact of possible future scenarios of climate change and security-wise, strategies mostly deal with contemporary issues. The West should prepare for multiple future possibilities to protect interests and values such as democracy, free-speech, self-determination, and human rights.

This call for attention and concrete policies related to climate security should, however, (I) not be at the expense of contemporary Western security strategies, e.g. Ukraine and the Middle East among others, (II) not be at the cost of investments in the energy transition, and should (III) not be used as an excuse to cancel or halt climate change combatting policies. Climate security should, most certainly, not be used as an excuse or as an alternative for the current fight against the minimalization of the changing climate. If climate security – or adaptation – will be used as a reason to put an end to the fight against climate change, the worst-case security preparation(s) shall become implemented policies. The negative effects of climate change should be minimized, contemporary attention to Western security issues should not be neglected, whilst the West should simultaneously focus on long-term plans to combat future security threats related to the inevitable changing of the climate.

The first steps for solving the problem

To tackle this problem of neglect, one must first ensure that intern- and transnational cooperation – which is essential to combat problems which transcend national borders such as climate change – shall not suffer due to nationalist politicians and others who try to renationalize international relations. This renationalization is nonetheless an impossible task due to how globally intertwined and interdependent societies are on one another. Global problems are mostly being solved in national context, while these can only be solved effectively in a trans- and international setting. Climate change and geopolitical security issues are examples of problems which do not stop at national borders. Therefore, (I) NATO and EU membership should be put into the national constitutions of the member-states, and (II) the geopolitical knowledge of politicians, policy makers and the ‘common man’ alike, should be enlarged tremendously through education and a topic-shift in public discourse. Only then there will be a strong enough base – which is backed by a vast majority of the electorate – for a coherent long-term climate security strategy. This strategy and concrete policies would thus prepare the future generations for the negative security consequences of climate change, without domestic political destabilization through a risk of the rise of anti-establishment national populism.

Furthermore, (III) contemporary – as well as the next generation of – political leaders, policy makers, and other individuals with power should work inherently together to ensure a safe society in which the West is more prepared for the security consequences of climate change, and in which border-crossing problems can be tackled effectively. No matter the political ideology of the governing parties in Western states, differences should be set aside on the global stage in the name of common interests. Western governments should integrate supranationally and work more profoundly together to

⁷ Ytze de Vries, “Our vision: Climate-Security Leadership and Youth Engagement in 2027”, *Youth Climate Security Research Team* (January 2024).

implement policies which prepares the West for future transnational security challenges which are caused by climate change.

Supranational integration can be achieved through multiple ways. In terms of the European decision-making process (IV) the EU must get rid of the unanimity clause regarding the common foreign and security policy & common security and defence policy as soon as possible. The EU cannot prepare itself on future climate security issues when populist governments can veto bills and stop security preparations due to domestic political reasons, or other arguments perceived as valid by nationalist populists. In our current globalized world, where almost every nation is economically, culturally, and politically to some extent intertwined with one another, the EU and the West cannot fall back into merely intergovernmental cooperation and nostalgic nationalist promises by politicians who cannot realize their words without a catastrophic loss of geopolitical power, an economic downfall, and a rise of security threats to the Western liberal-democratic political system from within and without.

Conclusion

In essence, there is a neglect within Western trans- and international organizations regarding the negative security consequences of climate change. Long-term strategies concerning climate security should be prioritized more and realized through concrete policy proposals. The preparation on future climate related security threats should not be used to halt the energy transition, but should be implemented together with contemporary Western security strategies, and alter the general fight against climate change. The issues of climate change and climate security are border-crossing problems, and thus long-term policies and strategies can only be effective if they transcend national borders. To ensure an effective approach, the foundations for trans- and international cooperation should first be secured within the constitutions of Western nations. The geopolitical knowledge of politicians, policymakers and the 'common man' should be enlarged tremendously and Western political parties and governments with varying political ideologies should set aside their differences to work more profoundly together to prepare for future climate security threats. Lastly, the West should integrate supranationally, among others in the fields of security and energy, even if this means giving up national sovereignty. If these solutions are realized, the West can begin solving upcoming climate security challenges more effectively and strengthen safety and their geopolitical position in the future for the next generations.

Perspectives from other members of the YCS Research Team on the article

Ytze de Vries (25)

Graduate MSc Energy Science at Utrecht University, founder of the Youth Climate Security Talks and works at the Dutch ministry of Defense.

From a military perspective, addressing climate security within the geopolitical context is imperative for defining the roles of different security institutions. The geopolitical escalations outlined in Jurre's paper underscore the interconnectedness of security challenges and the necessity for a comprehensive approach. Climate change, with its potential to induce wars, mass migrations, and destabilization, must be integrated into strategic planning to ensure the military's readiness for diverse threats. The absence of long-term climate security planning in major Western strategies, such as NATO's 2022 strategic concept, highlights a critical gap that needs urgent attention. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of security institutions in combating the consequences of climate change is essential for fostering effective transnational cooperation and strengthening the global security architecture.

Marieke Jacobs (27)

MSc Earth Science & MSc Energy Science at Utrecht University, working-student at Defensity College

It seems to be typical for humanity to constantly look for boundaries. Not only in exploration in knowledge and technology, but also how much civilization can handle. To just act at the very last moment, when the urge of intervention becomes too high, just in time and sometimes just too late. I hope that the current problems we suddenly face in enormous amounts, such as the unusual high water levels in the Netherlands, wakes everyone up and show that we really reached to boundaries of a secure society. And that those who do not think about the far future, realize that an unsecure future may not be far.

Tor Lovell (21)

BA Philosophy, Ethics and Religion student at the University of Leeds

Jurre does well to acknowledge that it's unlikely for the public to vote for policies that concern the future rather than the present, unfortunately this way of thinking affects national and international decisions too. However, in approaching any ethical decision, such as climate policy, either one can take a consequentialist approach or a deontological one.

Consequentially, as Jurre explains, it is a near impossible task to predict the future of our climate situation and so present policy is difficult to form under these circumstances. But deontologically (thinking about the goodness/badness of the action, not the effect the action has), policy could be approached as the ethical act itself. It need not be completely specific to have an effect. Simply because we cannot know the future does not mean communities should not act now.

Catrin Snaith (24)

MA Intercultural Communication student at the University of Sheffield

When under threat, people tend to neglect the importance of cooperation and dialogue, as they focus on individual salvation. Imagine now, this phenomenon on an international scale. Little imagination is needed for this, as it is our current reality. States often act out of self-preservation, focusing only on issues that immediately affect them, with the concerns of others filtered out like white noise. It's easy to call for international cooperation. But when binary, nationalist schools of thought encourage us to adopt 'us' vs 'them' mentalities, we're kept separate from one another and our fight against common threats such as climate change are made all the harder.

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