

The green challenges of foreign policy

Tina Birbili, PhD
ELIAMEP, 15.6.2007

Climate change: the big challenge for the international community

One of the biggest challenges ahead for the international community is climate change. The big dilemma is: can climate change unite the international community, and set the course of avoidance of its consequences or will the international community fail to do so and deepen even more the lines of division and conflict in international relations? This is the question that we will have to answer. I will offer some thoughts on this issue.

1.1 billion people lack access to adequate and safe freshwater resources. More than 850.000 are undernourished. Food security may worsen as climate change increases the risk of harvest failure. Climate change may trigger conflicts over the redistribution of resources mainly land and water and cause major migratory movements.

Without resolute counteraction, climate change will overstretch the adaptive capacities of many societies. This may result in internal destabilization, in state failures especially in weak and fragile states, in interstate conflicts and finally in overstressing of the global system.

Classic security policy cannot cope with these new challenges, with these new threats to regional and international stability. Strategies for adaptation to climate change are emerging as key elements of preventive security policy.

The main parameters that threaten stability

There are many parameters that threaten stability.

1. Scarce resources may represent a potential for conflict. Environmental stress can increase the severity, duration and collateral impact of conflict. It can enhance existing instabilities and threats.
2. Wars and conflicts affect the environment in a way that transcends national borders.
3. Environmentally destroyed areas after extreme weather conditions, wars and conflicts set back economic and social development and worsen the building up of peace and stability in the respective region.
4. Poverty and the marginalisation both of groups within countries and of countries themselves, also represent a potential conflict risk. Wherever high population growth and density, resource scarcity and a low level of economic development occur, there is an increased risk of conflict.

5. Climate change limits a country's problem solving capacity. The result is that we see an increase in the number of weak, fragile and unstable states.
6. Increase in migration. It can be assumed that the number of environmental migrants will substantially rise in the near future due to the impact of climate change. In developing countries in particular, the increase in drought, soil degradation and growing water scarcity in combination with high population growth, unstable institutions, poverty or a high level of dependency on agriculture means that there is a particularly significant risk of environmental migration occurring and increasing in scale. Europe and North America must also expect substantially increased migratory pressure from regions most at risk from climate change. The social, economic and political ramifications of large numbers of environmental refugees could be profound and are increasingly becoming a reality with South Pacific island nations pursuing relocation options.
7. And finally, there will be more and more intensive conflict between the main drivers of climate change and the countries most affected. What sort of international compensation regime will be established to compensate for the countries that suffer most? What sort of equilibrium will be established between the newly industrialized countries and the poorer developing ones?

Integrating climate change within the foreign policy agenda

Achieving the consensus and commitment needed to tackle environmental challenges needs a shift in the way of thinking and policy making, ie positioning environmental problems with international dimension, such as climate change, into a broad policy context.

In 2003, the Greek Presidency took the initiative to create a common framework of action, which would promote the ideals and perspectives of the EU on environment and sustainable development within the context of a wider external European policy. This common framework of action was initially seen as a network of appointed experts or diplomats from the 25 Ministries of Foreign Affairs, who were able to communicate, exchange information and ideas on cross-cutting issues of sustainable development and environment integration in bilateral and multilateral negotiations. The initiative built upon the Cardiff process, ie the Strategy on Environmental Integration in the external policies of the General Affairs and External Relations Council. However, this network of diplomats, this green diplomacy network, has to be updated and upgrade its role.

No change is possible unless there is institutional buy in within the foreign policy community. This requires senior managers within Foreign Ministries to set the direction and provide a focal point within their institutions for pushing

the agenda forward. A diplomatic network willing to deliver and capable of doing so.

However, even this is not enough. Integration should be done at other policy fields as well.

- Climate change measures should be incorporated into development assistance. The more climate change advances, the more important adaptation strategies in the affected countries will become. And these must be supported by international development policy.
- Trade and investment should be pointing on low-carbon incentives. The market niche for green technologies is ever-growing.
- Sustainable development issues and the management of shared resources should be examined as being part of the various peace treaties and cooperation agreements.
- Foreign policy, via a multilateral system of governance and strong international institutions, should cope with climate change and promote strong collective action.

Policy recommendations

For tackling the global environmental challenges, such as climate change, the further development of the multilateral system is essential. Climate policy is a case: without constructive cooperation between countries and the new drivers of global change, it will not be possible to limit climate change in a way which avoids destabilizing society and limits threats to international security. Climate change thus poses a challenge to international security, but classic, military-based security policy will be unable to make, in and by itself, any major contributions to resolving the impending climate crises.

A climate-induced increase in the number of weak and fragile states or even the destabilization of entire subregions will overstretch conventional security policy. At international level, the focus will be on global diplomacy to contain climate-induced conflicts, as well as on the development of compensation mechanisms for those affected by climate change, global migration policy, and measures to stabilize the world economy.

- The Security Council of the UN must update its mandate in order to deal with these challenges as well.
- UNEP must be given a new and significantly upgraded role.
- The role of EU as a broker in international negotiations over foreign policy and climate change must be strengthened. The EU must take a leading role in global climate policy and convince both the USA and the newly ascendant Asian powers of the importance of concerted efforts to avoid dangerous climate change. Climate policy, energy policy, and a low carbon economy, offer ideal fields of action for Europe to play a pioneering international role.

References

- German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), 2007, *World in Transition: Climate Change as a Security Risk*, report no. 07/02e, 6.6.2007
Hein P., 2001, *The end of foreign policy?* The Royal Institute of International Affairs
IISD, 2007, *Climate Change and Foreign Policy*, June 2007