“State fragility in a suffocating world: the European Union in the age of climate-threatened national security & climate-amplified conflict”

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ABSTRACT

As climate change poses severe risks to societies, ecosystems and nations globally, it constitutes one of the most pressing existential threats for humanity and the planet. Despite how critical it is for populations worldwide, climate change has long been overlooked as a national security matter, and it has been primarily approached through an environmental and developmental lens. Nevertheless, climate change is identified today as a national security threat, and a critical “threat multiplier”; a factor that aggravates fragility and fosters tensions, ultimately amplifying other, existing threats. The European Union, exposed to severe climate change-driven effects domestically, as well as to the catastrophic aftermath of external climate disasters, shall exert bold leadership to address the triple climate-security-conflict nexus, both within and outside its borders, in order to safeguard the viability of a sustainable future for Europeans and the world, and actualize its geopolitical role in today’s fast changing global stage.

The paper examines this triple nexus and the EU’s response, regarding two groups of states:

1) the EU Member States, that have been for long disassociating climate action from national and European security, and,
2) fragile and conflict-affected states (FCSs); states in unrest with weak social, economic, and political institutions, which do not own the means and capacity to address climate change as a priority.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, and especially since the 2015 Paris Agreement, the EU has established itself as a global leader in the fight against climate change with the adoption of pioneering action plans and the strategic prioritization of the issue. Setting the ambitious, but imperative goal to achieve climate-neutrality by 2050, the EU’s climate action roadmap includes, among others:

- the European Green Deal, presented in 2019, that sets the Union’s lowering emissions targets for 2030 and 2050 (by 55% compared to the 1990s levels, and

in accordance to the net-zero scenario, respectively), as well as formulates the framework for the European green transition[1],
- the European Climate Law, that legislates the European Green Deal and legally binds the Member States and European institutions to actualize it at national and European level[2], and,
- the EU Adaptation Strategy, set out in 2021, that further bolsters action towards European climate resilience, focusing on smarter, faster and more systemic adaptation, as well as on European climate action internationally[3].

Building on the EU Adaptation Strategy, an integrated framework on an even more ambitious and cohesive EU approach to climate resilience and preparedness is expected to be launched in 2026. The new framework on European climate resilience and risk management will facilitate Member States in addressing climate change impacts, and protect Europe's "security and prosperity", as characteristically noted, emphasizing the undeniable link between climate and security.

All of the above, aim to climate-proof the future of the EU and its citizens, and safeguard its Member States and the continent as a whole from the catastrophic scenario that lies ahead, otherwise. Europe is exposed to severe climate hazards and alarmingly frequent extreme weather events, with certain regions constituting climate change hotspots: areas that are excessively vulnerable to and disproportionately affected by climate change. The European South and its Mediterranean shores, the Western Balkans, and parts of the Iberian peninsula are identified as such, already experiencing dystopian climate emergencies.

Outside the European borders and in the EU's immediate and broader neighborhood, climate change has catastrophic impacts due to a devastating combination of geography, vulnerability and unpreparedness; even though we are all exposed to climate change, not everyone is exposed to climate change equally. Consequences are felt severely disproportionately in FCSs, where active conflict, violence, political instability, and the lack or the complete absence of democratic institutions do not allow for robust climate planning and prioritization, as in the EU. Nevertheless, it is exactly in these cases where climate change can act as the critical threat multiplier that it is, with immediate, life-threatening consequences for people in such contexts: climate catastrophes further physically disrupt the daily life of populations that are already suffering in war; intensify

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[1] *The European Green Deal*. (n.d.-c). European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
[2] *European Climate Law*. (n.d.). Climate Action. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/european-climate-law_en
[3] *EU Adaptation Strategy*. (n.d.). Climate Action. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en

competition over already limited land and water resources in ethnically and socially fractionalized communities; and leave citizens exposed to further vulnerability and emergency.

It is critical to highlight here the fact that climate change has not yet directly acted as a conflict initiator itself, with researchers disagreeing over the course of the past two decades regarding the extent to which it has shaped conflict in the past, primarily due to statistical limitations[4]; nevertheless, today scholars agree that it significantly affects conflict by intensifying state fragility. With the Middle East and North Africa region being exposed to alarming environmental and climate conditions, where extensive droughts, water scarcity, and competition over crop and land availability co-exist with active armed conflicts, authoritarianism and poverty in many cases, millions of people are suffering from a vicious circle of violence, where climate disasters intensify security risk factors, and vice versa.

With critical such cases in its southeastern borders, the EU must be prepared to not only face, but rather prevent such disastrous conditions in the broader region in the upcoming years, as both a global climate leader that committed to take climate action worldwide, as well as a security and peace pioneer. Actualizing its geopolitical role as the leading democratic partner, the EU shall step up its regional climate response, in order to support vulnerable populations, reverse a disastrous climate future, strengthen diplomatic ties, and prevent crises that could impact both the EU and its neighbors, severely.

SECURITY, PEACE AND CLIMATE

DEFINITION OF FRAGILITY AND CONFLICT

According to the Fund for Peace and the Fragile States Index[5], defining "fragility" requires taking into consideration a series of characteristics, whose assessment leads to a spectrum of state fragility levels. These characteristics include economic, political, cohesion and social indicators that incorporate a broad set of risk factors (e.g., state legitimacy, security apparatus, economic decline, human rights) which can lead to state failure[6]. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) agrees that evaluating fragility requires a multidimensional framework[7], that assesses not only economic, political, security and social data, but environmental criteria, too.

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[4] *What does state fragility mean? | Fragile States Index*. (n.d.). https://fragilestatesindex.org/frequently-asked-questions/what-does-state-fragility-mean/
[5] *Global Data | Fragile States Index*. (n.d.). https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/
[6] *What does state fragility mean? | Fragile States Index*. (n.d.-b). https://fragilestatesindex.org/frequently-asked-questions/what-does-state-fragility-mean/
[7] https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/conflict-and-fragility.html

With the term "conflict" referring to violent realities of different extent and intensity (from smaller scale community disputes to civil and international wars), different conflict drivers are more or less prevalent in different societal and political contexts, as well as at community, regional, national, and international level[8]. What fuels conflict in one place does not necessarily constitute a disruptive factor of the same intensity in another. These dynamics affect resilient states, too; resilient states are not future-proof, and can foster pockets of fragility that can weaken institutions, create instability, and lead to violence[9].

With environmental drivers fueling tensions and violent outbreaks, too, various climate related factors weigh differently in different contexts, e.g., in an EU Member State, crop availability could cause aggression, that could drive protests and influence voting patterns, but in sub-Saharan Africa the same issue could fuel an underlying violent armed conflict over resources, especially in an ethnically fractionalized community. Decoding what shapes these realities requires the examination and broader understanding of the societal, environmental, historical and political conditions that produce them.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A NATIONAL SECURITY ASPECT

Climate change is an existential threat for humanity and the planet; however, it is a national security matter, as well. Identified as the single most important non-state-actor threat of the 21st century[10], climate change constitutes an inseparable aspect of national security, as it amplifies pre-existing tensions and security risk factors[11]. With the climate-conflict nexus being characterized by complex dynamics, it is important to emphasize again, that climate change does not initiate conflict, but rather affects and accelerates it; no causality between the two is found, but a rather complicated correlation shapes their relationship.

In the EU, climate change shakes the national and European security status-quo in ways that disrupt states' function, cause instability, and weaken institutions; it is a destabilizing factor that exposes citizens to unprecedented physical danger and challenges nations' disaster response capabilities. It also further intensifies competition

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[8] Analytics, F. (2022, January 12). Environment, fragility & conflict. *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/12/environment-fragility-and-conflict/

[9] https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/newclimateforpeace.pdf

[10] Simon, C., & Simon, C. (2023, November 9). *Climate change as a national security issue*. Harvard Gazette. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/04/john-kerry-discusses-relationship-between-climate-change-and-security/

[11] Tammi, A., & Battula, S. (2024, July 9). Understanding the interplay of fragility, conflict and climate change for education – Part 1. *Global Partnership for Education*. https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/understanding-interplay-fragility-conflict-and-climate-change-education-part-1

over resources and perplexes the next day for European security, in a world that changes rapidly and demands from the EU vigorous defense planning. With climate stresses and conflict dynamics worsening significantly in the recent years, the EU needs to address the climate-security nexus in a holistic way, rather than disassociating its two pillars[12].

In FCSs, both the lack of climate preparedness and the presence of violence are profoundly evident everywhere, in most cases. As already mentioned, climate change impacts FCSs disproportionately; these are the states that are both the least responsible for the climate crisis, as well as experiencing its effects most severely[13]. On-going security crises, combined with the lack of resources, weak political institutions, authoritarian agendas and government illegitimacy act cumulatively, do not allow for the implementation of any climate resilience strategy, and are further deepened when a climate catastrophe hits. Security factors are exacerbated in such fragile contexts, increasing the risk of conflict and violence.

Climate-proofing will contribute to safeguarding states from preventable security crises, both in the EU and FCSs. Approaching the climate-security nexus in an integrated manner presents the opportunity to effcetively address both of its aspects.

THE CLIMATE-SECURITY-CONFLICT NEXUS IN THE EU & FCSs

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU is positioned favorably with respect to the climate-security nexus, compared to other regions around the globe; all of the EU Member States are ranked among the 60 most secure states and the 70 most well-prepared nations to address climate change-related challenges, globally, as of 2023[14]. Despite the newly emerging security threats, the EU remains among the most democratic and peaceful entities in the world; and despite the climate emergencies that the EU is already facing, its Member States are leaders in the fight against climate change. However, this does not mean that the EU is secure in the face of neither the distinct nor the combined challenges that the modern era of climate-threatened national security poses; as both the post-Cold War well-established security architecture shifts vastly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and climate conditions worsen, the EU shall adopt a boldly integrated climate-security strategy, that does not replace, but rather complements existing policies.

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[12] https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-eus-triple-nexus-challenge-climate-conflict-democracy?lang=en

[13] https://unfccc.int/news/conflict-and-climate

[14] *Climate Change is Affecting Geopolitics – Not Just the Other Way Around*. (2025, February 19). DGAP. https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/climate-change-affecting-geopolitics-not-just-other-way-around

With the EU Climate Change and Defense Roadmap launch in 2022[15], the EU has recognized climate change's role as a threat multiplier, pinpointing the security and defense challenges that it poses to Europe and the world. Global instability due to climate change and the need for strategic developments regarding future defense and operational capabilities were recognized as critical, while strong partnerships at multilateral level, within the UN and NATO frameworks, as well as through bilateral dialogue, were identified as inseparable pillars in order to upscale and actualize European climate-security ambitions.

Defense capabilities

Climate change affects the European security and defense mechanisms in unprecedented ways, challenging military personnel and resources, as well as compromising readiness mechanisms' capacities. During the last decade, armed forces and military personnel have been increasingly frequently asked to serve in the front lines across the EU, when climate disaster hits. The European External Action Service (EEAS) released its first report on climate, defense and security in 2022, emphasizing the significant role of national armed forces in climate-related crises, as first responders, continent-wide[16]. The same report asks the EU Member States to develop national plans that will prepare national armed forces to respond to climate disasters. Furthermore, climate change impacts are significant to the military system itself; physical risks to military infrastructure and supply chains (e.g., due to sea-level rise, and extreme weather events)[17], disruption of operations, and military plans' risk exposure[18], are characteristic of how the military is vulnerable to climate disasters.

Nevertheless, the EU's climate-security crisis is multidimensional and worsening. Influenced by multiple factors that exacerbate each other's effects, this new European reality demands precautious action and policy reformations not only on climate adaptation and defense, but on areas such as migration, too.

Migration policy

Climate change contributes to the uprooting of populations globally, either by intensifying pre-existing conditions or as the direct result of extreme weather events. Europe constitutes the potential lifeline for climate-displaced populations, especially from MENA, which is expected to experience significant climate-related consequences in the future, even in a net-zero scenario. With

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[15] *The EU' climate change and defence roadmap*. (n.d.). EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-climate-change-and-defence-roadmap_en

[16] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/progress%20report%20public.pdf

[17] Cho, R. (2023, October 17). *Why climate change is a national security risk*. State of the Planet. https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2023/10/11/why-climate-change-is-a-national-security-risk/

[18] https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/07/europe-defence-build-climate-dual-use/

more than 376 million people being displaced due to climate-related disasters globally since 2008, and 32.6 million people being climate-displaced in 2022 alone[19], it becomes evident that nations should prepare now in order to be ready to address migration flows, with the EU being no exception. Utilizing the lessons from the 2015 refugee and migration crisis, the EU ought to plan in advance and be ready to handle the possibility of a climate-induced migration crisis in the near future. With the probable gateways to Europe, such as the European Mediterranean shores, being climate hotspots experiencing intensified climate stress themselves, the planning must be robust, showcase and apply European solidarity in practice. At the same time, this possibility should counteract and bolster the EU's actions to support its neighbors' efforts towards climate resilience.

Ultimately, climate policy and diplomacy are inextricable elements of the next day of European security[20], highlighting the fact that European leaders must understand that "hard" security purposes do go hand-in-hand with climate readiness and resilience. Investing in climate security does not divert attention or resources from defense priorities, but rather armors them, and vice versa. The dilemma between investing in defense capabilities or climate resilience is a false conflict.

FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED STATES

With 1 in 5 countries in the world being classified as FCSs, 1 billion people globally and 43% of the world's poor are currently citizens of fragile nations[21] that do not hold the capacity to defend their citizens in the face of climate change and climate-induced disasters. As state fragility interacts with climate change, FCSs are exposed to severe risks, and, by definition, are not prepared or well-positioned to address them. Despite not acting as a conflict initiator, climate change creates the conditions that exacerbate security risks, put pressure on weak systems, and, ultimately, intensify populations' hardship.

With environmental shocks acting as compounding factors, the climate-conflict nexus in FCSs is fundamentally shaped by climate-fragility risks, such as resource competition, extreme weather events and disasters, transboundary water management, sea level rise and coastal degradation. Despite the lack of causality, reality reveals the dramatic

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[19] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI(2021)698753_EN.pdf

[20] *21st century diplomacy: Foreign policy is climate policy*. (2020b, October 21). Climate-Diplomacy. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/cooperation/21st-century-diplomacy-foreign-policy-climate-policy

[21] Jaramillo, L., Cebotari, A., Diallo, Y., Gupta, R., Koshima, Y., Kularatne, C., Lee, J. D., Rehman, S., Tintchev, K. I., & Yang, F. (2023). Climate Challenges in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States. Staff Climate Notes, 2023(001). Retrieved Jan 13, 2026, from https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400252082.066

conditions that FCSs are facing; as of June 2025, 16 of the top 25 countries that are the most vulnerable and less prepared to face climate-related impacts are also among the top 25 FCSs[22]. This striking fact emphasizes the urgency for FCSs to adapt and become climate-proof now, as well as the robust international support that they need in order to do so.

Plethora of data highlight the criticality to act. During the 2004-2014 decade, 58% of the climate disaster-related deaths occurred in the 30 countries that were the most affected by conflict and fragility; this number is expected to rise in the face of more severe and more frequent climate disasters in the upcoming years. By 2060, the median FCS is expected to experience 61 days/year of temperatures above 35°C, which will create devastating living conditions and exacerbate health risks for the exposed populations, heavily impact the agricultural sector, and lead to limited access to safe drinking water and sanitation. In a higher emissions scenario, conflict deaths in the median FCS could increase by 8.5%, with the number rising to 14% in FCSs that face extreme temperature increase specifically. It is recorded that 3 times as many people in FCSs are affected by extreme weather events every year than in other countries, while 10% of internal displacement is the direct result of climate disasters. At the same time, the cumulative GDP losses are estimated at 4% after 3 years of a disruptive extreme weather event in an FCS, compared to 1% in other countries.

Two striking cases close to the European southeastern borders testify to the urgency to support those who go through the insufferable combination of conflict and climate disaster. Recent floods in Gaza and climate change in Syria both outline how the already agonizing daily life of vulnerable populations at war becomes unbearable, when it is further exacerbated by —otherwise preventable— implications of climate change.

> Floods in Gaza intensify Palestinians' suffering
> Recent extreme precipitation in December, led to severe floods that overflowed tents in Gaza, serving as temporary humanitarian shelters for Palestinians. As a result of the ongoing devastating war, buildings in Gaza are almost entirely destroyed, with more than 1.5 million Palestinians currently living in tents[23], and —in addition to the horrific conflict— are severely exposed to extreme weather phenomena, that are the direct result of the intensified climate conditions in the region. The UNRWA Commissioner-General, Philippe Lazzarini, precisely

[22] *Overview*. (n.d.). World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview#1
[23] Tlozek, E., & Yazbeck, C. (2026, January 12). *Gazans beg for shelter as winter storms batter millions and Israel limits aid*. ABC News. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-01-13/gazans-beg-for-shelter-as-winter-storms-batter-millions/106205330

described the devastating compounding effect of the floods: “More rain. More human misery, despair and death”[24].

The alarming assessment of climate change implications in Syria

Almost 15 years after the beginning of the Syrian civil war, humanitarians and experts have thoroughly assessed the impacts of climate change in the country, with findings revealing the climate-amplified despair of the Syrian people. The war left no possibility for any climate change adaptation strategy, resulting to further worsening of every aspect of civilians’ daily life: the destruction of critical infrastructure left Syrians across the country with no access to safe drinking water; rising temperatures and extensive droughts ripped Syrian farmers of their only chance to earn a decent living, leading families to abandon their land; and, the overall unbearable conditions have intensified even internal displacement in the country[25].

WHAT’S NEXT?

With government commitments globally falling far short of what is required in order to achieve the 2050 net-zero goals[26], and conflict and violence being on the rise[27], the EU must galvanize its strategic plans and take even bolder action towards safeguarding a sustainable future for all. As the world is shaken by the chaotic combination of climate crisis and conflict, the EU must upscale its integrated response with respect to the climate-security nexus, and deliver tangible results both at home and for its neighbors who expect that Europeans invest their expertise and resources for the region’s prosperity.

A SECURE AND CLIMATE RESILIENT EU

- The development of a roadmap for an integrated climate-proofing, European security is urgent; this framework should address gaps, aiming to strengthen capacity, while climate change needs to be dynamically integrated in foreign and security policy. The 2026 expected framework on European climate resilience and risk management proposes a hopeful solution, and should galvanize a cohesive climate-security European startegy. Dual-technologies for climate resilience and security should be prioritized; building such solutions in Europe to

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[24] https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-commissioner-general-gaza-more-rain-more-human-misery-despair-and-death

[25] *Syria: Facing the dual challenge of climate change and conflict*. (n.d.). OCHA. https://www.unocha.org/news/syria-facing-dual-challenge-climate-change-and-conflict

[26] United Nations. (n.d.). *Net Zero Coalition | United Nations*. https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition

[27] United Nations. (n.d.-a). *A new era of conflict and violence | United Nations*. https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence

serve defense purposes and enhance climate security are key aspects of both EU security and societal resilience.

- Synergies and partnerships are critical; collaborations at multilateral, bilateral and regional levels are inextricable aspects of delivering results. Both the UN and NATO are already EU's key partners on the issue, while the EU is also partnering with multiple regional organizations, such as the African Union and the League of Arab States[28]; these partnerships need to be reinforced, in order to address issues of both regional and global interest.
- Regarding climate-induced displacement, the European Commission has recognized climate change as a driver for migration, but a concrete definition, as well as an international legal framework, are still missing. The EU shall lead the efforts in defining the climate refugee status, and exert bold leadership in formulating a blueprint regarding climate refugees' rights, through the UN.

ADAPTATION AS A PEACE BUILDING TOOL, AND GREEN FUNDING IN FCSs

Investing in peace, climate action, and stronger democratic institutions go hand-in-hand and are complementary aspects of building resilient societies. Among others, adaptation and green funding propose significant opportunities for FCSs to address climate, peace and fragility.

- Climate adaptation strategies are urgently needed, and they can also provide the space for peace building pathways; climate solutions are by definition inclusive, and can offer the opportunity to fractionalized societies in FCSs to come together in order to defend themselves in the face of an external threat, such as climate change. Integrated climate adaptation can act as a peace building tool, enhancing intra- and inter-community relationships and trust, contributing to the resolution of tensions. The EU can support inclusive processes through EEAS across MENA, encourage Member States to lead bilateral discussions with nations in the region, and help to build trust and networks even between conflicting groups, government bodies and people[29]. Climate resilience and adaptation should finally be embedded into peace and security processes, through peace talks, ceasefire and peace agreements; the EU must uphold this provision through diplomacy in multilateral organizations.
- Green finance should be facilitated and prioritized for FCSs through global and regional mechanisms, as it constitutes those nations' best chance for climate

[28] *Climate change - a priority for EU's security and defence policies*. (n.d.). EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/climate-change-priority-eus-security-and-defence-policies_en
[29] *The climate change-conflict connection - The current state of knowledge*. (2020, January 22). Climate-Diplomacy. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/conflict/climate-change-conflict-connection-current-state-knowledge

adaptation and resilience. Within this context, the EU, the world's biggest contributor of green finance, shall bolster its support towards FCSs, and monitor progress, too; at the same time, the EU owns the diplomatic leverage to advocate for inclusive green financing processes, as well as for reforms that will facilitate sustainable finance flows towards FCSs.

CONCLUSION

State security and fragility interact with climate change through climate disasters, threatening both FCSs and the resilient EU Member States. Fragility and conflict intensify climate vulnerability; at the same time, climate change exacerbates conflict drivers, as it amplifies competition over resources, leads to climate-forced migration and poses physical risks to societies and critical infrastructure. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, and as a compounding fragility factor; security and climate change end up creating a vicious circle of vulnerability and instability, where each magnifies the effects of the other. Successfully addressing the climate-security-conflict nexus requires holistic solutions, that include broad synergies among stakeholders, adaptation strategies as peace building tools, enhanced climate funding to FCSs, climate-proofing national security through integrated frameworks, the advancement of dual-solutions, and better preparation in the face of realities, such as climate-induced forced displacement.