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Climate change before the UN Security Council: head in the sand?

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The Current Column

of 25 July 2011

Climate change before the UN Security Council: head in the sand?

Bonn, 25 July 2011. What effects is climate change having on food security? What security implications does the rise in sea levels have for island states and coastal countries? On the initiative of the German presidency of the UN Security Council these and other questions were considered in an all-day debate in New York on 20 July 2011. However, the more than 65 states who made statements during this open debate took an almost greater interest in whether the Security Council was in fact the right place for a discussion of this kind. After lengthy deliberations the 15 Council members were able to agree on a presidential statement, in which they cautiously acknowledged that climate change might have security implications. This fell well short of what the President of the small island state of Nauru had called for in an urgent appeal to the international community, the rise in sea levels being a direct threat to his country. Western states (including the United States) had similarly hoped for a stronger statement. But an outcome of this kind reflects both the misgivings felt by many developing countries about a Security Council that is dominated by the West and their suspicion that the West's promises regarding development and the climate will not be followed by deeds. Emerging economies, such as China, with its own specific interest in the climate negotiations, but Russia, too, were able to take advantage of this. They prevented the Council, the body responsible for world peace and security, from sending out a far more alarming message to the current climate negotiations. Such a message could, after all, have been used to increase the pressure on those "climate foot-draggers", the USA and China.

The implications of climate change for security policy

While climate change is first and foremost an environmental phenomenon, it has direct or indirect effects on economic and social development and human rights and is a threat to peace, security and stability in the international system. Risk analyses predict, among other things, that existing conflicts between states over the use of, say, trans-boundary rivers may be exacerbated by climate change and increase internal and interna-

tional tensions. Nor can new conflict situations - as a consequence of storms, floods or environmentally induced migration - be ruled out, as the report of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) plausibly demonstrated as early as 2007.

Security Council and climate change – a difficult relationship

In April 2007 when the United Kingdom initiated the Security Council's first debate on the security implications of climate change, the two leading groupings of developing countries had their doubts. Not only were there accusations that the debate on climate change was an attempt by the industrialised countries to distract attention from their historical responsibility for the majority of anthropogenic greenhouse gases; both the Group of 77 plus China (G77) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) referred in a letter to their concern that the Security Council was venturing into the General Assembly's and Economic and Social Council's areas of competence. The Security Council, it was said, did not have the professional competence to consider climate change; not was it regarded as the right decision-making place for extensive participation leading to widely acceptable proposals. And some voices are warning against the "securitisation" of the complex phenomenon that is climate change. Although associating climate change and security policy does not necessarily lead to the application of friend-enemy schemata, answers with a short time horizon, military force or other classic security measures, that is precisely what is feared.

Change of portents in 2011...

This year there was reason to assume that the headwind which blew so strong in 2007 would have abated by now. That the global climate is changing rapidly and fundamentally is now hardly disputed, nor is there much doubt about the security implications. However, predictions regarding the highly complex and multifactorial causal chains remain difficult. Furthermore, in June 2009, following an initiative by the small island states, the General Assembly adopted a consensus resolution inviting all UN bodies to consider the security implications of climate

change that fall within their terms of reference.

When the German government tried to have climate change again put on the agenda, not only did it receive the backing of the western members of the Security Council, it was also able to convince China, Russia and even the non-permanent members India, Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil. Germany repeatedly emphasised that the debate in the Security Council should not in any way take the place of the on-going climate negotiations. Nor was the object to have the Council take direct action; on the basis of its mandate to prevent conflicts, it should concern itself solely with aspects of climate change relevant to crisis and security.

... and a small change

Many countries felt that a climate debate in the Security Council was in itself more than enough and that the Council should take action only in the event of actual threats. As Russia and China in particular rejected any such outcome as the presidential statement sought by Germany, it was still unclear on the morning of the Security Council's meeting whether the declaration would materialise. A document of this kind is not binding, but it

does carry diplomatic weight and requires the approval of all 15 Council members. The Pacific island states responded by demanding that the Security Council be aware of its responsibility and recognise climate change as a threat to international peace and security; a new special representative should also report regularly on threats posed by climate change, and it should be assessed whether the UN system was capable of reacting to a crisis of such magnitude. Despite numerous declarations of solidarity with the island states, most countries were not prepared to put these proposals into effect; they avoided legitimising further, let alone regular, activities by the Security Council. The Secretary-General alone is now called upon to take account of climate aspects in his future reports to the Council. In his speech the President of Nauru urged the traditional and new powers in the Security Council not to put their heads in the sand. Whether the declaration that has now been adopted is a sign of heads being withdrawn from the sand will become clear principally in the next round of climate negotiations in Durban at the end of the year.



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