

The nexus between climate and security; the warning signs are flashing red

Opening statement by General (retired) Tom Middendorp at “Sustainability in Europe: The State of Play”, at the European Parliament in Brussels on October 15, 2019.

Tom spoke on behalf of the International Military Council on Climate and Security and the Clingendael Institute.

Note to editors: Please check against delivery!

Thanks to the president of GLOBE EU for introducing me, and of course to GLOBE EU and its partners for inviting me to share my thoughts with all of you for the opening of this event.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Most of us grew up in a period of peace and increasing prosperity. A kind of golden age. And we got used to it. We tend to take it for granted.

But we cannot.

In dozens of conflict areas I have seen risks in many shapes and forms. It gave me a better understanding of the dynamics and the root causes of conflicts.

And looking at our current environment, I am afraid that we are facing a threat of existential proportions.

Let me stress that I am not a politician, nor a climate activist.

I am here as a security expert and as the Chairman of the International Military Council on Climate and Security. A council consisting of a fast-growing group of concerned senior security experts and research institutes.

We believe that climate change might well be the biggest game changer of this century.

A game changer that will have repercussions that go *beyond* environmental degradation.

A game changer that is also a matter of national security.

(...)

I first started realizing the potential impact of climate change in 2009, when I was commander of a multinational taskforce in Uruzgan province, in the south of Afghanistan.

We were facing increasing tensions in Chora, a district in the area.

The Taliban was threatening to overrun the town and take control of it.

We wanted to protect the local population and ended up in two days of harsh fighting against hundreds of Taliban fighters.

In the end we won the fight. But we didn't solve the problem.

The tensions remained. And could flare up again at any moment.

It took us several months to find out what the **real issue was. A lack of fresh water.**

It was the **scarcity of water** that caused the tensions and allowed the Taliban to establish their footprint.

After mediating that complex problem, the situation in Chora stabilized, and the valley became more secure.

Children went to school. And farmers could sell their merchandise at the market.

I learned back then, how important it is to understand the root causes of conflicts and instability.

And I learned that lesson over and over again in other conflict areas, like Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Mali.

Our changing climate acts as a threat multiplier. Failed harvests, caused by extreme drought, can lead to local unrest.

This is something we have seen in Syria, for instance.

The core factor behind the Syrian conflict was of course political dictatorship, poor governance and economic mismanagement...

But prior to the catastrophic civil war, Syria experienced its worst years of drought on record not provided for in the national agricultural policy, resulting in devastating crop failures.

Farmers were therefore forced to relocate to cities where they couldn't find work. And youngsters became more susceptible to extremism.

It is precisely in these urban peripheries that the first protests began, which evolved into the civil war.

A civil war, with far-reaching regional and international consequences, as we all know now.

Including the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War...

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know there is no easy cause to pinpoint when it comes to conflict and insecurity, but many studies show that climate change does contribute significantly.

And it is easy to understand why.

No rain. No crops.

No crops. No food.

And no food – or soaring food prices at best – means civil unrest.

And you can't blame these people who are struggling to provide for their families.

Their only options are to migrate to better places or look for alternative sources of income.

And this is exactly what makes them vulnerable to the influence of extremist recruiters and organized crime, who offer them work and food.

Joining an armed group is sometimes the only option available for young people around the world.

As we now see happening in Somalia, in Sudan and in the Sahel region.

These regions can be seen as the true 'canaries in the coalmine'; they are the warning signs of what is to come in other vulnerable parts of the world.

(...)

And that is also why I'm so worried.

With just one degree of temperature rise, we are experiencing the first effects of our changing climate. And already the impact is profound.

As we speak...

- We are consuming 50% more natural resources on a yearly basis than our planet can provide;
- We experience devastating category 5 hurricanes and wildfires that were supposed to happen only once every hundred years;
- The Arctic ice sheet is now losing almost a billion tons of ice every single day, opening up a new geopolitical arena;
- Accelerating sea-level rise and flooding threaten island nations, and coastal and Delta areas;
- More than half of the world population live in urbanized areas, often located in these coastal areas or along rivers and already facing drinking water shortages;

And as if that's not enough, we are experiencing at the same time:

- Worsening droughts and floods that are reducing food production and displacing millions of people;
- A world population that is expected to increase by one third over the next thirty years, further increasing the stress on natural resources;
- And record high temperatures threaten to render areas of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, North Africa and South Asia uninhabitable.

So, looking at this from a security perspective we can only conclude that climate change:

- multiplies and exacerbates existing threats to security and has the potential to destabilize otherwise functioning countries;

- threatens critical infrastructure;
- will set hundreds of millions of people on the march and might well become the primary cause of migration;
- leads to more natural and humanitarian disasters;
- and will lead to new geopolitical tensions between superpowers, with the melting of the Arctic and increasing resource shortages. After all, water might well become the new oil.

I am afraid that this is the crisis we face. This is the world we are creating for our children.

And this is why I believe the warning signs are flashing red.

Why I can only conclude that climate change is a concrete and existential threat to humanity.

To our very own existence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The former French statesman Georges Clemenceau once famously said, that 'War is too important to be left to the generals'.

I would say we can't leave climate change just to environment ministries. It is a whole-of-society problem requiring whole-of-society answers.

We need everybody to act, including the EU. To prevent climate change from worsening, to adapt to the already occurring impact of climate change and to improve response mechanisms for what is yet to come.

For the people who suffer from the impact of climate change. For our children and grandchildren; for future generations.

And that requires all of us to rise above political and national agendas;

To look further ahead than the next quarterly journal or the next election period.

To take drastic preventive – and proactive actions.

Because our success lies in our collective ability to act.

Or, like the former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown once aptly said:

'We cannot compromise with the earth; we cannot compromise with the catastrophe of unchecked climate change, so we must compromise... with one another.'

Thank you.

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