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European Militaries in the New Climate Reality

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At the Council of the EU, 16 November 2021: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on how NATO-EU cooperation should include the security impact of climate change. Source: North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

SYNOPSIS

As the effects of climate change become more destructive, militaries have been increasingly called upon to participate in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations — even in Europe where this has not traditionally been their role. In order to maintain their readiness to face the long-term threats of climate change, militaries must continue to integrate climate security into defence planning.

COMMENTARY

Climate change is among the great threats facing the world today. With [each of the last four decades being successively warmer than any preceding decade since 1850](#), global warming is contributing to increased rainfall, increased drought, and rising sea levels around the world. This in turn increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, heightening the risk of converging disasters.

Covid-19 has demonstrated the difficulties faced by states in managing multiple disasters simultaneously. As disasters increase and climate security becomes a growing topic of national concern, security actors including militaries are likely to take on a bigger role in the HADR space. As such, the need to build military readiness in an increasingly complex operating environment is becoming very urgent.

Military Response in HADR Operations

As seen with [the inclusion of militaries as first responders and logistics support](#) in most national responses to Covid-19 globally, militaries in HADR operations are often the most active during the response phase of disaster management. In particular, their roles as organised manpower, logistics suppliers and essentially, reserve personnel, have proved critical for governments to fill gaps in their responses. This has been demonstrated in the use of [military medical equipment and personnel to ease the strain on public healthcare](#) during national responses to Covid-19.

Even in Europe where civil disaster response mechanisms are traditionally used, militaries are now being called upon during disaster response as the effects of these disasters outstrip the capacity of civil mechanisms. For example, during the heavy floods that affected Belgium, Germany, France and Luxembourg in July 2021, militaries were a key part of the response. Even with the activation of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, the scale of the disaster was such that there was a need for military involvement. [Germany triggered its “military disaster” alarm](#), a rare move that lifted the tight post-war restrictions on domestic deployment. In Belgium, the military conducted rescue operations and deployed [military engineers to work on infrastructure construction and reconstruction](#).

Climate Security in Europe

The European Union (EU) and its member states have long recognised the link between climate change and security, advocating for action both internally and on the international stage. Prominently included in policies and strategic meetings such as the [2016 Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy](#), and the 2018 high-level meeting on “Climate, Peace, and Security” hosted by then-High Representative Federica Mogherini, climate change has been acknowledged as a “threat-multiplier” for its role in exacerbating underlying tensions including forced migration and conflict over resources, as well as in increasing the need for HADR operations in conflict settings.

By now, most defence ministries and related international security organisations have already acknowledged their role in climate security. Even in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), [climate change has been tabled as an issue for discussion](#)

[on multiple occasions](#) since 2007, when the then-chair the UK sponsored the first UNSC debate on climate change. Attention on climate change has particularly increased since 2017, with [Germany's focus on climate security](#) during its time as a non-permanent member from 2019–2020.

With the risks of intensifying and/or converging disasters increasing and militaries more likely to be called upon, they are also likely to be more greatly overstretched, further eroding readiness. Militaries must therefore adapt to operate on a planet with warming temperatures, extreme weather conditions, converging disasters, and in a potentially more volatile operating environment.

Building Military Readiness for Climate Change

For defence forces to build military readiness, it is necessary that they move beyond simply reacting to disasters to building a proactive disaster management strategy — to plan for the future. There is a need to develop a deep understanding of how climate change is likely to affect not just the security environment in which they operate, but also their strategies, personnel, bases, installations and equipment — as was discussed during the [2019 informal meeting of the EU defence ministers chaired by High Representative Mogherini](#). As such, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the EU national militaries should analyse their current capabilities and how these “match up” to likely future scenarios, including climate-degraded increases in complex HADR operations. The results of these analyses should then be used to do scenario-based planning — as is already [being used by various defence forces and international organisations](#) — to assess military readiness and eventually, integrate climate security into national security strategies.

Security cooperation is another key component of building military readiness. This is critical when managing the effects of climate change which are not constrained by geographical boundaries. Only when states cooperate with one another, will they be able to build and maintain their resilience to the changing climate. One such example is the [EU Climate Change and Defence Roadmap](#). Endorsed in 2021, this roadmap integrates climate change into the EU's civil and military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mandates. This allows for long-term climate change planning and implementation during EU missions which will facilitate smooth multinational HADR operations and further the climate security agenda in the EU. This roadmap can be similarly replicated by other defence forces and multilateral organisations, accelerating the practice of considering climate security risks in setting the tone and developing plans for future disaster risk management.

As global temperatures continue to rise and weather events grow more extreme in the region, European militaries and defence organisations are increasingly likely to be called upon during complex HADR operations. It is the job of the militaries — in their roles as responders and strategists — to acknowledge the nature of these climate-related security risks, ensure military readiness in order to enhance their capacity and as such, plan for a constantly changing climate reality.

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