

NATO and Climate Change: a crossroads between adaptation and awareness

WRITTEN BY IMMACOLATA CIOTTA

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Introduction

Anthropocene is the name of the current geological era, in which humanity acts on the planet as a geophysical force (Stromberg, 2013). Human adaptability to the new era consists of the ability to generate new tools that can navigate technological challenges, ingrained habits of thought and the fabric of everyday life, and to describe the disproportionate influence humans exert on their environment and global ecology (Caprioglio, 2019). From this narrative, the defence sector is not exempt. This is reflected in the process of adapting to new challenges has caused NATO's focus to be broadened to include risks arising from climate change. Although the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept mentions climate change, the Atlantic Alliance has only recently begun to address the issue in a more concrete way. In fact, the 2021 NATO Action Plan for Climate Change and Security identifies the climate problem as a threat multiplier. Moreover, it recognises how the effects of this multiplier also affect the effectiveness of military capabilities and influence the behaviour of states, contributing to increased instability and regional competition. Finally, the effects include increased fragility in post-conflict contexts, to the detriment of vulnerable population groups often affected by massive migratory movements.

The issue of NATO's role in responding to climate change was addressed during the negotiations for the new NATO Strategic Concept 2022. At the NATO summit in Madrid, the Alliance recalibrated its priorities by placing, for the first time, both the political and military sides in agreement 'on the marching order' to keep the climate issue very high on the agenda and to avoid downgrading it compared to other, equally pressing security issues.

NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan

Climate change is identified as a threat multiplier. Indeed, it affects NATO security, operations and missions. This identification is certainly linked to the impact that climate change has on the operational environment, contributing (as a significant factor) to exacerbate its volatility and instability.

Although the most significant recognitions of the link between security and climate change are recent, NATO has a much longer history in broader terms with the topic. In order to sketch out an evolution, it is appropriate to recall some salient steps in the Alliance's history. The first recognition of environmental challenges dates to 1969, institutionalised with the creation of the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS). Furthermore, the 2010 Strategic Concept listed climate change as a security challenge for the first time (NATO, 2010). Although these two steps are fundamental, a more structured and effective advancement did not occur until March 2021, with the approval of the Climate Change and Security Agenda. Specifically, the Agenda envisages a comprehensive approach, aimed at increasing the Alliance's awareness of the effects of climate change and, at the same time, developing adaptation measures, while ensuring a credible deterrence and defence posture and supporting the priorities of security of military personnel and operational and cost effectiveness (NATO, 2022).

In the same year, NATO developed and adopted the executive tool for the pragmatic implementation of this agenda, the Climate Change and Security Action Plan. It presents the ambitious goal of making NATO the leading international organisation in understanding and adapting to the security impact of climate change. Analysing the highlights of this Plan, it is interesting to note that there is a detailed definition of the effects through which climate change affects the security environment (NATO, 2021).

It is defined as a 'threat multiplier' capable of exacerbating the effects of other traditional challenges (famine, floods, loss of land and livelihood) as well as leaving room for actors that could threaten the Atlantic Alliance. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on the fact that the military component is affected by harsher climatic conditions (extreme weather, sea level rise, etc.), which create harsher conditions for military operations and missions, compromising their effectiveness. Finally, the effects of climate change shape the world order and may influence state behaviour (NATO, 2021).

However, the ambitiousness of NATO's project lies in the definition of the four functions it proposes to fulfil:

1. To raise Allied awareness, NATO will conduct an annual climate change and security impact assessment. In addition, to complement this assessment function, the Alliance will leverage its science and technology programmes and communities to support research on the impact of climate change on security, including gender perspectives in the context of NATO's policy on women, peace and security.
2. Based on its assessments, NATO will undertake a process of adaptation, both doctrinal and logistical. For the first aspect, it will incorporate climate change considerations into its work on resilience, civil preparedness, defence planning, capability delivery, assets and installations, standards, innovation, training, exercises and disaster response. For the second aspect, the Alliance will progressively adapt its capabilities more prominently in its procurement practices and in its partnerships with industry.
3. NATO will contribute to climate change mitigation, the designated tool for this purpose being the development of a mapping (and concomitant analytical methodology) of greenhouse gas emissions from military activities and installations. The impact it is expected to have is to contribute to Allied emission assessment programmes and could help formulate voluntary GHG emission reduction targets for armed forces.
4. NATO aims to improve outreach both with international and regional organisations (such as the United Nation and European Union) and with civil society actors in order to contribute to the global response to climate change.

To sum up, the relevance of this Action Plan is twofold: in addition to the important effects that its implementation will produce, it is crucial to note the Atlantic Alliance's awareness of the distortions that climate change brings about in the strategic environment (Lippert, 2019). Furthermore, the fact that NATO presents itself as a leading international organisation ensures that it is projected into a dimension where the aim is to avoid duplication of roles already played by other organisations. Despite the fact that international organisations have been leaders in researching the impact of climate change and explaining the potential consequences for wider affected societies, military organisations have increasingly taken on the responsibility of communicating risks closely related to the security domain.

New Strategic Concept and Climate Change

Compared to the NATO Action Plan for Climate Change and Security, a major advance is the institutionalisation of climate change as a challenge by the new Strategic Concept adopted by NATO in June 2022. For clarity's sake, it is appropriate to clarify what the Strategic Concept is. It is a fundamental document for the Alliance (second in importance only to the North Atlantic Treaty), which constitutes a guide for NATO's strategic adaptation and steers its future political and military development. As a rule, the new strategic concept is adopted every ten years and it is changes in the world order that require it to be revised (NATO PDD, 2022).

Indeed, compared to the context of the 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit, nowadays climate change is a pressing topic of discussion, capable of raising awareness and concern as much as more traditional threats. Therefore, even though the NATO Madrid Summit 2022 was dominated by the shadow of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, climate change remained very high on the agenda.

To better understand the magnitude of this change, it is necessary to pay attention to the new Strategic Concept document. The introduction to the document reiterates "the cross-cutting importance of investing in technological innovation and integrating climate change... into all our core tasks" (NATO, 2022). In this passage one can detect continuity with the assumptions of both the Agenda and the Action Plan discussed above. They are deepened by the recognition of climate change as a threat multiplier for fragile and unstable contexts, with the Sahel region and the Middle East and North Africa as examples. Furthermore, it is reported how climate change also affects the way allied armed forces operate. What is new, however, is the fact that according to this document, armed forces are increasingly finding themselves intervening in contexts of disaster relief often caused by climate change.

Among its Core Tasks, related to the Crisis Prevention and Management function, NATO stands in line with the previous strategy, describing itself as ready to further develop "the capability to support civil crisis management and relief operations and to prepare for the effects of climate change, food insecurity and health emergencies on allied security" (NATO, 2022).

Finally, in paragraph 46, NATO reaffirms its desire to become the leading international organisation in understanding and adapting to the security impact of climate change. The aim is that the Alliance will lead efforts to assess the impact of climate change on defence and security and to address these challenges.

In conclusion, the salient terms of the Alliance's proposed contribution to combating climate change are reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving energy efficiency, investing in the transition to clean energy sources and harnessing green technologies, while ensuring military effectiveness and a credible deterrence and defence posture.

Conclusion

NATO's adaptation process and the energy security implications of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict made it a priority to address the climate issue in security terms at the NATO. In this context, it can be argued that "Russia is using fossil fuels as a weapon, on which the West depends" (NATO, 2022). Contextually, moving away from fossil fuels means moving away from autocrats and instability. Avoiding this strategic dependence means accelerating the green transition, and this is a long-term goal. This analysis brought out a converging vision: the urgency of addressing the climate challenge and stemming its effects.

NATO's approach to the climate issue can be described in three steps. The first involves studying and understanding the short- and long-term security implications to define a strategy. The second, sees the need to adapt military forces and capabilities to disaster relief; in practical terms, the Alliance should equip itself with equipment that can operate in more extreme temperatures, for example in the Arctic. Lastly, as a final step NATO must contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions coming from military bases (NATO, 2022).

The approach designated by the NATO Agenda, Action Plan and Strategic Concept is also aimed at contrasting the increasing effects of climate change in fragile and unstable strategic environments. It should be noted that climate change is a big security issue when read in relation to food and water security issues. In fact, the loss of priority for climate change and the exacerbation of its effects brings more people, particularly the youth, closer to violent extremism.

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