ENVIRONMENT OF PEACE

Security in a new era of risk

Executive summary

Behind the headlines of war in Europe and the aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic, our world is being drawn into a black hole of deepening twin crises in security and the environment. Indicators of insecurity are rising, while indicators of environmental integrity are sinking. The mix is toxic, profound and damaging; and institutions with the power to find solutions, including governments, are waking up far too slowly.

In terms of security, there is an increase in the incidence of conflict and the numbers of dead and displaced people—a trend in existence long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Spending on arms and military forces is rising; the use of nuclear weapons seems to be less unthinkable than it was previously. In terms of the environment, manifestations of decline include more extreme weather, rising seas, constraints on water availability, the decline in mammals and pollinating insects, plastic pollution, dying coral reefs and shrinking forests.

The darkening security horizon presents one layer of risks to peace; environmental decline adds a second layer. The interaction of the two trends produces a third, more complex set of risks, whose significance humanity is only beginning to grasp.

However, it is clear that the two crises do interact. Countries facing the highest levels of ecological threat are statistically likely to be those where peace is at its most tenuous. They also tend to be marked by fragility and low capacity for resilience.* For the most part,

* Fragility is defined as 'the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks' (OECD).

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these countries have done little to cause the global environmental crisis, but they bear the brunt of its effects. Half of the ongoing United Nations peace operations are in countries with the highest exposure to climate change impacts. These correlations are not coincidences.

This is the entry point for *Environment of Peace*.

The link between environmental integrity, peace and human well-being should not really be contentious. Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, countries have recognized that ecological integrity is essential to human development. In agreeing the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, governments declared: 'There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.' In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council formally recognized a healthy environment as a fundamental human right.

Yet our environment is rapidly degrading. Although every government is aware of climate change and wider environmental decline, and some have made progress on issues such as pollution and deforestation, they are collectively failing to tackle the major drivers with sufficient urgency. Among other impacts, degrading the natural environment makes it more likely that diseases will spread from wild animals into the human population. And the last two years have shown how devastating such diseases can be.

Beyond their direct effects, climate change and the wider environmental crisis contribute to insecurity. The evidence shows that they often generate social and political instability, which, unresolved, can escalate into violence. Armed conflict not only damages the environment, but it makes effective environmental governance harder to achieve. Confrontation, disputes and conflict also sour the international atmosphere for arriving at cooperative responses to environmental challenges.

Because of these interlinkages, the idea of security that drives this report is an inclusive one. The traditional defence- or state-centred standpoint tells part of the story of security and insecurity. The more people-centred, human security concept tells another part. For a truly peaceful and secure world, we need to get both parts right.

What, then, is to be done?

As the evidence will show, reducing insecurity and conflict in this new era of risk means, as a starting point, fundamentally changing how we think about peace. With environmental degradation part of the security problem, restoring environmental integrity needs to be part of the security solution. This also implies an overwhelming need for more ambitious and more effective cooperation between governments on peace and security at every level, from conceptual to operational; because when the threat affects all countries, national assertiveness is clearly not going to be an effective response. They may perhaps be inevitable when faced with acute situations such as the invasion of Ukraine, but they cannot be a solution to the broader and escalating crises. In the long run, cooperation is self interest.

If one defining characteristic of an effective response is cooperation, another is adaptability. The crises are going to evolve, creating risks and impacts that cannot be precisely known. The

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responses of people will also change. Decision makers will need to intervene, learn from experience and intervene again.

Currently, governments are spending money in ways that stoke insecurity rather than tackling it. Subsidies that fund environmental harm by supporting activities such as fossil fuel extraction and use, overfishing and deforestation amount to trillions of dollars per year. Given the link between environmental decline and insecurity and conflict risk, these can also be regarded as conflict subsidies. Looked at through this lens, the wisdom of continuing with them appears doubly questionable.

At the same time, the world's richest countries are conspicuously failing to generate the international financing needed to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss—further exacerbating insecurity and conflict risk. Moreover, funds to aid adaptation to environmental decline and to build resilience are not being spent in the most needed areas; the most fragile states, which by definition have the clearest need, receive just 1/80th per capita of the climate financing that flows to non-fragile states.

Resilience allows communities and countries to survive shocks without resorting to conflict, and to rebuild swiftly afterwards. It is essential for security in all its forms. Yet the security and environmental crises erode resilience.

Combatting vulnerabilities and building resilience against climate shocks will also provide a buffer against non-climate related threats. In 2010, a heatwave fuelled by climate change contributed, via a decimated grain harvest in Russia and a consequent spike in bread prices, to the Arab Spring. In 2022, Russian and Ukrainian grain harvests are likely to be substantially lower than usual, a prospect that is already pushing world prices dangerously high again. Different cause, similar risk; increasing resilience would protect against both.

Resilience can ameliorate the risks posed by environmental degradation, but it cannot tackle the causes. Halting and then reversing environmental decline involves making transitions in many aspects of society at unprecedented pace and scale. But transitions can fracture and dislocate communities. Across the world, particularly in the Global South, initiatives in biofuels, hydropower, nature conservation and climate adaptation—often conceived with good intentions—have regularly stoked insecurity and conflict. Many times, they fail because of it. The environmental crisis is now too big to permit failure; so, the myriad transitions needed in energy, transportation, industry and above all land use have to work. That means actively involving communities in their design and implementation in order to achieve just and peaceful transitions, which are then more likely to be successful ones.

The nature of governments and their relationship with their citizens is also going to be key to making good decisions. The recent rise of autocrats and populists has not been good for either security or the environment and has undermined the resilience of global institutions that facilitate cooperation on both issues. Tackling shared, complex problems will be much easier in a world where governments treat their citizens and each other with respect, involve their citizens in decision making, and ground their policies in evidence.

As we show in this report, there are real examples of hope to draw on. In the UN system, at regional level and within countries, the links between environmental degradation and insecurity are in places being taken more seriously. Most governments are open to cooperation on these issues, and in some cases they are pursuing it. Non-governmental organizations are actively building peace through environmental enhancement. These examples are models that can be upscaled, provided the vision and will are there.
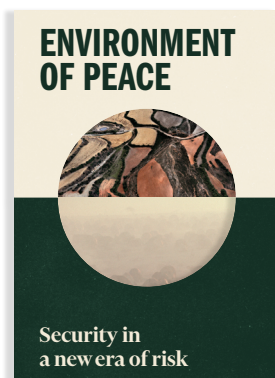
We conclude by presenting a series of six recommendations for action, and a set of five principles to guide it. The principles include cooperation and adaptability, which, in the face of an unpredictably changing risk landscape, are just common sense. So is inclusion, because solutions in which all parties have a say are more likely to succeed. Solutions will have to take account of the fact that the problem is both pressing and deep-rooted, meaning that action has to begin immediately yet be guided by far-sighted vision.

Some of our recommendations for action concern the UN system, some are aimed at national governments, and some connect with the private sector, civil society and other sectors. Although many types of entity can and should play a role, governments are central due to their unique power as legislators, rule-makers and allocators of resources. Governments can also enact change quickly; and time is undeniably short. Chapter 5 sets out the recommendations in detail, but in summary:

1 **Address the linked crises with joint solutions.** Identify and implement measures that build both peace and environmental integrity.
2 **Invest in preparedness and resilience.** Build capacity to detect signs of growing threats and defuse tensions.
3 **Finance peace, not risk.** Meet international funding obligations, ensure funding reaches the most fragile communities and end conflict subsidies.
4 **Deliver a just and peaceful transition.** Assess and address possible negative outcomes of pro-environment measures before implementation.
5 **Be deliberately inclusive.** Involve marginalized groups fully in decision making and share the benefits.
6 **Research, educate, inform.** Understand and communicate the risks and build cooperation through education.

All our recommendations can, given the will, be implemented within a few years. We would urge governments, communities and other decision-making insitutions to commit to doing so. Active crises such as that unfolding in Ukraine may command attention for their duration, but environmental degradation will continue until governments act to end it, as will the creation of complex risks by the interaction of the twin crises.

Security and environmental integrity are both headed in the wrong direction, to the detriment of every country and our collective common good. It is a mutually damaging situation deserving of a mutually beneficial solution.

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Read the full report:
www.environmentofpeace.org