

Mitigating the climate change risks to global security

An opportunity for UK leadership in 2021

Summary

- Climate change poses serious risks to global security, prosperity and well-being. Many within the security community recognize that the physical effects of climate change – unpredictable rainfall, rising sea levels and frequent extreme weather events – will have serious consequences for international peace and security, particularly in terms of food security, livelihoods and forced displacement.
- Although most leaders acknowledge both the direct and indirect impacts of a changing climate, there has been limited action to manage the resulting security risks. More needs to be done to help fragile and vulnerable countries cope with the impacts of climate change.
- In 2021, the UK has a unique opportunity to set the climate change agenda. In addition to hosting COP26 in November, the UK is also presiding over the G7 throughout the year and will chair the UN Security Council in February 2021.
- Tackling the security issues of climate change requires both leadership and a clear strategy to use the high-level meetings of 2021 to build momentum towards ambitious global action with a clear set of objectives. The existing five campaigns of the UK's COP26 presidency, particularly the adaptation and resilience aspect, provide a strong basis for a new approach.
- At a time when the UK government is looking to demonstrate the relevance of a global Britain on the international stage, the opportunity for the UK to lead on climate change issues should prove highly attractive.

Neil Morisetti
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Introduction

If we don't urgently change our way of life, we jeopardise life itself.

António Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations¹

In what will be a critical year for addressing climate change, the high-level events of 2021 will provide the UK with an unparalleled opportunity to set the climate agenda and demonstrate global leadership. Alongside Italy, the UK is organizing and presiding over the 26th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is taking place in Glasgow in November. The UK is also presiding over the G7 throughout the year and will chair the UN Security Council (UNSC) in February. These platforms give the UK an extraordinary opportunity in 2021 to articulate a clear approach for reducing the risks posed by a changing climate, to build momentum through a series of landmark events, and to exercise renewed diplomatic effort and political leadership, while taking bold action through a coherent domestic strategy that addresses both mitigation and adaptation.

This paper seeks to explain why and how the UK should include a focus on security in its climate strategy going forward, and what this could achieve.

Increasingly apparent security implications

Geopolitical stability, which is a prerequisite for global prosperity and well-being, currently faces many challenges.² Some are historical interstate issues, often with a military component including a resurgent Russia, China's activity around Taiwan and in the China Seas, and competition for resources in the eastern Mediterranean. Other challenges to geopolitical stability come from domestic issues within states, although external factors often play a role, such as in the civil wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia.

At the same time – as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated – the world is also confronted by a range of non-traditional, transboundary threats. These have neither military origins nor military solutions, and their effects continue to ripple through the globalized, interdependent economy. Climate change is one such threat.³

¹ Guterres, A. (2019), 'Secretary-General's remarks at opening ceremony of UN Climate Change Conference COP25', www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-12-02/secretary-generals-remarks-opening-ceremony-of-un-climate-change-conference-cop25-delivered.

² United Nations and World Bank (2018), *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, Washington, DC: The World Bank Group, pp. xvii and 12, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>.

³ A number of recent assessments – such as the 'Climate Change Risk Assessment' undertaken periodically by the UK government – conceptualize the security impacts of climate change in terms of the complex interrelationship of human well-being, economic security, food security and political security. See, for example, Committee on Climate Change (2016), *UK Climate Change Risk Assessment 2017: Synthesis report: priorities for the next five years*, www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/UK-CCRA-2017-Synthesis-Report-Committee-on-Climate-Change.pdf. This Chatham House briefing paper is advised by such work but takes a narrower definition; following much of the mainstream politico-security discourse in considering the security implications of a changing climate in relation to its effects on instability or conflict, migration or resource availability and access. See Lewis, K. and Lenton, T. (2015), 'Knowledge problems in climate change and security research', *WIREs Climate Change*, 6(4): pp. 383–399, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.346>.

The impact of a changing climate is becoming increasingly apparent to all. Whether as a result of extreme weather events or the playing out of long-term trends, it is clear climate change is proving highly disruptive to society. Nowhere are the effects of climate change as evident as in the security environment, where the second and third-order consequences, including loss of land and livelihood, are already contributing to global instability and an increasing risk of conflict.⁴

The regions and countries most acutely affected by climate change are often those that already struggle to provide fully for their citizens due to pre-existing stresses, including healthcare issues, demographic challenges, food and water shortages, and poor governance.

A consequence of climate change under such strained conditions may be large unplanned movements of populations, principally within countries, that exacerbate existing tensions, as some consider was the case in Syria.⁵ Alternatively, in their search for viable livelihoods, populations that are unable to move may engage in conflict over resources (as seen in Chad and Nigeria)⁶ and be susceptible to recruitment into organized crime (as has been the case in the Amazon basin)⁷ or violent extremist organizations, such as Boko Haram or Al Shabaab.⁸

In these contexts, such conditions have the potential to aggravate existing tensions and stresses. There are several other likely links between climate change and security:

- Extreme weather events will exacerbate fragile situations and could increase people's vulnerability and sense of grievance, particularly in countries already affected by conflict.
- Climate change is likely to disrupt food production in many regions, increasing food prices and market volatility, as well as heightening the risk of protests.
- Climate change could affect the availability and quality of transboundary water, which could increase pressure on existing water governance structures.

⁴ For a comprehensive overview of the links between climate change and conflict, see, for example, Detges, A., Kligenfeld, D., König, C., Pohl, B., Rüttinger, L., Schewe, J., Sedova, B. and Vivekananda, J. (2020), *10 Insights on Climate Impacts and Peace*, adelphi and Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK),

http://berlin-climate-security-conference.de/sites/berlin-climate-security-conference.de/files/documents/10_insights_on_climate_impacts_and_peace_report.pdf.

⁵ There is considerable academic dispute about the role of climate change in the Syrian crisis. See the contrasting perspectives of Friedman, T. (2013), 'The Scary Hidden Stressor', *New York Times*, 2 March 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/friedman-the-scary-hidden-stressor.html; Werrel, C. E. and Femia, F. (eds) (2013), *The Arab Spring and Climate Change*, Center for American Progress, Stimson, The Center for Climate and Security, https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ClimateChangeArabSpring.pdf?_ga=2.138104624.1406886634.1611764326-1664099285.1605013182; De Châtel, F. (2014), 'The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 50(4): pp. 521–535, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00263206.2013.850076.

⁶ Vivekananda, J., Nagarajan, C., Sylvestre, F. and Brown, O. (2020), *Shoring up stability: Addressing climate and fragility risks in the Lake Chad region*, adelphi, https://catalogue.unccd.int/1400_Shoring-up-Stability.pdf.

⁷ Cepik, M. and Cepik, H. M. (2020), 'Climate change and security in the Amazon: vulnerability and risks for indigenous peoples on the Acre-Ucayali border', in Igarape Institute (2020), *Climate and security in Latin America and the Caribbean*, <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-12-02-publication-Clima-and-Security-EN-web.pdf>.

⁸ Heaton, L. (2017), 'The Watson Files', *Foreign Policy*, 31 May 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/31/the-watson-files-somalia-climate-change-conflict-war>.

- Rising sea levels will threaten the viability of low-lying areas even before they are submerged, leading to social disruption, displacement and migration. At the same time, disagreements over maritime boundaries and ocean resources could increase.
- As climate adaptation and mitigation policies are more broadly implemented, the risks of unintended negative effects will also increase, particularly in fragile contexts.⁹ For example action taken to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, especially through reduced use of fossil fuels, presents many economic opportunities for UK industries, but unless alternatives are found it also has the potential to negatively impact the economies of oil and gas-producing nations and to alter geopolitical relationships.¹⁰

Therefore, while it is unlikely that climate change has been, or will be in future, the sole cause of conflict, it is considered a threat multiplier and a clear obstacle to sustainable peace.¹¹

Although there has been limited assessment of climate-related security risks, it is very likely that the scale and scope of such risks, which so often reverberate across borders, have been underestimated. The very nature of the interconnected world means that events in one region have the potential to impact others. This is certainly the case with climate change: where instability induced volatility in the prices of food and raw materials has impacted on economic security and growth in all countries. Large-scale unplanned interstate movements of people risk triggering social disruption in recipient countries, while rising temperatures facilitate the spread of many diseases. Similarly, there are economic costs associated with extreme weather events, which have resulted in disruption of vulnerable supply chains and damaged local economies.¹²

Pathway to success

Ultimately, success will only be achieved when sufficient action has been taken to avoid a dangerous rise in global temperatures. As identified in the 2015 Paris Agreement, this will require nations both to reduce future GHG emissions to net zero by 2050, through their UNFCCC Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and to adapt to the changing climate in order to minimize the actual damage caused by climate change. These two strands

⁹ Rüttinger, L., Smith, D., Stang, G., Tänzler, D. and Vivekananda, J. (2015), *A New Climate for Peace: Taking action on climate and fragility risks*, adelphi, International Alert, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, European Union Institute for Security Studies, www.newclimateforpeace.org/#report-top.

¹⁰ The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) (2019), *A New World: The Geopolitics of the Energy Transformation*, http://geopoliticsofrenewables.org/assets/geopolitics/Reports/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Global_commission_renewable_energy_2019.pdf.

¹¹ The 'threat multiplier' discourse was popularized by the Centre for Naval Analysis (CNA) and persists despite the CNA more recently reframing climate change as a 'conflict catalyst' that accelerates instability, see, Abrahams, D. and Carr, E. R. (2017), 'Understanding the Connections Between Climate Change and Conflict: Contributions From Geography and Political Ecology', *Current Climate Change Reports*, 3: pp. 233–242, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40641-017-0080-z>. Others have noted that the term suggests an overt focus on a state security understanding of climate security (rather than human-centred), see, Krampe, F. and Mobjörk, M. (2018), 'Responding to Climate-Related Security Risks: Reviewing Regional Organizations in Asia and Africa', *Current Climate Change Reports*, 4: pp. 330–337, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40641-018-0118-x>.

¹² Hildén, M., Lahn, G., Carter, T. R., Klein, R. J. T., Otto, I. M., Pohl, B., Reyer, C. P. O. and Tondel, F. (2020), *Cascading Climate Impacts: A New Factor in European Policy Making*, CASCADES report, www.cascades.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CASCADES_Policy_Brief_1_0-4.pdf.

of activity – mitigation and adaptation – will require engagement by all of society, nationally and internationally. A commitment to high ambition at COP26 will be a crucial demonstration of such engagement.

While mitigation is critical, action is needed to increase the ability of nations, societies and people to adapt to climate change and build resilience to climate-related risks. Many in the security community have long acknowledged the importance of adaptation in managing the challenges that climate change poses to prosperity and well-being. Indeed, the then UK foreign secretary, Margaret Beckett, made the case for action when she led the UNSC debate on the subject in 2007. But building resilience to climate change has not always been a priority issue, especially among countries less obviously suffering the impacts or among countries with high-carbon economies, where in the short term the costs of transition appear to outweigh the benefits.

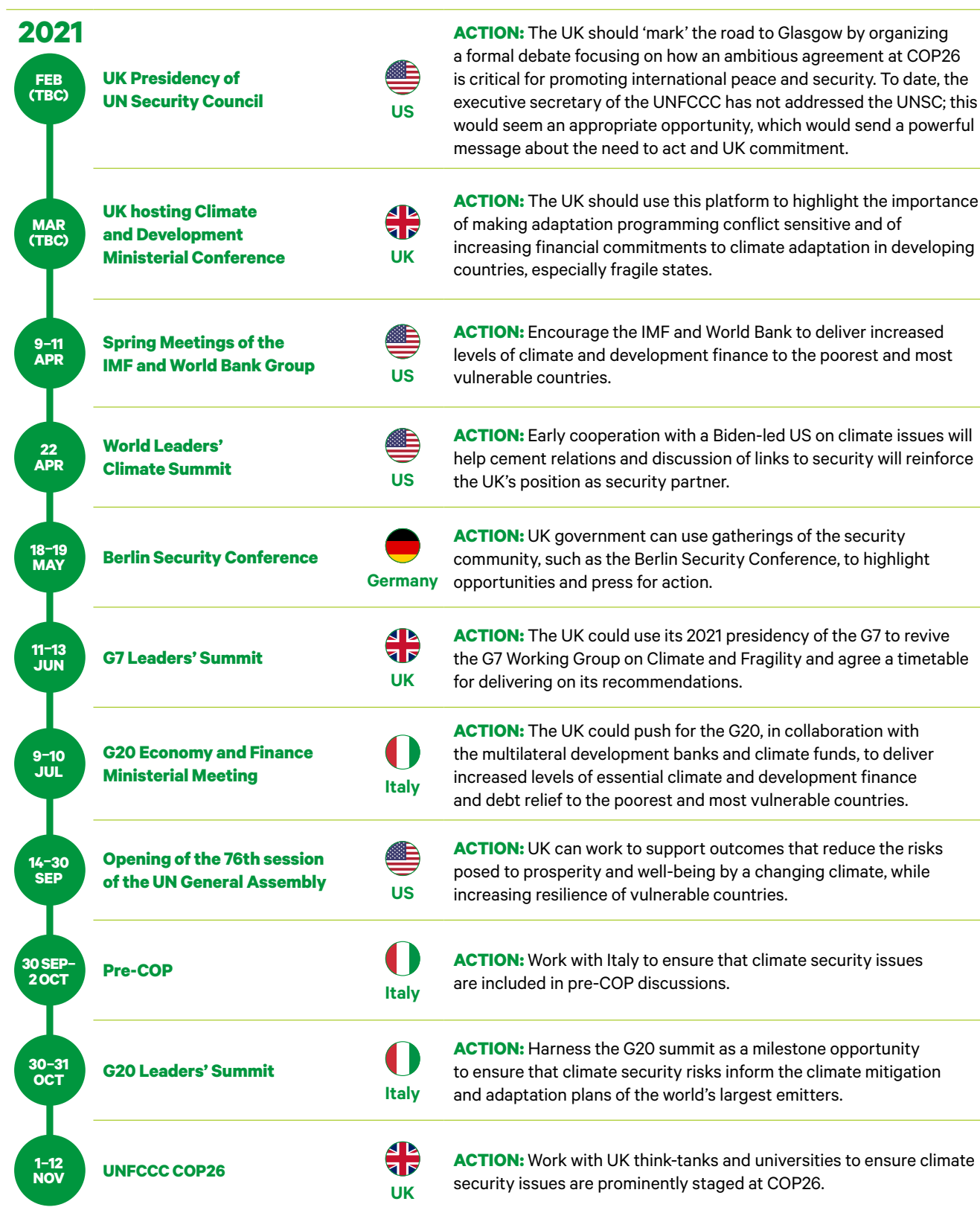
There has been limited action to reduce the likelihood of climate change acting as a threat multiplier. More needs to be done, as part of wider development support, to improve the resilience and capacity of those vulnerable nations that are already being directly affected by the changing climate.

The UK's past performance in addressing the global challenges of climate change has been inconsistent.

The UK's past performance in addressing the global challenges of climate change has been inconsistent. Although, like many other nations, it has highlighted the risks posed by climate change to geopolitical stability in a number of iterations of its National Security Strategy and the National Risk Register, and is a regular contributor to UNSC debates on the issue, follow-up action across government has been limited. In part this may be because it has not been seen as a sufficiently pressing issue, and the time frame for making a direct impact has appeared too long in the context of short political cycles. Other likely factors in the UK's lack of action include an inadequate understanding of how climate change poses a risk to geopolitical stability; a lack of clarity as to where responsibility for action lies; and the perceived challenge and complexity of delivering a coherent response.

On a more positive note, and in part reflecting the increasingly compelling evidence of how climate change is disrupting society's norms, greater interest has more recently been shown across the UK government. This includes increased involvement by the Cabinet Office (through the Integrated Review and engagement with the COP process), Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Ministry of Defence (through the appointment of Lieutenant-General Nugee as climate change and sustainability strategy lead), and the intelligence agencies. The challenge now is to turn this interest into action.

Figure 1. A timeline for action on the climate risks to global security



Source: Compiled by authors.

An agenda for 2021

Although in 2021 the UK will need to address the fallout from COVID-19 and Brexit, it also finds itself in what is probably a unique position of being able to both set the agenda for action to address climate change and demonstrate leadership to facilitate delivery. If properly framed, this will also assist the recovery from COVID-19.

In November, the UK will host COP26, where nations must be persuaded to markedly increase their level of ambition in their NDCs, commit to net zero emissions and align their post-pandemic economic recovery plans with the Paris Agreement. Achieving such a successful outcome at COP26 should be a primary foreign policy goal for the UK and one where, drawing upon climate science and relevant technology, the country can lead by example.

To achieve this it will be necessary, as part of the UK's broader adaptation and resilience COP26 campaign,¹³ to build and deliver a coherent, reasoned narrative of how action should be taken collectively to reduce climate-related risks to geopolitical stability.

The narrative should include the importance of using multiple levers of influence – reinforcing good governance, low-carbon energy and natural resource management – to improve the capacity and resilience of vulnerable countries, and the availability of appropriate funding. It should also emphasize the need to ensure that action taken is conflict sensitive and does not, unintentionally, exacerbate ongoing challenges.

While the focus is on COP26, this year provides the UK with many other relevant opportunities to demonstrate commitment and press for climate action. These include the presidency of the UNSC in February, leadership of the G7, the Munich and Berlin Security Conferences, and other gatherings of members of the wider security community (including officials in foreign affairs, defence, development aid and home affairs).

While detail and priority are very much for the UK government and supporting policy advisers to determine, a number of possible activities merit further discussion, as laid out in Figure 1.

The UK's presidency of the UNSC in February 2021 provides an early opportunity to focus on the security implications of climate change and to influence the positions of key players in relation to action on both adaptation and mitigation. As part of a wider programme of activity in the run-up to Glasgow and as a permanent member of the UNSC, the UK should organize a formal debate focusing on how an ambitious agreement at COP26 is critical for promoting international peace and security. To date, the executive secretary of the UNFCCC has not addressed the UNSC; in this unique position, the UK could send a powerful message about the government's commitment to this issue and the urgency to act.

¹³ For an overview of the UK's COP26 campaigns, and the adaptation and resilience theme in particular, see UK Government (2020), 'Campaigns', UN Climate Change Conference, <https://ukcop26.org/uk-presidency/campaigns>.

Similarly, the profile and output of the UN Climate Security Mechanism (CSM), established in 2018, needs to be raised. Created as a three-way partnership of members of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DDPA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the CSM was designed to provide the UN with up-to-date information on emerging climate security threats. However, to date it has focused on internal UN capacity-building rather than horizon scanning for future threats. The UNSC should give serious consideration to the establishment of an envoy with responsibility for focusing on a more coherent approach to highlighting and addressing the security implications of a changing climate as a way of making greater progress.

In March, the UK is hosting an online conference bringing together climate vulnerable and donor countries to address climate and development challenges. They can use this opportunity to highlight the importance of making adaptation programming conflict-sensitive and of increasing financial commitments to climate adaptation in developing countries, especially fragile states. Following on from the January Climate Adaptation Summit in the Netherlands and Boris Johnson's launch of the Adaptation Action Coalition, the summit offers a good opportunity to raise these issues with global leaders.

Within the G7, the UK already has a record of engaging on such issues. When it last held the presidency in 2013, the UK commissioned an independent report (*A New Climate for Peace*)¹⁴ that highlighted both the risks to geopolitical stability and the need to ensure that action does not result in unintended consequences. The key findings remain valid and the 2021 presidency could be used to agree a timetable and leads for delivering on the findings and recommendations, possibly through the revival of the G7 Working Group on Climate and Fragility, whose work has stalled recently.

With G7 support, the UK could push for Italy (co-host of COP26) to use their G20 presidency to lead work with the IMF, multilateral development banks and climate funds to deliver increased levels of essential climate and development finance and debt relief to the poorest and most vulnerable countries, possibly in the form of a 'green and resilient recovery package'. This would be especially important in the current context, where many developing countries are grappling with pandemic-induced economic and debt crises, which reduce their ability to finance climate adaptation and resilience-building. Efforts should be made to ensure that fragile states have greater access to these funds, and to ensure that all finance is provided in a conflict-sensitive way. Without such action the risk of climate-induced instability will increase.

Throughout 2021 and culminating at COP26, an FCDO-led programme of international engagement could support these activities, and other more informal engagement, as part of a wider and integrated campaign to address climate change and the risks it poses to geopolitical stability. Such a campaign

¹⁴ Rüttinger, Smith, Stang, Tänzler and Vivekananda (2015), *A New Climate for Peace: Taking action on climate and fragility risks*.

should make maximum use of the global security networks that exist, especially among the military, and the influence this community has with their respective national governments.

Working with partners

Achieving progress on climate-related security risks will not be straightforward. In order to limit the rise in global average temperature to 2°C, UNEP estimates countries must increase the ambitions of their 2015 NDCs by three times, while limiting rises to 1.5°C would require a five-fold increase.¹⁵ The impact of COVID-19 on governments and society, during a period when multilateral organizations are already under pressure, makes this an even greater leadership challenge. However, as the UK government is looking to demonstrate the relevance of a global Britain on the international stage, the case for such leadership should prove highly attractive, especially as it will not be required to act alone.

President Biden has indicated the importance he attaches to addressing climate change and the risks it poses to global security. The appointment of John Kerry as his special envoy for climate change with a seat on the US National Security Council (a first) is a clear signal of intent. Early cooperation with a Biden-led US on this issue will strengthen relations and reinforce the UK's position as a security partner, while potentially offsetting some of the negative responses to the recently announced reduction in the overseas aid budget to 0.5 per cent of gross national income.

By leading discussions on this issue and highlighting the risks to all, the UK can strengthen the case for action and cooperation with minimal resource impact.

Similarly, the UK can promote sustained engagement and, ultimately, real progress on the security implications of climate change by strengthening cooperation with China on the issue, continuing to engage with European nations, including Italy and Germany (holder of the 2022 G7 presidency), as well as with many Pacific states and other partners that have a deep understanding of the issues.

The UK government will be encouraged to engage in many climate initiatives over the next 12 months, but its resources are limited. However, if unaddressed, the challenges outlined in the existing UK COP26 adaptation and resilience campaign will likely result in further geopolitical instability. By leading discussions on this issue and highlighting the risks to all, the UK can strengthen the case for action and cooperation with minimal resource impact.

¹⁵ UNEP (2019), *Emissions Gap Report 2019*, Nairobi: UNEP, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30797/EGR2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Consideration should also be given to drawing on the expertise and resources of a range of international partners, which could provide the UK government with the following types of support:

- The use of existing programmes and relationships (particularly with key partners in China) to improve global understanding of climate risks and appropriate measures to reduce them.
- The generation of detailed region-specific assessments of the impact of climate change on prosperity and well-being to assist G7 parties in addressing the recommendations of the *A New Climate for Peace* report. This could involve revising the G7 Working Group on Climate and Fragility.
- Cooperation with strategic international partners to provide a focus on the security implications of climate change at COP26.
- Coordinated activity across UK think-tanks and universities to provide support to the UK government's strategy for maximizing achievement during the G7 presidency and at COP26.
- Opportunities to work with development and humanitarian agencies, focusing on resilience and adaptation to advance climate and security risk-informed programming in fragile and climate-affected contexts.

Conclusion

The risks posed by climate change to global security, prosperity and well-being are numerous and varied. However, the magnitude and immediacy of the challenges that a changing climate presents are such that action cannot be deferred to another day. The UK has an opportunity in 2021 to deliver not just high ambition at COP26 but to lead on reducing the risks posed to geopolitical stability. Such ambitious action will require leadership from those in positions of international authority, including the UK when it chairs various bodies in 2021. The chances of success and sustained momentum will be markedly improved if the UK develops a coherent strategy for highlighting both the need for and nature of action to address the geopolitical risks posed by climate change. Such a strategy should align with the existing adaptation and resilience campaign, which is central to the UK's COP26 presidency, while drawing upon expertise both within and beyond government departments.

Adopting such an approach clearly has wider benefits than just tackling the risks posed by a changing climate. Not only will it provide an opportunity for the UK government to demonstrate that – post Brexit – it is serious about playing a leading role on the world stage, but it will help cement relations with the Biden administration and potentially reduce tensions with China. Meanwhile, it reinforces a commitment to multilateral institutions and underlines the government's relevance by addressing a key issue of concern for the UK public.

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Cover image: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks during the launch of the UK-hosted COP26 UN Climate Summit, on 4 February 2020 in London, England.

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