

➤ Addressing the ‘Action Gap’ in Institutional Responses to Climate Change

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This memo focuses on the geopolitical and security dimensions of climate change in international organizations.

Global problems require global solutions. International organizations addressing climate change face a fundamental question—are they ‘fit for purpose?’ This framing by multilateralist scholars and leaders explores why international organizations, particularly the United Nations (UN), are not able to meet their core objectives. The [UN needs](#) “greater credibility, legitimacy, representation, effectiveness, and enhanced capacity and willingness to act in defense of the common peace.” We seek to understand how, in an increasingly [polycentric and fragmented](#) world, do we achieve collective action on global security issues like climate change?

The UN has over [thirty years](#) of climate work through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Yet gaps remain. First, this meta-analysis of scientific research shows an exceptional degree of admiring the problem, but has failed to inform necessary political mobilization. It primarily focuses on the physical sciences without sufficient corresponding research investigating social/political/security implications. Second, the UN has shown that it is not ‘fit for purpose.’ UN organizations lack the mandates, resources, influence, budgetary authority, and most importantly political support, and powerful member states have not risen to meet this challenge. [COP after COP](#), vulnerable countries are losing faith when rich and powerful countries

fail to reach consensus on how to set required goals as well as help those less empowered and financially capable to manage the threat. Those able to address the climate security threat are less than willing to help those more at risk. This has led to the baked in effects, the foreseeable geopolitical instability, and an unpredictable reordering due to the lack of solutions.

Climate security only has a [brief history](#) within the UN Security Council with permanent members diverging on whether to link the topics. Since the U.S. [joined](#) the UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security in April 2021, three permanent Security Council members (France, U.K., U.S.) are in favor of formally linking climate and security. These countries promote including climate into security policy planning and the addition of a [Special Envoy for Climate Security](#). However, in February 2021, China, Russia, and South Africa made [statements](#) to explicitly not link the climate and security. This remains contested at the highest levels.

There is an evident ‘[action gap](#)’ resulting from the lack of consensus for the connection between climate and security and the UN’s inability to be ‘fit for purpose.’ Scholars seem to offer a binary choice to address the weaknesses of the UN—where critics prefer to tear it down in favor of bilateral agreements and multilateralists double-down on [existing structures](#). While the former provides little solutions to address climate security, the latter suffers from a lack of creativity

given the weaknesses identified within the UN system.

Consequently, how will this re-order relations and what can we do? Leadership and engagement are essential. In the Trump approach, the U.S. withdrew from engagement which diminished its role to shaping the global response and ceded leadership to other strong countries—and many argue that any ‘re-ordering’ under these conditions would not favor U.S. strategic or security interests. In the Biden approach, the U.S. has aggressively jumped into the void of climate leadership—mobilizing international leadership and bringing climate security to the fore. What more is needed? Research, institutionalized climate security policies, improved climate security literacy across the government; academia; and the general population, and creativity. Addressing climate security requires ingenuity in improving the weaknesses within the UN and alternative multilateral actions. Innovative multilateral engagement will start to fill the ‘action gap’ enabling us to create the future peace.