

Armed Forces in the Face of Climate Change

The GIDS at the Munich Security Conference 2020

‘Westlessness’ – this term was at the heart of the 56th Munich Security Conference. Conference Chairman Wolfgang Ischinger described the international situation as ‘exceptionally serious’. The Federal President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, also sent a clear message in his opening speech: ‘The withdrawal to concentrate on a narrowly-defined national interest prevents us from taking joint action and coming up with convincing answers to the issues and problems that no one, not even the biggest nation state on Earth, can solve alone. [...] Climate change mitigation is but one of them.’ Climate change was also the topic of the event hosted by the German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies. This year, the Institute was represented for the first time in what is probably the world’s most important conference on security policy.

Climate change and its impact on security policy was a widely discussed topic at this year’s Munich Security Conference (MSC) which, for the first time, included a side event hosted by the German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies (GIDS), the think tank operated by the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College and the Helmut Schmidt University / Bundeswehr University, Hamburg. With its subject ‘Adapting to Climate Change: A Future Role for the Military?’ the event underlined the topicality of the issue of climate change and its consequences.

In cooperation with Mr Simon Struck, Professor Dr Stefan Bayer, Head of the ‘Economy and Ecology of Violence’ Research Area at the GIDS and Professor of Economics at the HSU, had compiled a research report entitled ‘The Strategic Orientation of Armed Forces in Times of Climate Change’. This report served as the starting point for the discussion during which introductory presentations were given not only by Prof. Bayer, but also by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and by Norway’s former Foreign and Defence Minister and current Member of Parliament, Espen Barth Eide.

Our Common Enemy: Climate Change

‘Climate change is now our common enemy,’ Mr Ban Ki-moon declared. The fact that climate change is a reality is something that all participants agreed upon. According to Prof. Bayer, one can try to limit the impact of climate change or adapt to it – and most likely, we will need to face both challenges at the same time. In his opinion, one of the key issues with regard to the armed forces is the question how to best employ them in the future in the light of the impacts of climate change. What role can the military play in adapting to climate change? ‘Climate change is already recognised by different armed forces and is being incorporated into a strategy and planning level: around the

world, armed forces have very different ways of adapting to climate change,' Prof. Bayer said.

Mr Ban Ki-moon also mentioned the armed forces' ecological footprint. Five percent of global carbon dioxide emissions were caused by armed forces, he explained. He also pointed out that the U.S. Armed Forces' oil consumption was incredibly high and that they emitted more carbon dioxide than both Sweden and Portugal together. 'I am convinced that the reduction of the carbon footprint is necessary,' the former United Nations Secretary-General emphasised. At the same time, he called for the development of strategies for adapting to climate change and its consequences.

The Role of the Military with Regard to Climate Change

Espen Barth Eide also made himself very clear: 'Climate change is real. It is no longer just a prediction.' In his capacity as a politician, he clearly stated that now the objective had to be to prevent climate change as much as possible. At the same time, however, one would already need to adapt to the unavoidable changes and make preparations. 'The planet will change,' he affirmed. Consequences of climate change such as food and water shortages and an increase in diseases would hit those countries first that were least prepared for them. This, Mr Eide added, was the real tragedy. And yet, the military could make a significant contribution to mitigating these consequences, Norway's former foreign minister said. Furthermore, Mr Eide, too, mentioned the military's enormous consumption of fossil fuels. He indicated that a reduction was possible at least during routine operations.

During the discussion, some participants also brought up the argument that a reduction in the consumption of fossil energy, the most of which is obtained from the Middle East in the form of crude oil, could have security implications. A 100 percent shift to renewable energies would mean drying up an important source of wealth for Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region. Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureate and former Chief Economist at the World Bank, agreed: 'The people there will not be very happy.' He added that it would then be necessary to help those countries to find new sources of income.

More Renewable Energies

Lieutenant General Martin Schelleis, Chief of the German Joint Support and Enabling Service, said that climate change was not the only challenge. He also stressed that the fight against climate change should always be a political one. Even though he agreed that the military could make a significant contribution to the fight against climate change, he pointed out that the armed forces were not the solution to the problem. Nonetheless, the Chief of the Joint Support and Enabling Service elaborated on how the German military was already making use of renewable energies. As an example, he named the Bundeswehr camp in Niamey, Niger, where solar panels are used to generate part of the required energy.

Mr Eide underlined the military's capability to quickly adapt to challenging situations. This point was highlighted repeatedly during the discussion. It was concluded that the high organisational potential of armed forces could serve as an example on how to address the consequences of climate change. The situation in Brazil, where military forces were purposefully employed to fight the devastating fires, was mentioned as an example in this respect. The Executive Director of Greenpeace International, Jennifer Morgan, also followed the discussion with great interest. In her statement, she, too, placed emphasis on the fact that armed forces could take on a key role not only in adapting to climate change but also in managing its impacts. According to her, the massive bush fires in Australia have shown how complex the challenges are that need to be addressed when dealing with climate disasters. She concluded that it was necessary to prepare for such scenarios.

Developing Strategies

This year's Munich Security Conference was attended by around 140 heads of state and government, ministers of foreign affairs and defence and high-level representatives of other ministries. During the conference, Wolfgang Ischinger warned: 'We are witnessing an epochal break the repercussions of which have not yet been realised by the public at all.' This concerns many aspects, and climate change is one of them – and a very important one. 'We now must recognise the armed forces' potential in connection with climate change, analyse security implications and develop strategies on how to best tackle the effects of climate change,' Prof. Bayer concluded.

Author: Victoria Eicker