JANUARY 2024

CLIMATE CHANGE, GEOPOLITICS, AND FOOD SECURITY

EVENT SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 13, 2023

Siena Cicarelli, Patricia Parera, and Ethan Wong

Edited by Tom Ellison and Francesco Femia
Climate Change, Geopolitics, and Food Security: Event Summary

January 2024

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Cover photo: A view of the villages of Vyshneve, Andriivka, and Ul’yanivs’ka in southern Ukraine, May 2021. (Maxar Technologies via Google)

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A view of the villages of Vyshneve, Andriivka, and Ul'yanivs'ka in southern Ukraine, May 2021.

Source: Maxar Technologies via Google
Introduction

This event report is the third for the Center for Climate and Security (CCS) initiative *Feeding Resilience*, a project dedicated to the U.S. national security benefits of jointly addressing climate change, food security, and stability. The project also aims to share experiences about the nexus of climate change, food insecurity, instability and national security in an effort to identify policy gaps and elicit recommendations and best practices as a foundation for Feeding Resilience’s policy report in 2024.

This report summarizes the third roundtable in the series, *Climate Change, Geopolitics, and Food Security: Implications for Europe, the United States, and Multilateralism*, held in Brussels and virtually on 13 November 2023. The discussion was co-sponsored by the European Policy Centre (EPC) and Nexus, the latter being a joint CCS/Istituto Affari Internazionali project funded by Stiftung Mercator. The roundtable focused on the geopolitical implications of climate change and food insecurity, with insights from European Union (EU) institutions, United Nations Development and Humanitarian agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), United States military and civil society organizations, and the organizers.

The roundtable was held under Chatham House Rule\(^1\), and the list of participants, agenda, and presentations are available at climateandsecurity.org/feeding-resilience-3 and in Annexes 1 and 2 of this report.

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\(^1\) The Chatham House Rule is used around the world to encourage inclusive and open dialogue in meetings. The Chatham House Rule helps create a trusted environment to understand and resolve complex problems. Its guiding spirit is: “share the information you receive, but do not reveal the identity of who said it.”
Key Takeaways

Below is a summary of key takeaways from the policy discussion.

Food is Central to Geopolitical Competition and Cooperation

• Food systems - and food security - are increasingly critical geopolitical factors, involving every region, multilateral body, and policy area. As previously stated by CCS, all “climate change discussions are deeply intertwined with geopolitical competition and cannot be seen in isolation.”

• Geopolitical calculations are a growing factor in food systems and climate-focused investments. Food insecurity and gaps in the agrifood system create vulnerabilities that bad actors can exploit for geopolitical gain, as demonstrated by Russia’s attacks on agricultural infrastructure and weaponization of disrupted Ukrainian food exports to advance its aims.

• Food and agriculture is a key area of competition and cooperation with China, which faces acute and long-term food security challenges of its own. As Western policy makers seek to derisk relations with Beijing, they should be wary of fracturing the global food system. Instead, improving food systems are a national security priority for both the Chinese government and the West, offering a rare opportunity for multilateral cooperation in an otherwise contentious policy environment.

• Food insecurity has the potential to exacerbate broader instability, conflict and competition, particularly if climate finance fails to reach those most affected by climate change. Policymakers must recognize these links and begin integrating them into their strategic planning.
• As noted by previous Feeding Resilience roundtables, there is a “need to develop, maintain, and strengthen military readiness in a more volatile food and climate landscape, as well as mainstreaming an appreciation of the geopolitical benefits of food and climate investments in an environment of geostrategic competition.”

Managing Both Short-Term and Long-Term Risks

• Food insecurity must be viewed as both an immediate and a longer-term threat. Roughly 735 million people faced hunger in 2022, with those numbers likely to climb as climate change impacts agrifood systems. This is critical for development, humanitarian and security actors alike; as more people feel the “threat of hunger”, there is a risk of increased political instability or conflict.

• Today’s short-term challenges will exacerbate the long-term impacts of climate change on existing agri-food systems, supply chains, and vulnerable populations, mainly small rural farmers. Food systems are the first to suffer the impact of climate change through precipitation change, temperature spikes, and desertification, which could push millions into poverty, drive migration, disrupt social cohesion, and destabilize conflict-prone regions.

• As policymakers look to manage these short-term risks, they must not lose sight of the longer-term effects of climate change on food security—and begin investing accordingly.
Co-Benefits In An Era Of Financial Constraints

- The amount of resources needed to address food security and the other knock-on effects of climate change is expected to increase.

- The resources needed to transform food systems and meet Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are around $350 billion per year by 2030.

- At the same time, governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society face significant financial constraints as they balance this growing need with competing priorities, tough economic conditions, and risk aversion.

- Recognizing these constraints, policymakers need to use limited resources more effectively and focus on “co-benefits”—programs that simultaneously support their security, development, and sustainability objectives. This should include mainstreaming climate considerations into existing programs, avoiding redundancy, and breaking down silos among development, diplomacy, and defense.
Featured Topics

Below are the key topics addressed during the discussion and priorities for policy action. The discussion was based on the guiding questions provided to participants (see Annex 1 below), and the comments from introductory speakers.

Food Security within Europe

Russia’s war in Ukraine continues to severely affect the global food market and exacerbate food insecurity, highlighting how bad actors can weaponize food insecurity, and illuminating the benefits of resilient food systems to global stability. In July 2023, Russia withdrew from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and resumed the blockade of Black Sea ports, ending the agreement that had allowed Ukraine to export 33 million tons of grain, mostly to developing countries.

One participant noted that the withdrawal reflects broader Russian actions to weaponize food systems. For instance, Russia has deliberately attacked food production infrastructure, such as grain silos, warehouses, and ports to limit food availability. Russia has also used its hold over Ukrainian exports as leverage to demand sanctions relief and greater access for its own food and fertilizer exports. Given that Ukraine is a major exporter for developing countries, Russia’s weaponization of food has disproportionate effects on vulnerable populations, threatening the food security of millions of people around the world. Some studies also suggest that the rising food prices due to the war have fueled violence, estimating that Russia’s invasion increased intergroup conflict in Africa by a weighted average of 5.3%.

Participants also agreed that the war has created long-term risks for global food security. Data from the International Grains Council (IGC) shows that Ukraine produced nearly 29% less grain this year, and production could decline further as Russia’s military continues to target food facilities. Moreover, significant portions of Ukraine’s arable land has been degraded
by the conflict and contaminated with landmines or unexploded ordnance, compromising the country’s future agricultural productivity and ability to supply the many countries that rely on Ukrainian exports.

Although the EU has helped mitigate the disruption of food supplies from Ukraine, roundtable participants indicated that food production within the EU faces growing vulnerabilities as well. For example, recent wildfires and prolonged droughts have already destroyed farmland, stressed vegetation, and contributed to crop failures in many regions. As climate change intensifies extreme weather and shifts agricultural biomes, crop yields in the EU could continue to suffer, affecting food supplies, global food prices, and exports to key trading partners, like the United Kingdom, United States, and China.

**Competition, Cooperation, and Chinese Food Security**

China faces both immediate and long-term food security challenges. The country remains highly reliant on soybean and wheat imports, and the changing eating habits of the middle class have driven up demand for processed foods and animal proteins. As a result, the country’s food self-sufficiency ratio has decreased from 93.6 percent to 65.8 percent since 2000, and food imports have increased by an average of 11.4 percent annually over the past two decades. Climate change is likely to exacerbate these challenges, degrading soil quality and further restricting production capacity.

China has also pursued a comprehensive strategy aimed at increasing its power and influence globally. China is now the top trading partner of more than 120 countries, including nearly all of those in South America. For instance, food products accounted for 33% of total exports from Latin America and the Caribbean to China in 2020. More than 140 countries have signed up as participants in the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s sprawling infrastructure development program, and China now owns, manages, or has invested in
more than 100 ports in some 60 countries. China has also used the program to carry out agricultural investment cooperation projects.

Participants noted that China’s food security challenges and global investments have geopolitical implications. As the United States and EU continue to de-risk investments and build supply chain resiliency, there is a risk of fracturing the current food system and forcing third countries to choose between the West and its competitors. That could drive actors like Russia and China towards more aggressive action in Africa, such as land grabbing for carbon offsets, or investments meant to influence multilateral coordination. This could include efforts to influence political decision-making on the continent or use Africa as a base for strategic competition, trapping producers like Brazil, Argentina and Australia between competing global powers, and accelerating aggressive investments into genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and domestic stockpiles.

However, food security also has the potential to be a key area of cooperation in a polarized environment and economy. As highlighted above, Russia’s war in Ukraine demonstrated the fragility of key markets like cereals and the widespread humanitarian impact when food systems are weaponized. Given these dynamics and strong trade dependencies, there could be room to coordinate efforts and spur sustainable investments through the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Global Alliance for Food Security (GAFS), and other bilateral, regional and multilateral mechanisms.

**Local Resilience Supports Global Stability**

Building local agricultural resilience to climate change and other shocks helps reduce the ability of spoilers like Russia to hold the global food system at risk. Women and smallholder farmers are particularly crucial for global agriculture. Small-scale farmers produce one third of the world’s food, up to 70 percent
in many developing countries, and women make up almost 40 percent of the global agricultural labor force. Yet, the livelihoods of women and small farmers and their capacity to feed the world are increasingly threatened by climate shocks, such as heat waves, changing rain patterns, floods, and other extreme weather events that damage crops, reduce arable land, and exacerbate existing inequalities. With limited amounts of climate finance actually reaching small-scale farms, participants noted that more investment is needed that supports adaptation, develops social safety nets, focuses on gender equality, and anticipates long-term climate trends. One example of a successful framework was the World Food Programme’s Sahel Integrated Resilience program, which enabled the food security of beneficiaries to remain stable despite additional shocks and stressors.

Roundtable participants also recognized that the context-specific impacts of climate change on agriculture, combined with reliance on local traditions in many settings, require a localization of the development agenda. One participant noted that traditional knowledge contains a “reservoir of adaptive capacity” and innovative solutions that can be used to make food systems more resilient to climate change. Furthermore, research indicates that women and girls are up to 14 times more likely to be harmed during a disaster and that climate hazards can amplify gender inequalities, making them more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Therefore, as women and other vulnerable populations—such as Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities—are disproportionately impacted by climate change, donors and institutions must fully integrate them into decision-making processes. Their expertise and experiences will ensure that interventions reflect community dynamics and that assistance reaches those most in need.
Safe Geopolitics Requires Food Systems That “Do More Than Feed”

For local wellbeing and global stability, today’s food systems must evolve and adapt to a changing climate and a growing population. As such, instead of simply increasing the amount of food we produce, the SDGs call for the transformation of agricultural and food systems to meet social, economic, and sustainability targets. Notably, this represents a transition from traditional, production-focused food security efforts to a more systemic approach.

Participants noted the importance of long-term approaches during this systemic transformation. For example, while the protection and knowledge of local farmers remain critical, building resilience and investing in innovation is also critical. And while sectoral reforms are a key part of a systemic approach, policymakers must adopt a nexus approach and break down silos to change the current food system in the long-term.

For the United States and EU, this could include leveraging overarching frameworks like Global Gateway, Team Europe, or the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), including partner countries in a more meaningful way, incentivizing farmers to adopt sustainable practices, and anticipating the food security impacts of climate-driven migration. For example, the EU’s Global Gateway recently launched a regional food security project for the Caribbean, showcasing the bloc’s commitment to sustainable agri-food systems and development.
Conclusion

Overall, the roundtable emphasized the geopolitical implications of food security and identified critical areas of focus to ensure global food security and climate adaptation measures are targeted, effective, and informed.

The workshop underscored that food is power and maintaining reliable access to food is critical for security. Russia’s war in Ukraine illustrates that key food systems can be weaponized to extract military and political gains, taking advantage of trade dependencies and interconnected food supplies. With conflict and climate change continuing to disrupt food production and reduce food availability, including in traditionally stable countries, the geopolitical importance of food is growing. To preserve stability, it is vital for the United States, EU, and other partners to focus on global food security and strengthen food systems at home and abroad.

The interactions between climate, food, and security have compounded into a “polycrisis” of multiple acute emergencies that threaten livelihoods and stability. But without tackling structural vulnerabilities, these destructive problems will only intensify as climate change continues to drive insecurity. Given increasingly limited resources, there is a need for an approach that simultaneously manages these short-term crises, and develops the capacity to endure future climate realities. Enhanced collaboration between defense, development, and diplomacy establishments is also needed to transform agricultural systems to be more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient to climate risks.
Annex 1: Suggested Questions for Discussion

• What are the key geopolitical risks related to climate change and food that the security community should care about? What are security actors already doing to tackle these risks?

• What are the similarities and differences between U.S. and European approaches to economic and technological cooperation and competition with China on climate, food, and related sectors? What are the geopolitical and security implications?

• How should the United States, NATO and EU security, development and humanitarian communities address frustrations from poor and vulnerable countries about a relative lack of assistance with climate vulnerability and food insecurity compared to defense priorities (such as Ukraine)?

• What is your organization’s approach to food insecurity and climate change, including the social drivers of climate change vulnerability, the uneven distribution of risk, short-term emergencies and long-term resilience building? Could you suggest lessons learned about policies and/or programs that help improve food system adaptation and resilience while preventing or minimizing conflict at the same time?
Annex 2: Roundtable Participants

- **Antonio Albaladejo Román** - Policy Analyst, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), European Parliament
- **Ricardo Borges de Castro** - Associate Director and Head of the Europe in the World Program (EPC)
- **Siena Cicarelli** - Research Fellow, Center for Climate and Security (CCS) and Program Director, Nexus Project
- **Luca Cinciripini** - Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), EU Politics and Institutions program
- **Antoine D’haese** - EU Projects Manager, Safe Food Advocacy Europe
- **Ruben Diaz-Plaja** - Senior Policy Adviser, Policy Planning Unit, NATO
- **Tobias Gras** - Senior Policy Advisor, Danish Agricultural Council
- **Annika Hedberg** - Senior Adviser on climate and sustainability
- **Alan Matthews** (virtual) - Trinity College Dublin, Professor of European Agricultural Policy, Trinity College Dublin
- **Eleonora Milazzo** - Joint Research Fellow at the European Policy Centre and the Egmont Institute in Brussels
- **Cassandra Morton O’Connor** - Public Engagement Specialist, U.S. Mission to NATO
- **Asli Okyay** - Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
- **Jan Ondrus** - Advocacy Lead at the United Nations World Food Programme Office to the European Union
• **Zitouni Ould-Dada** - Deputy Director, Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment (OCB). Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

• **Grazia Pacillo**, Senior Scientist. Co-Lead CGIAR Climate Security FOCUS/Climate change resilience, food security and agriculture - The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

• **Laurence Pais** - European External Action Service

• **Isabel Paliotta** - Policy Officer for Sustainable Food Systems at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB)

• **Patricia Parera** - Senior Research Fellow, Center for Climate and Security (CCS)

• **Sophie Pornschlegel** - Director of Studies and Development, Europe Jacques Delors, Thinking Europe

• **Paul Rushton** - Officer, Climate Change and Security, Emerging Security Challenges (ESC), NATO

• **Gary Russ** - European Command (EUCOM), Real Estate, Environmental and NSIP. Infrastructure and Engineering Branch.

• **Erin Sikorsky** - Director, Center for Climate and Security (CCS)

• **Stefan Sipka**, Senior Policy Analyst and Interim Head of Sustainable Prosperity for Europe program, European Policy Center (EPC)

• **Claus Haugaard Sorensen** - Senior advisor on humanitarian and development policy. Global Executive Leadership Initiative

• **Jessica Stoll** - USNATO Political Officer; Foreign Service Officer

• **Raul Villegas** - Program Assistant (EPC)

• **Michael Werz** - Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress. Co-Director of Nexus project in partnership with CCS

• **Ethan Wong** - Research Fellow, Center for Climate and Security (CCS)