New Threats to International Peace and Security: Pandemics, Food Security and Climate Change

Nuevas amenazas para la paz y la seguridad internacionales: pandemias, seguridad alimentaria y cambio climático

Enrique Ochoa Martínez

Politic's Coordinator, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations
eochoa@sre.gob.mx

■

Abstract

This article describes how the U.N. Security Council addressed issues related to pandemics, food security, and climate change during Mexico's tenure as an elected member for the period 2021-2022. It provides an analysis of the similarities and differences of how the Council approached these issues, in comparison to traditional threats to international peace and security. The article also addresses the reluctance and justification of some Security Council members in accepting the link between climate and security.

■

Resumen

Este artículo describe la manera en que el Consejo de Seguridad abordó las temáticas relacionadas con las pandemias, la seguridad alimentaria y el cambio climático durante la participación de México como miembro electo, periodo 2021-2022. Presenta un análisis de las similitudes y diferencias en su forma de abordarlas y compara el tratamiento de estos temas con el de las amenazas tradicionales a la paz y seguridad internacionales. También aborda la reticencia y justificación de algunos miembros del Consejo de Seguridad en aceptar la relación entre clima y seguridad.

■

Keywords

United Nations, Security Council, multilateralism, preventive diplomacy, pandemics, food security, climate change

■

Palabras clave

Naciones Unidas, Consejo de Seguridad, multilateralismo, diplomacia preventiva, pandemias, seguridad alimentaria, cambio climático

New Threats to International Peace and Security: Pandemics, Food Security, and Climate Change

Enrique Ochoa Martínez

During the first five decades after the establishment of the United Nations Security Council, its agenda focused primarily on "traditional" security situations, that is, on conflicts of a clearly international character, or on situations of domestic conflict that could affect international peace and security.

The first time that a "thematic situation" properly speaking was discussed in the Security Council was in 2000, when a debate on HIV/AIDS was held.[1] On that occasion, former Vice President of the United States, Al Gore, referred to the need to see security issues through a broader prism. Since then, the Security Council's agenda has expanded to address issues such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, pandemics, food security, climate change, women, peace and security, and children and armed conflict, among others.

However, the degree of institutional acceptance of these thematic agendas varies considerably; for example, in the case of terrorism, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Security Council adopted resolution 1373 (2001) which established the Counter-Terrorism Committee as a subsidiary body. Subsequently, in 2004, through resolution 1535 (2004), the Council

---

[1]   Loraine Sievers and Sam Daws, *The Procedure of the U.N. Security Council*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 46.

decided to create an additional structure, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED). Similarly, after the discovery of the nuclear proliferation network run by Pakistani scientist, A.Q. Khan, the subsidiary body on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was established through resolution 1540 (2004). Four years later, resolution 1612 (2005) created the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict as a subsidiary body. Through these actions, terrorism, non-proliferation, and children and armed conflicts were formally registered as topics on the Security Council agenda.

Regarding the women, peace and security agenda, the historic resolution 1325 (2000)[2] which recognizes the important role of women in issues related to peace and security, served as the basis for the Security Council to establish an Informal Group of Experts to systematically address this issue through resolution 2242 (2015).[3] However, the decision to establish an informal group and not a subsidiary body marks a clear difference in relation to the aforementioned issues.[4]

The treatment of climate change has been even more controversial. Some of the permanent members (P5) as well as some elected members refuse to acknowledge the direct connection between climate change and peace, which is why in 2021, for example, Russia vetoed a draft resolution on this topic. Given the discrepancies regarding a more structured approach to climate change, an Informal Group of Experts was also established.[5] However, unlike the group on women, peace and security, it was not the product of a decision of the Security Council, but of the determination of some of its members. Only "like-minded countries" participate in this group, with the notable absences of China and Russia.

In the case of pandemics or food security, to date the Security Council has limited itself to adopting resolutions on these issues and dealing with them in the context of the conflicts it already addresses. The following

---

[2]   Adopted on October 31, 2000.

[3]   Adopted on October 13, 2015.

[4]   During its participation in the Council, Mexico served as president of the 1540 Committee and co-chair of the Informal Group of Experts on Women, Peace and Security.

[5]   The first co-chairs of this informal group were Germany and Niger.

describes how the issues of pandemics, food security and climate change were addressed during Mexico's participation as an elected member of the Council in 2021-2022.

Pandemics

The aforementioned debate on HIV/AIDS that took place in 2000 led to the adoption of resolution 1308 (2000).[6] which recognized that if HIV/AIDS was left uncontrolled it could "pose a risk to stability and security." This was the first time that the Security Council recognized that a pandemic could constitute a risk to peace. Similarly, through resolution 2177 (2014),[7] the Council determined that "the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to international peace and security."

The COVID-19 pandemic was the third public health crisis to be discussed in the Security Council. However, given the differences of opinion, mainly between China and the United States, the Council took more than three months to issue a resolution on a pandemic that, for the first time in history, had impacted on the Security Council's own working methods, forcing it to meet remotely. The main discrepancies lay in the insistence of the United States, during President Trump's administration, to mention the origin of the virus (which was evidently unacceptable to China) and not mention the role of the World Health Organization (WHO). Finally, on July 1, 2020, the Security Council adopted resolution 2532 (2020),[8] which recognizes the possibility that the pandemic endangers international peace and security, and demands the general and immediate cessation of hostilities, supporting the call of the Secretary General, but without recognizing the role of the WHO. The above laid bare the existing polarization within the Council, which prevented it from acting in a timely manner to confront this serious, non-traditional threat.

---

[6] Adopted on July 17, 2000.

[7] Adopted on July 28, 2014.

[8] Adopted on July 1, 2020.

Enrique Ochoa Martínez

In this context, Mexico, which did not yet occupy a seat on the Council, worked to encourage the General Assembly to approve a resolution on international cooperation to guarantee global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment for dealing with COVID-19. This resolution was co-sponsored by 179 U.N. members and was approved by all member States in April 2020 as resolution 74/274,[9] months before the Security Council managed to issue a resolution on the issue.

Subsequently, after the change of Government in the United States, the United Kingdom promoted the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 2565 (2021).[10] This, in addition to referring to the text proposed by Mexico in the General Assembly, recognizes the role of the WHO, requests to strengthen national and multilateral approaches, and international cooperation (such as the COVAX mechanism) to facilitate equitable and affordable access to vaccines against COVID-19 in conflict, post-conflict, and humanitarian emergencies, highlighting the need for international alliances to expand manufacturing and distribution capacity. It also recognizes widespread immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good. This last point was also strongly promoted by Mexico. The resolution was adopted unanimously and, thereby, the Council was able to regain some credibility to act against this new threat to peace.

In 2021 and 2022, the Security Council held two high-level debates related to the pandemic, hosted by the United Kingdom and China, the latter of which focused on post-pandemic recovery in Africa. In the first debate held in February 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mexico made a call to stop the hoarding of vaccines and to accelerate deliveries via COVAX in support of countries with fewer resources.[11]

---

[9] "International Cooperation to Ensure Global Access to Medicines, Vaccines and Medical Equipment to Face COVID-19," A/RES/74/274, April 21, 2020.

[10] Adopted on February 26, 2021.

[11] Permanent Mission of Mexico to the U.N., "Intervención del secretario de Relaciones Exteriores Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon en el debate abierto de alto nivel del Consejo de Seguridad 'Retos para el acceso equitativo de vacunas para el COVID-19'," New York, February 17, 2021, at *https://mision.sre.gob.mx/onu/index.php/intervencionescsonu/1102-17-de-febrero-de-2021-intervencion-del-secretario-de-relaciones-exteriores-marcelo-ebrard-casaubon-in-the-open-debate-challenges-for-equitable-access-to-vaccines-for-covid-19* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

In 2022, Mexico denounced the unacceptable inequality in access to vaccines, which is exacerbated in countries in conflict, post-conflict, and facing humanitarian crises, such as Haiti. It called, among other issues, for the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights in the context of the pandemic, as provided for in the regulations of the World Trade Organization (wto).[12]

During the two-year period in which Mexico participated in the Security Council, many of the debates mentioned the challenges arising from the covid-19 pandemic in conflict situations, and its humanitarian impact, including challenges due to the lack of access to vaccines. For example, in the case of Syria, the importance of renewing the authorization for border crossings on the frontier with Türkiye was highlighted, so that vaccines could be brought to the population in northwest Syria, an area that is not under control of the Syrian government. With the adoption of resolution 2585 (2021),[13] renewing the authorization of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the Council contributed to mitigating some of the effects of the pandemic in that region.

Overall, it can be concluded that the Security Council's support for the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire during the pandemic was extremely erratic and late. Although some armed groups such as the National Liberation Army in Colombia or the Communist Party of the Philippines responded to the call, few actually carried it out. By the time the Security Council adopted resolution 2532 (2020), the few groups that had declared a truce had already restarted hostilities for various reasons.

On the other hand, although it is difficult to quantify the impact of the adoption of resolution 2565 (2021) on the distribution of vaccines, several countries shared information with the Security Council about their actions to deliver vaccines to countries in conflict and to peacekeepers from U.N.

---

[12] Permanent Mission of Mexico to the U.N., "Intervención del secretario de Relaciones Exteriores de México la sesión del Consejo de Seguridad en seguimiento a las resoluciones 2532 y 2565," New York, April 11, 2022, at *https://mision.sre.gob.mx/onu/index.php/intervencionescsonu/1702-11-de-abril-2022-intervencion-de-mexico-en-la-sesion-de-seguimiento-a-las-resoluciones-2532-and-2565* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

[13] Adopted on July 9, 2021.

missions, so it is reasonable to assume that the resolution had a positive, although insufficient, effect.

Food security

Through resolution 2417 (2018),[14] the Security Council recognized that armed conflicts can have direct and indirect consequences for food security due to displacement, destruction of food reserves, or their impact on food markets.

At the beginning of 2023, the five countries that the World Food Program (WFP) identified as having the highest risk of famine were Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.[15] All of them are in conflict or post-conflict situations. In the case of northern Ethiopia, the WFP estimates that after two years of conflict, more than 13 million people require humanitarian assistance, confirming the direct relationship between war, food insecurity, and famine. Meanwhile, a WFP report on the 2022 global food crisis noted that around the world, the number of people in situations of acute food insecurity had increased by more than 200 million in just two years, from 135 to 345 millions.[16] Part of this increase was due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the two-year period in which Mexico participated as an elected member of the Security Council, two high-level debates on food security were organized, both of them during U.S. presidencies. The Secretary of Agriculture and Rural Development participated on behalf of Mexico in one of them, highlighting that "food systems in the world are interdependent

---

[14] Adopted on March 24, 2018.

[15] "Fighting Famine," in WFP, at https://www.wfp.org/fight-famine (date of access: June 16, 2023).

[16] WFP, *Global Food Crisis 2022,* Rome, PMA, June 2022, p. 2, at *https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/ wfp-0000140702/download/?_ga=2.70674455.622437619.1700176111-1054263952.1700176111* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

Enrique Ochoa Martínez

and armed conflict anywhere sooner or later impacts on the food system as a whole."[17]

The discussion on food security was present in most of the sessions on the different conflicts, particularly in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a result of the war, food, fertilizer and fuel prices increased significantly, which had a devastating impact on economies dependent on grain and fertilizer imports from both Ukraine and Russia. The most affected were African and Middle Eastern countries. For example, according to the WFP, 31% of Yemen's wheat imports came from Ukraine and, once the war started, prices reached a level seven times higher than in 2015.[18]

Following a "white note" prepared by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in accordance with resolution 2417 (2018), a debate was convened in September 2022 to review the effects on food insecurity arising from the conflict and violence in northern Ethiopia, northeastern Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen. The note mentioned, among other data, that in Yemen and South Sudan about 19 million and 7.7 million people, respectively, suffered from acute food insecurity.[19]

In the context of this discussion, Mexico stated that in order to address food insecurity it is necessary to increase local production, reduce food waste, make fertilizers more affordable, and increase the functionality

---

[17]   Permanent Mission of Mexico to the U.N., "Intervención de México en la reunión informativa del Consejo de Seguridad sobre la protección de los civiles en los conflictos armados (seguridad alimentaria)," New York, September 15, 2022, at *https://mision.sre.gob.mx/onu/index.php/intervencionescsonu/1944-15-de-septiembre-2022-intervencion-de-mexico-en-la-sesion-informativa-sobre-seguro-alimentaria* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

[18]   Peyvand Khorsandi, "Yemen: Millions at Risk as Ukraine War Effect Rocks Region," in WFP, March 14, 2022, at *https://www.wfp.org/stories/yemen-millions-risk-ukraine-war-effect-rocks-region* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

[19]   OCHA, "Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths Remarks at Security Council Briefing on Conflict-induced Food Insecurity and the Risk of Famine," in Relief Web, September 15, 2022, at *https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-martin-griffiths-remarks-security-council-briefing-conflict-induced-food-insecurity – and-risk-famine* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

of fertilizer and seed supply chains. It also stressed the need for wfp to have the budget it needs to react effectively to famine risks.[20]

The debates served to give visibility from the Security Council to the most critical food security situations. Likewise, statements such as the one promoted by Mexico and Norway[21] expressed support for the Secretary-General's efforts to find a way out of the conflict in Ukraine. In this context, the representatives of the Secretary-General worked together with Türkiye to facilitate the Black Sea agreements that allowed the export of grains and fertilizers from Ukraine and Russia to resume, which had a direct impact on food prices.[22] Likewise, in the case of Yemen, the negotiation of the truce facilitated by the support of the special envoy allowed the entry of fuel through the port of Al Hudaydah, which in turn facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid and reduced the number of people at risk of food insecurity. On the other hand, in the case of Afghanistan, despite the Taliban taking power, it was decided to renew the mandate of the special political mission (unama) to continue coordinating humanitarian efforts and confront the food crisis, even though the international community had not recognized the regime in power.

Climate Change

Although the members of the Security Council recognize the problem that climate change represents, there is no internal consensus regarding the impacts of climate change on international peace and security. This is despite the fact that climate change and environmental degradation are a factor that has exacerbated conflicts such as in the Sahel, where desertifi-

---

[20] Permanent Mission of Mexico to the U.N., "Intervención de México en la reunión informativa del Consejo de Seguridad sobre la protección de los civiles en los conflictos armados (seguridad alimentaria)," September 15, 2022, at *https://mision.sre.gob.mx/onu/index.php/intervencionescsonu/1944-15-de-septiembre-2022-intervencion-de-mexico-en-la-sesion-informativa-sobre-seguridad-alimentaria* (date of access: June 6, 2023).

[21] "Statement by the President of the Security Council," S/prst/2022/3, May 6, 2022.

[22] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (unctad), *A Trade Hope: The Impact of the Black Sea Initiative,* Geneva, unctad, March 2023.

cation and water scarcity have increased tensions between communities of pastoralists and farmers.

Russia and China consider that climate change is a social and environmental issue that is outside of the remit of the Security Council, since there is a specific forum for it. It is true that discussions on climate change have to take place in a broader context in which all States participate, such as the Conferences of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). There is also a perception that bringing discussions to the Security Council could distract the attention of the international community from the UNFCCC COP debates, and could even lead to the diversion of resources to focus primarily on conflict-affected areas.

For Mexico it is evident, and it has clearly stated it in various debates, that climate change has had a direct impact on the conflicts in the Sahel, Mali or South Sudan, but also in a very close country like Haiti,[23] where, in addition to suffering the impact of numerous natural disasters, a large part of their economy is based on agriculture and fishing.

Four debates on climate and security were held during 2021 and 2022, under the presidencies of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Niger and Gabon. In the debate organized by Ireland in September 2021, Mexico's Minister of Foreign Affairs emphasized that climate change is a threat to the survival of humanity, and it was irrefutable that its effects can exacerbate existing conflicts. Furthermore, he clearly stated that the Council should not evade the issue and requested that the Secretary-General's reports include early warnings on the security implications of the adverse effects of climate change.[24]

---

[23]   "Haiti," in UNDP Climate Change Adaptation, at *https://www.adaptation-undp.org/explore/caribbean/haiti* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

[24]   Permanent Mission of Mexico to the U.N., "Intervención del secretario de Relaciones Exteriores de México, Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon, en el debate del Consejo de Seguridad sobre clima y seguridad", 23 de septiembre de 2021, en *https://mision.sre.gob.mx/onu/index.php/intervencionescsonu/1410-22-de-septiembre-de-2021-intervencion-del-canciller-marcelo-ebrard-durante-el-debate-abierto-sobre-clima-y-seguridad* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

Enrique Ochoa Martínez

The debate organized by Niger, one of the countries most affected by climate change,[25] took place in December 2021 and focused on the link between climate change and terrorism. On that occasion, the U.N. Secretary-General observed that "in central Mali, terrorist groups have exploited the growing tensions between herders and farmers to recruit new members from pastoralist communities, who often feel excluded and stigmatized."[26]

The discussions hosted by Ireland and Niger were intended to set the framework for the adoption of a climate and security resolution on which several rounds of negotiations had taken place. In 2021, Germany had already tried to adopt a similar project, but the idea was scrapped when it became clear that it would not succeed.[27] In December 2021, Ireland and Niger presented a draft resolution that was co-sponsored by 113 States, including Mexico. However, Russia vetoed its adoption, India voted against it, and China abstained.

Russia argued that expanding the Council's mandate and establishing a direct connection between climate change and peace could have negative consequences, and that this issue belongs to other multilateral forums.[28] India agreed with this positioning and further added that affordable access to finance and technology are critical for climate action.[29] Although China

---

25 Laura Fultang, "Niger's Accelerating Climate Crisis," in OCHA, September 27, 2022, at *https://www.unocha.org/story/niger%E2%80%99s-accelerating-climate-crisis* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

26 U.N. Secretary-General, "Remarks at Security Council Debate on Security in the Context of Terrorism and Climate Change," in United Nations, December 9, 2021, at *https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2021-12-09/remarks-security-council-debate-security-context-of-terrorism-and-climate-change* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

27 Stefan Talmon, "Germany Fails to Integrate Climate Security Concerns Into the Work of the Security Council," in German Practice in International Law, August 31, 2021, at *https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/2021/08/germany-fails-to-integrate-climate-security-concerns-into-the-work-of-the-security-council/* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

28 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the U.N., "Explanation of Vote by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia after the Vote on UNSC Draft Resolution on Climate and Security," at *https://russiaun.ru/en/news/av_13122021* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

29 Permanent Representative of India to the U.N., "Action on Draft Resolution on Security in the Context of Climate Change (moved jointly by Niger and Ireland) [December 13, 2021; 1000 hrs] Explanation of Vote by Ambassador TS Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of

---

shared Russia's position, it chose to abstain, presumably so as not to directly oppose African countries, where it has important economic interests.

From that point on, all of the discussions referring to the issue of climate change became even more tense. In 2021, Brazil, a country that has a similar position to India on this issue, joined as an elected member of the Security Council.

Several draft presidential statements,[30] such as one promoted by Gabon on cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union, were left out due to references to climate change. However, with regard to the renewal of the mandates of United Nations peacekeeping missions, in general, a number of references already present in the resolutions could be maintained, such as those of the missions in Mali (MINUSMA) or in South Sudan (UNMISS). Regarding the Somalia Assistance Mission (UNSOM), the language on climate change was diluted and in the case of the special political mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) alternative language was used referring only to droughts.[31]

As in previous topics, the debates in the Security Council undoubtedly served to increase the visibility of the issue of climate change. However, the most concrete actions were limited to requesting reports on its effects and establishing specific positions for climate and security advisors in some U.N. missions, such as in Somalia or Iraq.

Conclusion

It is evident that the Security Council has responded to new threats in different ways, ranging from the creation of specialized subsidiary bodies

India to the United Nations," at *https://pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNSC?id=NDQ1NQ* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

30   These documents require the consensus of the members of the Security Council in order to be adopted.

31   Security Council Report, *The U.N. Security Council and Climate Change: Tracking the Agenda after the 2021 Veto,* New York, Security Council Report (Research Report, 4), December 30, 2022, at *https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/unsc_climatechange_2022.pdf* (date of access: June 16, 2023).

to the dismissal by some of its members of their connection to international peace and security.

However, in the three cases analyzed, the Security Council served as a platform to grant them visibility. With regard to pandemics and food security, the support of the Council has been fundamental for the work carried out by the different areas of the U.N. Secretariat, in particular OCHA, but also specialized agencies such as WHO or WFP.

However, there is a need to improve coordination across the U.N. System to address these new threats. There is frequent discussion of how to enable different organizations to work in a more coordinated manner. However, important challenges to effective coordination remain.

Regarding climate change, the reluctance of some permanent and elected members to have the Security Council address it stems in part from the perception that doing so could divert attention from central issues, such as unfulfilled commitments on climate change financing by countries that have historically been main polluters. To resolve this situation, it will be necessary to overcome the existing mistrust so that the Council can address the issue of climate change from the appropriate perspective, since the consequences of this phenomenon are clearly factors that exacerbate conflicts and even represent a threat to the very existence of some small island States.

Although the Security Council has managed, with varying degrees of effectiveness, to confront new threats, its future relevance as the body responsible for ensuring international peace and security will depend, to a large extent, on its ability to adapt to addressing not only these threats, but also to new emerging challenges, such as those arising from advances in science and technology. Such cases might include cybersecurity or artificial intelligence.