

BRIEFING
PAPER

405

February 2025



Addressing environment- related risks in the EU's crisis management

From greening to foresight and preparedness

Emma Hakala

FIIA

FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 405 / February 2025

Addressing environment-related risks in the EU's crisis management

From greening to foresight and preparedness

Summary

- The EU and its crisis management efforts are increasingly challenged by environment-related risks, such as extreme weather events and their implications for stability, migration and food security.
- Greater recognition of environmental risks could bolster resilience and preparedness not only within specific crisis management missions, but also across the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.
- The integration of environmental issues into crisis management has been hindered by unclear mandates, lack of knowledge and expertise, and a failure to recognize the potential benefits for preparedness.
- For better mainstreaming, the environment needs to be seen as a key part of comprehensive preparedness, for example by producing foresight data, identifying linkages between the environment and security, and contributing to early-warning systems.

Author



Emma Hakala

Leading Researcher
The Center on Climate Politics and Security
FIIA

Introduction

The European Union has long recognised climate change and the global ecological crisis as security threats. As early as 2008, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) framed climate change as a threat multiplier that aggravates other tensions and sources of instability. Recognizing the interrelations between environmental crises, peace, security and conflicts has become a consistent element in the EU's foreign and security policy, reiterated in the Global Strategy and Strategic Compass.

To support the integration of environmental aspects into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the Union's High Representative and the European Commission adopted a joint communication, *A New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus*, in 2023. Among several areas of work, the communication mentions the EU's crisis management operations, stating the need to “progressively mainstream and address climate and environmental aspects in the planning, implementation and review of their mandates”.¹ A follow-up report on the implementation of the joint communication was published in February 2025, presenting an opportunity to take stock of the progress and potential of environmental mainstreaming.

This Briefing Paper examines the work that the EU has done up to now to prepare for environment-related risks in its crisis management operations and identifies factors hindering effective mainstreaming. It then proposes more effective ways to address environmental aspects and ensure

that they are not completely sidelined as the EU's attention shifts towards military preparedness and more conventional security threats.

Environmental degradation adds to current global challenges

Crisis management is a core element of the EU's CSDP, supporting the Union's role as an international security actor. Based on an integrated approach to conflicts and security, it draws on both civilian and military capabilities to respond to complex crises. A major part of the work is carried out in the field by 24 missions or operations across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. These operations are mandated to support host governments through activities ranging from confidence-building and monitoring to law enforcement and security sector reform.

The global operating environment for crisis management has shifted significantly since 2003, when the EU deployed its first operations in the Western Balkans. This shift has been reflected in the objectives and focus areas of crisis management. In the early 2010s, missions were launched in Africa and Afghanistan, equipped with broad mandates covering issues such as democratization and law enforcement, aimed at improving overall security in the host countries. However, largely due to declining interest and reduced resources from member states, the level of ambition in crisis management operations decreased towards the end of the 2010s. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and other rising geopolitical tensions hastened a shift of focus back to Europe and its neighbourhood, with the

1 European Commission (2023) *A new outlook on the climate and security nexus: Addressing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on peace, security and defence*. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023Jc0019>.

promotion of the EU's internal security and military measures becoming a strategic priority.²

Amid the security upheaval, the EU and its crisis management operations are also increasingly challenged by environmental collapse. The growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events directly impede the work of crisis management operations, and expose their personnel to new risks. For example, extreme temperatures pose a health hazard as such, while sandstorms or landslides may cut off roads and temporarily restrict movement around the host region.

Environment-related risks can also contribute to a deteriorating security situation in the host region, complicating the operating environment for crisis management. Reduced access to water or arable land, for instance, may exacerbate harmful societal developments such as poverty and displacement, which may, in turn, lead to growing discontent and instability. Such consequences may derail promising peace-building processes or create opportunities for extremist groups to gain ground.³ By extension, they also affect local authorities, the main stakeholders of crisis management operations in the host country. Environmental risks can thus undermine the specific initiatives and actors that crisis management operations are deployed to support.

Better awareness and foresight regarding environment-related risks are urgently needed to ensure preparedness in the CSDP and crisis management. This requires not only the adoption of new practices, but also new information and analytical capacity. Although the EU produces vast amounts of environmental data, including risk assessments, for example through the European Environment Agency, their specific connections and cascading effects on

security and stability are less well known.⁴ The EU is not alone among international or intergovernmental organizations, and could benefit from learning and adapting good practices from other actors. The UN in particular has developed a vast array of climate, peace and security-related activities. Through the Climate Security Mechanism, it has successfully deployed advisors to the field and promoted programmes sensitive to conflicts and climate.⁵

In the EU, increased awareness of environmental risks could also enhance preparedness across the entire CSDP through improved early-warning intelligence. Preparedness is broadly understood as the state of readiness to face various crises, particularly war. Even purely war-related preparedness requires an understanding of risks and capacities across society as a whole, and today's complex crises equally call for cross-sectoral efforts. As Finland's former president Sauli Niinistö points out in his report to the EU on Europe's civilian and military preparedness, more coordinated action is needed to ensure the Union's capacity to respond to various crises. Among other things, the report highlights the need to treat environmental risks as part of overall resilience, including them in comprehensive risk assessments.⁶ Such analysis requires cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary data, combining environmental indicators, such as extreme weather, with societal and political factors such as instability, inequality, or poverty. Early-warning data from outside the EU is also needed, as complex socio-ecological risks often cascade and spill over national borders. CSDP missions could contribute by analysing field data and reporting it to the EU and member states.⁷

- 2 Smit, T. (2024) "Towards a More Strategic Civilian CSDP: Strengthening EU Civilian Crisis Management in a New Era of Geopolitics and Risk", *SIPRI Research Policy Paper*. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/policy-reports/towards-more-strategic-civilian-csdp-strengthening-eu-civilian-crisis-management-new-era-geopolitics>. Karjalainen, T., Savoranta, V. (2021) "The EU's Strategic Approach to CSDP Interventions: Building a Tenet from Praxis", *FIIA Analysis*, October 2021. https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/analysis11_the-eus-strategic-approach-to-csdp-interventions_tyne-karjalainen-ville-savoranta-2.pdf.
- 3 UNDP (2020) "The Climate Security Nexus and the Prevention of Violent Extremism: Working at the Intersection of Major Development Challenges", UNDP Policy Brief. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-Climate-SecurityNexus-and-Prevention-of-violent-extremis>.

- 4 Meyer, C., Vantaggiato, F. P., & Youngs, R. (2021) Preparing the CSDP for the new security environment created by climate change. In-depth analysis. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653639/EXPO_IDA\(2021\)653639_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653639/EXPO_IDA(2021)653639_EN.pdf).
- 5 Scartozzi, C. M. (2022) "Climate-sensitive programming in international security: An analysis of UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions", *International Peacekeeping*, 29(3), 488-521; UNDP (2023) Climate Security Mechanism. Brochure. https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-10/climate_security_mechanism_brochure_may_2023.pdf.
- 6 Niinistö, S. (2024) Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness. Brussels, European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en?filename=2024_Niinisto-report_Book_VF.pdf.
- 7 Meyer et al. 2021.



European Commissioner for the Environment Jessika Roswall speaks at a press conference in Brussels on February 4, 2025, about the state of water in the European Union. Commission reports point to the poor condition of surface water across EU countries.

Source: Wiktor Dabkowski, Eyevine/Lehtikuva

At the strategic level, the need for CSDP operations to take environmental risks into account has been clearly acknowledged in the policy documents that govern crisis management. The Strategic Compass also calls for strengthened analytical capacities and early-warning systems to prepare for risks caused by climate change and its mitigation. This is articulated in a specific goal whereby all CSDP missions and operations should have an environmental advisor and report on their environmental footprint by 2025.⁸

The strategic goal is carried through to the 2023 Civilian CSDP Compact, which provides guidelines for the EU's civilian crisis management efforts, particularly citing the need to enhance the capacity to tackle the global, political, economic,

ecological and other challenges facing the Union. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has also provided operational guidelines for mainstreaming environmental issues into civilian CSDP missions in practice. The document presents concrete measures and assigns responsibility for their implementation within missions, including actions ranging from environmental footprint reporting and awareness raising to assessing environmental security risks and combatting environmental crime.⁹

Despite a promising foundation in policy documents, the integration of environmental issues into the CSDP has proceeded slowly in practice. Most

8 Council of the European Union (2022a) A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security, 7371/22, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

9 Council of the EU (2022b) Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the establishment of a Civilian CSDP Compact, 9588/23. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/civilian-compact_en; Council of the EU (2022c) Operational Guidelines for integrating environmental and climate aspects into civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions, 11095/22. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11095-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

progress has been made in environmental footprint reporting, supported by a set of procedures outlined in the EEAS operational guidelines. However, there is no shared analytical framework or methodological basis for assessing environmental risks in host regions. By the end of 2024, only four environmental advisors were working in CSDP operations – well below the target of an advisor in each mission by 2025. Previously, environmental advisors had been assigned to missions in the Central African Republic, Georgia, and Somalia, for example.

More action is needed to mainstream environmental aspects into the work of CSDP missions. However, this is likely to be challenging in the current geopolitical context, where the EU and member states are more inclined to focus and narrow down CSDP activities amid tightening financial constraints. To continue responding to environment-related risks, the EU needs to find smart, cost-efficient ways to drive the agenda forward. For that to happen, it is also necessary to understand what may have caused implementation to lag behind.

Obstacles to mainstreaming

While the ambitious goals outlined in policy documents have carved a space for environmental activities within the CSDP and crisis management, structural and strategic factors have slowed their implementation. First, the work of each CSDP mission is determined by its mandate, and according to publicly available sources, none of the mandates for currently ongoing missions explicitly mention environmental risks. Most missions are mandated to work on issues such as capacity building for local security authorities, the rule of law, or monitoring peace agreements – areas with little direct connection to the environmental sector.¹⁰ This does not preclude environmental activities but essentially requires them to be framed as supporting the core work of the mission, potentially assigning them a lower priority. As a result, the level of ambition for environmental activities may remain low, particularly if they are not perceived as directly beneficial for the work of the mission.

Second, CSDP missions lack expertise in the linkages between environment and security.¹¹ In accordance with mission mandates, most of the staff work on themes such as the rule of law and border control, with few apparent connections to environmental issues. As environmental objectives have only recently been incorporated into the CSDP, missions have no institutional experience to draw on and generally lack uniform guidelines for activities, apart from footprint analysis. The deployment of environmental advisors to each mission to implement environmental mainstreaming has been delayed because the recruitment of advisors has stalled. In addition, the advisors are left alone to oversee a wide range of issues, from footprint analysis to awareness-raising. In practice, this means that the missions are only able to cover parts of the environmental agenda to their full potential.

“The strategic value of improved foresight, early-warning and preparedness capacity remains poorly recognized.”

Third, the EU initially focused on reducing the environmental footprint of crisis management, which may not have been effective from a strategic point of view. Footprint analysis as such is not part of the environmental security work that aims to enhance situational awareness, risk assessment, or preparedness. Although efforts to “green” defence forces and other security actors are often included under the umbrella of environmental security – such as the UN’s ‘Greening the Blue’ activities in its peacekeeping missions – they primarily require engineering or logistics expertise, which differs significantly from that of an environmental security expert. Footprint analysis does not contribute to the recognition of, and preparedness for, environmental security risks. The EU has chosen a different strategy here from the UN, for example, which has since moved beyond “greening” efforts and ensured that its climate, peace and security advisors contribute to policy advice and strategic foresight.

10 Meyer et al. 2021; EEAS (2025) Missions and Operations. EEAS website, 30.1.2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en.

11 Overview of thematic reporting of Finnish mission staff to CMC Finland on climate and sustainability, 2024.

The EU has aimed to “lead by example” by reducing its own environmental impact to inspire action from partners and host governments. However, to be persuasive, this example should also demonstrate benefits. While it is possible to reap benefits through energy efficiency, for example, CSDP missions have yet to report major breakthroughs in their performance. Crisis management also tends to take place in challenging circumstances where vital needs like energy, food and water supply are strained, and low-carbon or less resource-intensive alternatives are unavailable. Efforts to fine-tune the environmental footprint may appear futile or even counterproductive to the mission mandate, potentially diminishing the crisis management staff’s commitment to the environmental agenda.

The EEAS has not managed to secure the necessary internal and external buy-in to credibly advance the environmental CSDP agenda in practice. Ambitious policy goals have not been matched with adequate resources, or the time to implement them. The EEAS has also struggled to communicate the potential benefits of better integration of environmental issues to crucial stakeholders, including its own crisis management staff. The strategic value of improved foresight, early-warning and preparedness capacity remains poorly recognized.¹² More effort will be needed to address these shortcomings – and there are strategic and resource-effective ways of doing so, as discussed in the next section.

Rethinking environmental security practices in the CSDP missions

Improved implementation of the environmental agenda in crisis management cannot rely on additional financing, as this is unlikely to materialize at a time when the focus of the EU’s CSDP is shifting back to traditional security questions. Instead, solutions need to be found through strategic positioning and practices. The environment should be seen from the point of view of the EU’s geostrategic interests, as a key part of comprehensive preparedness, as recognized, for example, in President Niinistö’s report. The environmental component as a whole needs to

be integrated into the full scope of the CSDP by better contributing to foresight and risk assessment.

CSDP missions are ideally positioned in the field to *produce foresight data* on the environment and security. In local contexts, the missions can observe developments such as the impacts of floods or droughts on internal displacement, or the effects of sandstorms or torrential rain on the movements of extremist groups. Monitoring such events can contribute to situational awareness, enabling missions to prepare for the implications of environment-related risks for their own activities. In addition, they should report this data to inform foresight and analysis at the EU level.

Data from the field can, in turn, be used to support better *identification of linkages between environment-related risks and security*. Although the evidence base for the environment, peace and security is expanding through research, more detailed analysis is needed to understand the chains of effects through which impacts cascade across sectors and national borders, such as supply chain disruptions stemming from extreme weather events. A deeper and more contextualized understanding of these interconnections can provide valuable support for policymaking in particular.

“Rather than prompting new functions, environmental issues should be integrated into standard monitoring and reporting.”

The data produced by CSDP missions should also be used to develop *early-warning capability for environment-related risks*. Contextualized evidence from the field should be combined with quantitative data stemming from satellite sources, such as the EU’s Copernicus Programme for Earth Observation. This would produce more detailed environmental data that could be fed into existing European Early Warning Systems, contributing to situational awareness, comprehensive risk assessment, and preparedness throughout the EU on issues such as migration, food security and critical materials.

¹² Meyer et al. 2021.

In practice, enhanced monitoring and analysis of environment-related risks does not necessarily imply new resource-intensive tasks for the CSDP missions, considering the work they already do. Rather than prompting new functions, environmental issues should be included as a standard part of the monitoring and reporting to the EEAS that is already performed by the Mission Analytical Capability (MAC). Planning will be needed, particularly at the outset, to integrate environmental aspects into analysis and reporting, and mission staff will need to be trained in any new practices or priorities included in their roles.

However, by extending some of the routine environmental monitoring tasks to the MAC analysts, the Environmental Advisor could focus on thematic planning and mainstreaming, for example through training fellow staff. Efforts to deploy environmental advisors should continue, even though the Strategic Compass goal of ensuring that every mission has one may now be out of reach. Pending the recruitment of permanent Environmental Advisors, missions could also address their immediate needs by employing short-term environmental experts, as has already been done in the mission in Niger. Moreover, a shift in the CSDP's overall interest towards the EU and its neighbouring regions, such as the missions in Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova, does not render the environmental agenda any less important – if anything, it highlights the need for situational awareness of environment-related risks closer to home.

Conclusions

The need for the EU to address environment-related risks will not disappear, even in a more tense geopolitical and security situation. The ecological crisis has the potential to exacerbate security risks stemming from war and economic competition, and to erode overall resilience. The inability to recognize and react to environment-related risks would also run counter to the idea of comprehensive preparedness, which has been acknowledged as vital to the EU's security.

The environmental agenda needs to be justified and implemented in a strategic way. It should no longer be seen as an additional element imposed on the CSDP by other policy sectors, but as a prerequisite enabling work on the core functions of security and preparedness. Even when environmental security issues are not explicitly mentioned in mission mandates, they may play a crucial supporting role, as failure to address them could severely undermine the mission's ability to fulfil its tasks. Ultimately, foresight and pre-emptive action on environment-related risks will be far more resource-efficient than reactive attempts to address the harm done. ◆

BRIEFING
PAPER
405
February 2025

ISBN 978-951-769-821-4

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Cover photo: European Union, Diego Cupolo, 2024. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.
Cropped from the original.