WEATHERING RISK

Climate Security Scenarios in the Balkans

An exercise conducted at the Berlin Climate and Security Conference 2022

IMCCS EXPERT GROUP
COUNCIL ON STRATEGIC RISKS

CENTER FOR CLIMATE & SECURITY
COUNCIL ON STRATEGIC RISKS

adelphi

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Executive Summary

The scenarios exercise detailed in this report was hosted by the International Military Council on Climate and Security (IMCCS) Expert Group and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Participants were drawn from attendees at the Berlin Climate Security Conference hosted by adelphi and the German Federal Foreign Office in October 2022. The exercise sought to identify action points on climate security for NATO and EU leaders, and was based on a report released by the IMCCS Expert Group in July 2022 as part of the World Climate and Security Report 2022.[1]

he Balkans region—which consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia—will experience significant climate change-related hazards, including droughts, heatwaves, tropical storms, and wildfires. Given the region's reliance on hydropower, and its position as a highly trafficked land route for migration to the European Union, these climate impacts could result in cascading security risks.

This paper examines climate security futures for the Balkans region developed during an interactive scenarios exercise,[2] predicated on a scene set in 2027 where multiple climate extremes have adversely impacted the Balkans including an extended heatwave, extreme wildfires in multiple countries, and historic floods. International institutions are stretched thin by climate catastrophes across their domains, and migration from the Middle East and North Africa region through the Balkans has increased dramatically.

With this scene setter in mind, participants identified two of the most important, or diagnostic, and uncertain drivers of change in the region—primary external investment sources (e.g. European Union [EU]/NATO or China) and regional cohesion. Participants then created four future scenarios which explored how these drivers would combine with climate impacts to create security risks. Analysis of these scenarios yielded five key recommendations for NATO countries and EU leaders:

- Develop equitable climate resilience strategies to minimize regional divides
- Leverage climate security engagement for cooperation
- Adapt current interventions for climate engagement
- Engage with stakeholders at different levels of governance
- Invest in building civilian trust

The most important finding from the exercise is that the riskiest climate security scenario for the Balkans is one with no external engagement. In other words, some investment, regardless of the source, is better than none.

Scene Setter

THIS IMAGINED FUTURE, ROOTED IN LIKELY CLIMATE CHANGE TRAJECTORIES, SET THE SCENE FOR THE SCENARIOS CONVERSATION:

In July 2027, a heatwave settled over the Balkans for two long weeks, increasing cases of heat related illness, drying out vegetation, and decreasing regional electricity supply as water was diverted away from hydroelectric plants and toward drinking supply. In August, wildfires—already an annual occurrence in parts of the Balkans—are increasing in number, intensity, and geographic domain. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Slovenia are battling multiple high-intensity wildfires.

Though Balkans countries have previously aided each other in fighting fires, a more intense fire season has strained the ability of neighbors to help neighbors. Additionally, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, though bolstered in recent years, is overextended, as there are also high-intensity fires in Austria, France, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Thus, the Civil Protection Mechanism has only had the capacity to dispatch limited aid to full member states in the region (Croatia and Slovenia). NATO member states have sought assistance from NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), but those resources are also stretched thin across a continent on fire.

Discontent with the EU and NATO is rising among Balkans countries as each is left to fight fires on its own. Some anti-EU and anti-NATO politicians in the region are particularly vocal about the limited support offered to the Balkans given the efforts from Balkans countries in previous fire seasons.

The countries not experiencing fires (Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia), are only able to offer limited assistance. Serbia is further limited because a 120-year flood—the second in 15 years—devastated parts of the country in May 2027 and rebuilding is an ongoing process, during which they have welcomed Chinese financing for new infrastructure, given established Chinese investment in Serbian coal power plants.

Outside the Balkans, a spring heatwave on top of years of drought has caused an uptick in migrants from parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Earlier in the decade, most climate and conflict driven migration in the MENA region was internal, from rural areas to the cities. But in 2027, the drought is harsh enough that overwhelmed urban areas lack water and reasonably priced food, pushing greater numbers of people to seek refuge in the EU via the Balkans countries. There is growing concern that nativist political movements in some Balkans countries could seize on these developments to push forward an anti-immigrant agenda, as they did during the 2015 migrant crisis.[3]

Drivers of Climate Security Risks in the Balkans[4]

Given this scene setter, exercise participants identified a range of drivers of future insecurity in the Balkans across six categories: Socio-political, technological, demographic, diplomatic, military, and economic.

SOCIO-POLITICAL

- Polarization and radicalization among citizens-erosion of regional and national social cohesion
- Government capacity and/or corruption
- Inequities between communities, and perceptions of the inequities (e.g. distribution of resources by geographic location, ethnic divisions, and age)
- Government control of public-facing narratives

TECHNOLOGICAL

- Energy security (hydropower and grid performance; may impact nuclear security)
- Infrastructure resilience (water / transport / food)
- Level of adaptation / response to forecasting on climate change
- Use of cybersecurity tactics to exacerbate crisis (e.g. deepfakes, misinformation campaigns)

DEMOGRAPHIC

- Altered livelihoods as a result of climate change (i.e. shift in labor distribution)
- Maladaptation of livelihoods (e.g. turning to criminal, gang, or extremist activity)
- Health risks, especially to older populations, and changes in pathogen range
- In and out migration (i.e. brain drain, youth, integration and treatment of new populations, urbanization)
- Gendered impacts of climate change

DIPLOMATIC

- Access (or lack thereof) to international institutions and mechanisms
- Regional tensions between and among the Balkans countries, especially along institutional alignments (i.e. member states of NATO / EU vs states outside those organizations)
- Foreign influence, specifically in investment
- Disinformation and misinformation, either from foreign entities or from malcontent citizen groups
- Role of Russia, Turkey and China

MILITARY

- Sustainment of the NATO climate security agenda
- The militarization of responses to climate change
- Trajectory of the war in Ukraine
- Organized crime / other non-state actors take advantage of government gaps

ECONOMIC

- Role of the private sector
- Distribution of relief funds or services exacerbating marginalization, along rural / urban divide or ethnic groups
- Debt trap (i.e. by China)

Climate Security Scenarios for the Balkans

To develop scenarios for discussion, participants identified the following drivers as both the most important, or diagnostic, and the most uncertain in shaping future climate security risks. The first selected driver was primary external investment source (e.g. EU / NATO or China). The second driver was the level of internal regional cohesion.

PRIMARY EXTERNAL INVESTMENT SOURCE: This driver considers the most active investors in the Balkans region, whether through infrastructure investment or trade. By considering the EU and NATO countries as the primary investors on one extreme, and China as the primary investor on the other, this driver allows consideration of different influences in the region.

REGIONAL COHESION: This driver considers the strength and willingness of Balkans nations to cooperate regionally. Cohesion might be a circumstance where Balkan countries consider themselves a solid negotiating bloc and aid one another in the face of crises. At the other end of the spectrum, a fractured Balkans would see each country turning inwards, shielding what resources they have, and only helping their neighbors when problems threaten to spill over national borders.

The intersection of these drivers creates four potential future worlds for Balkans countries:

- "An Unlikely Love Story"—Chinese external investment, cohesion within the Balkans
- "Brussels vs. Beijing"—Chinese external investment, fracturing within the Balkans
- "More Power to Brussels"—EU/NATO external investment, fracturing within the Balkans
- "Dream"—EU/NATO external investment, cohesion within the Balkans

Summary of scenarios: A matrix of four potential futures

Cohesion within the Balkans

DREAM

- EU continues to invest in capacity / resilience through Green Deal (infrastructure, livelihoods, climate adaption)
- Trust in European institution and NATO grows
- Build up of NATO HA / DR capacity
- Election results reflect increased trust in international institutions (less right wing group traction)

AN UNLIKELY LOVE STORY

- China adapts strategy for investment (more compromising, more inclusive, more targeted in investments)
- Balkans more transactional, more aggressive in demands, more powerful as region
- Russia important as disruptive power to counter China
- EU working to maintain Balkans cohesion

Primarily Western external investment

Primarily Chinese external investment

MORE POWER TO BRUSSELS

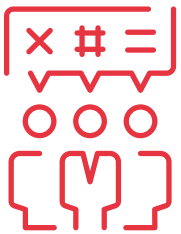
- Significant sustained funding in resilience from EU / NATO, but shocks resulting in mostly international response deepen fractures in Balkans
- Civil response force increases and serves as a good inroad for investment
- Out migration increases remittances but regional migration sparks ethnonationalist violence
- Serbia is the weakest regional link

BRUSSSELS VS. BEJING

- Race between two big power blocks (West and China) to provide assistance
- Balkans member states leveraging outside actor competition, espousing an every-state-for themselves mindset
- Top leaders of Balkan countries and their networks powerful—deepening marginalisation, and weakening civil society
- Russia reliant on hybrid tools to further fracturing within the Balkans

Fracturing within the Balkans

Taking a closer look: Scenarios in detail



"An Unlikely Love Story"

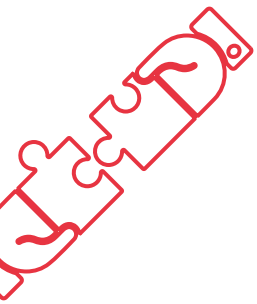
CHINESE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT, COHESION WITHIN THE BALKANS

In this scenario, a united Balkans has leaned into its power as a negotiating bloc, and the region is more transactional and aggressive in its demands. China, a relatively unestablished investor in the region, has had to be more compromising in its investments to succeed in establishing a foothold. Due to Chinese expertise, Balkans countries have invested in hydropower as their main renewable energy source, at the expense of diversifying. This has caused concern, particularly from energy sector experts, about regional energy security given the growing likelihood of more frequent and extended climate change-driven drought. Though the funding and attention of the EU and NATO have been divided by the climate-related crises taking place elsewhere, the institutions have made concerted efforts to stay engaged with civil society and state militaries respectively, and are working to bolster regional cohesion where possible.

"Brussels vs. Beijing"

CHINESE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT, FRACTURING WITHIN THE BALKANS

In this scenario, national governments' top political leaders and their networks have gained the most power and influence as the Balkans region has adopted an every-state-for-themselves mentality. Investment funding in the region has become a competition between two big power blocs (Brussels vs. Beijing), with China slowly becoming the primary investor. Countries with leaders who demonstrate the most stability and power are favored for investment by China, which has led to unequal distribution and created an additional flashpoint for regional fracturing. Distrust between Balkans countries has limited the ability of states to respond in the face of large-scale climate impacts that cross borders. Greater empowerment of national governments has decreased the power of civil society and deepend marginalization of rural communities. Civilian frustration with current governments has begun to result in more reactionary political activity. In some cases, this has resulted in violent actions against recently arrived migrants from the MENA region.



“More Power to Brussels”

EU/NATO EXTERNAL INVESTMENT, FRACTURING WITHIN THE BALKANS

In this scenario, the EU continues to build resilience against climate change in the Balkans through the Green Deal, while NATO has engaged in building capacity for the civil response forces. However, this top-down approach to resilience has not incentivized cooperation among the Balkans countries, and each has adopted an every-country-for-themselves mentality. Generally Brussels and NATO are most responsive to climate hazards in member states, leaving non-member states with less capacity to manage risks. This discrepancy increases animosity towards the EU and NATO among non-member state citizens. Russian disinformation campaigns exploit this vulnerability to increase anti-EU/NATO sentiment and sow further regional discord. Rural to urban migration within the region has increased as citizens seek more stable livelihoods. Though this results in remittances for some rural communities, others are struggling for survival. Meanwhile, migration from the MENA region and responses to it have strained southerncommunities, increasing internal tensions.

“Dream”

EU/NATO EXTERNAL INVESTMENT, COHESION WITHIN THE BALKANS

In this scenario, the EU has continued to build capacity and resilience against climate change impacts through the Green Deal. This includes facilitating infrastructure building, livelihood transition projects, and climate adaptation. Both NATO and the EU have invested in developing and deploying plans for resilience and capacity building that bring along candidate member states. Additionally, the EU facilitates much of its engagement through civil society mechanisms and has invested heavily in civilian trust building exercises. Balkans countries have been diversifying their renewable energy sources beyond hydropower. Though Russia has attempted to engage in disinformation campaigns about climate-related migrants to whip up nationalist sentiments, efforts have largely failed given a collaborative regional strategy for addressing migration. Election results within the Balkans reflect increased trust in European institutions and right wing groups have less traction.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

The Balkans highlight climate security risks within the NATO and European Union space. By investigating multiple possible futures and checking analytic assumptions about the trajectory the region is on, these scenarios hope to prompt early action and engagement on issues of climate resilience. Anticipatory engagement on climate—specifically that which builds civilian trust in institutions and governing bodies—can blunt the cascading and compounding impacts from climate risks.

Overall, the exercise resulted in six key recommendations for NATO countries and EU leaders to better prepare for and minimize climate security risks in the Balkans. These recommendations are made with the understanding that climate security is not the sole provenance of defense actors. Instead, climate resilience is a function of cooperation across the 3Ds of international engagement: defense, diplomacy, and development.

The riskiest climate security scenario for the Balkans is one with no external engagement

During discussion, participants and facilitators noted that the most intriguing and concerning scenarios were the ones in which external investment is largely withdrawn and the Balkans are left to fend for themselves. These circumstances – whether or not the Balkans countries remain internally cohesive – could risk greater civilian discontent with national and international institutions, reduced capability to respond to cross-border threats like wildfires, and targeting of marginalized communities as scapegoats for governance shortcomings. In other words, some external investment—irrespective of the source—is better than none.

Develop equitable climate resilience strategies to minimize regional divides

Climate change will impact some Balkans states more harshly than others, including some that are not yet members of NATO and / or the EU. As international institutions' resources are stretched thin by cascading crises, any aid given to non-member states is likely to decrease, though member states may still receive investment and support. Therefore, one avenue of climate security risk identified by participants was that disparities in climate resilience programming may exacerbate regional divides and create a sense of abandonment for some communities in the Balkans. Developing inclusive investment plans which target the resilience of member and non-member states alike can prevent internal fracturing and increase civilian trust and support for international institutions.

Leverage climate security engagement for cooperation

NATO should use its climate security agenda to foster greater cooperation among member states and candidate member states on climate security resilience and innovation. Though NATO does not provide direct investment in state-level adaptation and resilience measures, it can help strengthen interregional relationships by convening workshops in the Balkans on green defense innovation, for example, or helping Balkan militaries share best practices on climate adaptation. The new NATO Climate Security Center of Excellence in Canada could be used for this purpose. For the EU, it should leverage the requirement in the 2022 Strategic Compass for all member states to develop climate security strategies for their defense ministries as a tool to facilitate collaboration and sharing of best practices among Balkan countries. It could also share lessons learned from this process with candidate states in the region, possibly through the OSCE or UN channels.[5]

Adapt current interventions for climate engagement

Layering climate considerations into existing programming will achieve faster and more lasting climate security progress than creating completely new initiatives. Including climate resilience can have many co-benefits for better sustainability, longevity, and durability of already existing peace processes, infrastructure investment, and community engagement. Thus, where possible, incorporating climate considerations should be undertaken in future planning for functioning and successful peacebuilding and conflict-prevention interventions in the Balkans, such as the NATO Partnership for Peace program.

Engage with stakeholders at different levels of governance

Exercise participants noted that engagements with local stakeholders are just as crucial as the oft-prioritized engagements with national and ministerial level interlocutors, because top-down climate resilience practices that do not engage with local stakeholders lack cultural salience, durability, and sustainability. When key local partners are engaged and involved, climate mitigation and adaptation measures are better tailored and more effective in accomplishing true resilience. NATO and the EU already have structures to engage with local stakeholders, but they must be leveraged explicitly for climate security work.

Invest in building civilian trust

Developing good will among citizens and civil society will be paramount for building resilience–especially where state capacity is low. One tool NATO could consider is expanding the Trust Funds program which was initially designed to "provide resources to help partner countries implement practical projects in the areas of demilitarization, defense transformation or capacity building."[6] Leveraging such a program to invest in climate resilience and adaptation capacity-building for militaries in the Balkans could provide concrete benefit across the region to manage risks. NATO could also consider developing a forum for conversations among Balkan countries on climate security threats, modeled on the Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative which were partnerships designed to allow collaboration and security cooperation with non-NATO members. Because of growing youth activity in both peacebuilding and climate change advocacy, engagement with youth in the Balkans on climate resilience and adaptation programs will be an important avenue for trust building. The "Eastern Partnership Youth Window" and "Western Balkans Youth Window" initiatives from the EU, which foster cooperation between countries, are already well-positioned to facilitate climate resilience collaboration.[7]

Annex 1

Methodolgy

Scenarios exercises provide an opportunity to explore speculative futures which are grounded in the natural and social sciences. The exercise is designed to highlight hidden or under-recognized risks and opportunities and provide a basis for insightful planning. By virtue of design, scenarios exercises find much of their use in the process of conducting and engaging in a creative conversation which explores the range of possible and probable circumstances. In the field of climate security, where the climate impacts can be held fairly constant, these conversations can help identify the more unpredictable, human-related drivers which will interact with climate change, creating security risks.

This scenario engaged a group of participants with varied backgrounds–though all were in some way involved in climate security. Participants were provided a scene setter for the Balkans set in the year 2027, which highlighted the worsening effects of climate change. They were then asked:

> *"Given this scene setter, what are the key socio-political, technological, demographic, diplomatic, military and economic drivers that will intersect with these developments to shape the security risk landscape for the Balkans?*
>
> *Specifically, what are the most important and most uncertain drivers?"*

After a brainstorm which produced a robust list of drivers, participants voted on the two most important and uncertain. Taking into account the votes, exercise facilitators selected two drivers (primary external investment source and regional cohesion) as the axes of a matrix. Each axis is envisioned as a force or condition with opposing extremes and combining the drivers in the matrix produces the four possible futures shaped by the interaction of the drivers.

Participants were then split into four groups, and each group was tasked with developing one future using the following guiding questions:

- What are the key characteristics of each scenario?
- What does each scenario mean for key actors (e.g. society, state, military, non-profit, private sector, international)?
- Which types of actors have power in this scenario and why?
- What short title would you give this scenario?

Once the contours of each scenario were developed, the full group reconvened to discuss all four scenarios. During this discussion, participants were asked to consider the tipping points that could lead to one scenario over another, and what kinds of policy interventions are needed to avoid or achieve these scenarios.

Annex 2

Attendee list

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Endnotes

1 “The World Climate and Security Report 2022: Climate Security Snapshot – The Balkans.” Product of the Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security. Authors: Elsa Barron (CCS) and Hugo van Manen (HCSS). Edited by Erin Sikorsky and Francesco Femia. Published by the Center for Climate and Security, an institute of the Council onStrategic Risks. July 2022. https://imccs.org/climate-security-snapshot-the-balkans/

2 For a detailed explanation of the methodology, see Annex 1.

3 This scene setter is based on regional events which have taken place between 2012–2022

4 The following sections will break down the findings of the exercise, for a full understanding of the way the exercise was facilitated, please see Annex 1.

5 “A Strategic Compass for the EU.” European Union External Action. March 21, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-eu-0_en.

6 “Trust Funds: supporting demilitarization and defence transformation projects.” NATO. February 15, 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50082.htm#:~:text=Individual%20NATO%20member%20states%20and,defence%20transformation%20or%20capacity%20building.

7 EU Youth Strategy. https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/world_en

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