

Is environmental degradation a greater threat to the international community than war?

"The answer to the global climate crisis will come from global solidarity backed by global action."¹ These were the words of António Guterres which encapsulate a fundamental truth, underscoring the need for multilateral cooperation and substantial action of our current international community, as will be addressed in this essay. Both environmental degradation and war are extremely pressing issues to international relations and global security, despite their many differences, and it is on account of this that it can be so difficult to judge which poses a greater threat. In recent years, media channels and government bodies have frequently pushed for climate action, due to its long-term existential threat to our planet, but many fail to appreciate the impact of conflict on our environment, both now and when reflecting on previous fights. This essay will explore the implications of prioritising either factor above the other, both in the short- and long-term, and fundamentally conclude that prioritising the resolution of conflict in today's international community would lead to a much more stable and collaborative foundation on which we can collectively move to fight environmental degradation – provided this is completed swiftly and effectively with open discussion from all sides involved.

Environmental changes, namely global warming, are argued by many to be the most pressing issue to date, with 74% of UK citizens reporting feeling 'very or somewhat worried' regarding the crisis, and it being their second greatest concern (following rising costs of living)². With its far reaching and potentially irreversible consequences for our planet and future generations, it is easy to see why. Climate change is indeed a global issue and knows no borders, showing

little remorse to those it so cruelly affects – its impacts are felt worldwide, regardless of status, power, and wealth. It is, indisputably, a challenge that constantly demands urgent attention, collective action, and international cooperation. Effects that follow in the wake of climate change, such as rising sea levels, resource scarcity, and damaging, extreme weather events have been seen to completely displace communities and Indigenous culture, as well as disrupting economies and placing further strains on resources. A UN representative from Papua New Guinea referred to climate change threats as being ‘no less serious than those faces by nations and peoples threatened by guns and bombs’³, showing the very real impact of climate change, particularly on poor, third-world countries who don’t hold the individual capacity to fight its effects. Papua New Guinea themselves had to sign an agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (2020)⁴ to help rural communities cope with rising sea levels, natural disasters, and unpredictable weather patterns (to name a few). Not only does climate change threaten infrastructure globally, but it also carries extreme economic costs in our many attempts to reduce its impact. Between 2016 and 2018, for example, \$650 billion was spent fighting climate change disasters, such as wildfires, flooding, and other extreme weather events. This presents multinational risks to economic sectors, most namely agricultural and oil sectors, but also some more surprising areas, such as real estate and leisure. The international community has been thrust into a state of constant change and as a result must be prepared to make short-term changes, as well as investing in longer-term structural changes⁵. This is and will continue to be particularly impactful on smaller, less developed countries who lack strong and united councils where power ultimately resides – they may be unable to fund and uphold large-scale infrastructure to protect themselves from the effects of

climate change (e.g. the Philippines, Caribbean islands, and coastal South America). It is necessary to reiterate the fact that climate change is an intergenerational issue – it needs to be widely recognised that our actions now will impact our future societies, whether we seek to fight climate change or not. Scientists currently predict that global temperatures will increase by four degrees (°C) should we fail to cut our emissions, which includes a 7% increase annually in precipitation and higher ocean acidity⁶, posing new threats to wildlife and humans. It is the responsibility of the global international community to protect the planet and attempt to reverse our actions – before it is too late.

That being said, conflict poses an equally great threat to the international community. Whilst fighting climate change has the ability to unite nations, conflict creates far more significant global division and affects universal collaboration on all fronts. This means, therefore, that widespread conflict could (and will) have a large effect on the fight against climate change should powerful countries refuse to cooperate with each other at all. Take, for example, the division of the USA and China at COP 27 in 2022 – they both criticised each other for a lack of action and fell out due to a ‘lack of concrete areas of cooperation’⁷. The USA and China have had a long history of conflict, such as the 1950 Korean War (by proxy) and their ongoing economic trade war – it is not illogical to argue that this conflict has and will continue to impact their ability to communicate and cooperate in the future, which is particularly worrying when it comes to climate change due to their roles as major emissions producers, as well as being both wealthy and powerful. Should they be able to work together, they could make positive, long-lasting, and impactful

international change, both against the climate crisis and further afield. Not only does conflict have severe geopolitical consequences, but it can also lead to internal and global political instability that can impact diplomacy and international relations. Weak and unstable governments will consistently fail to make effective and unbiased decisions, which can often lead to stunted economic growth and increased corruption. In addition to this, the economic costs of war – particularly hot war – can create an increase in national debt and future taxes, as well as inflation, damaged infrastructure (which needs rebuilding), and lost GDP. Resource depletion is often also a pressing issue, and, whilst conflict can increase employment and create modern technology and innovation, it is also important to note the psychological impact of war, which are often untreatable and is felt for generations. So, whilst climate change is an inter-generational crisis, so is global conflict as it also creates community displacement, of which the consequences are continuously felt. Additionally, conflict can highlight and exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalised groups – destroying entire cultures, communities, and societies - as well as sparking new marginalisation that holds trans-generational effects. It often impacts both physical and mental health that extends far beyond citizen death. For example, female exclusion often increases during conflict, whether in attempting to avoid widespread sexual violence that so often accompanies war, due to a lack of sanitary products, or adopting the long-enforced role of primary caregiver to siblings and children.⁸ For example, in the current conflict in Gaza, many women do not have access to safe contraception, and the unhygienic situation creates a much higher risk of infection, including Hepatitis B and toxic shock syndrome.⁹ Those who are pregnant are likely to struggle in childbirth due to the lack of hospital care, and there has been a large increase in infant fatality –

about 25-30% during the first month of fighting.¹⁰ This clearly demonstrates how conflict can lead to increased marginalisation, shown here through the common example of women, but can extend to cover other groups, including racial, religious, and disabled factors.

Fundamentally, both conflict and climate change are extremely pressing issues to the global community. They each hold both immediate and long-term effects and require global cooperation in order to be fought effectively. Overall, however, solving the constant issue of global conflict could pave the way to multi-national collaboration that is vital in fighting the climate crisis. Whilst addressing climate change could be integrated into sustainable development goals that could target both environmental and social issues simultaneously, it is more logical to argue that solving conflict places us in a better position for fighting global warming, such as in reducing significant resource allocation to military and defence expenditures. This can then be used in developing sustainable development initiatives and mitigation efforts. Furthermore, the increased stability can allow for better planning and execution of such schemes. Peacebuilding efforts can include programs for environmental conservation and rehabilitation, fighting the degradation caused by conflict (including deforestation, pollution, and displacement). Lastly, conflict resolution addresses underlying social inequalities, creating a more just and equal society – which is essential for sustainable and effective climate action. Ultimately, it is crucial that we create a more peaceful and united global community in order to complete our sustainability goals – united by a desire to protect and better our planet, and the culture and people of endangered nations. Global cooperation is the cornerstone of this action, as has been referenced numerous times throughout

this essay, and is essential for crafting comprehensive solutions that transcend borders and political squabbles and go beyond geopolitical division. By embracing the dual imperatives of conflict resolution and climate action, we can create a future where the health of the planet and the health of societies is mutually beneficial, through collective determination, cooperation, and sustained global effort.

References:

¹Remarks on Sustainable Developments and Climate Change. | António Guterres (16 February 2020). Full speech can be found [here](#), or alternatively [here](#).

² Data and analysis from Office for National Statistics: Worries about climate change, Great Britain: September to October 2022. Full document can be found [here](#).

³ ‘The Greatest Threat to Global Security: Climate Change Is Not Merely an Environmental Problem’ | Emyr Jones Parry (2007). Full document can be found [here](#).

⁴ Advancing Papua New Guinea’s National Adaptation Plan | United Nations Development Programme (2022). Full article can be found [here](#) and Climate Action | UNDP Papua New Guinea. Web page and full article can be found [here](#).

⁵ Climate disasters cost the world \$650 billion over 3 years – Americans are bearing the brunt: Morgan Stanley. |Tom DiCristopher (14 February 2019). Full article can be found [here](#) and Morgan Stanley: 5 sectors that cannot escape climate change (2019). Full document can be found [here](#).

⁶ Predictions of future global climate. Full report can be found [here](#).

⁷ COP27: What are the sticking points in COP27 negotiations? | Matt McGrath (20 November 2022). Full article can be found [here](#).

⁸ Exclusion as a cause and consequence of violent conflict |Seema Kahn; Emilie Combaz; Erika McAslan Fraser (August 2015). Full report can be found [here](#).

⁹ In Gaza, being a mother is a matter of life or death | Sana Noor Haq and Nadeen Ebrahim (5 November 2023). Full article can be found at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/05/middleeast/israel-strikes-gaza-women-children-health-crisis-mime-intl/index.html> and Women and girls sheltering for their life in Gaza face dire lack of sexual and reproductive health supplies, disease outbreak | International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF) (30 October 2023). Full report can be found [here](#).

¹⁰ More babies born in Gaza due to stress, trauma – Oxfam (23 November 2023).

Full article can be found [here](#) *and* Babies dying from preventable causes in

besieged Gaza – Oxfam (23 November 2023). Full report can be found [here](#).