

# The evolution of environmental security in a North American policy context

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Over the past decade, there has been lively discussion and active research in North America on the issue of environmental security. It reached its peak in the mid- to late-1990s when then Vice President Al Gore championed the issue and Secretary of State Warren Christopher put environmental security on the US State Department's priority list. The State, Defense and Energy Departments assigned personnel to address the issue and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to work together on it. During that period a good bit of definitional and analytical work was accomplished and published.

Recently, however, the US Government has placed a lower priority on exploring the linkage between environment and security. A small number of NGOs and academics still devote considerable time to environmental security, though they have been shifting their emphasis from the earlier, specific focus on environment to the linkage of security with poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

### Road to consensus

The discussion in the 1990s covered a wide range of issues and was devoted to reaching a clear and agreed definition of "environmental security". Although there never was full agreement on the definition, there was a consensus on some of its basic elements. Nor did any agreement emerge on a programmatic approach. There were differences over what was being secured, what was being secured against, who was trying to provide security, and what methods were being employed to provide it.

### Security analysts sceptical of concept

Not unexpectedly, many security experts voiced scepticism of the concept of environmental security. While they did not dispute the important connection among environment, social and economic issues, they disagreed with the characterisation of these issues as security concerns. They argued that health and well-being, disease and resource degradation certainly threatened human life, but insisted that grouping them as security matters was conceptually muddled.

They also argued that environmental "threats" are often, but not always, manifested over longer, incremental time scales and differ fundamentally from security issues in how they should be addressed. Given the differences, adding such a diversity of "threats" to traditional security concerns, they said, made the concept of security boundless and proportionately less useful as an analytical tool. They also charged that developing countries with primary concerns about development and poverty would consider environmental security an industrialised country effort to divert attention from their main concerns. They claimed the effort to link environment to security is an effort to spur interest in environmental issues, win public support and gain funding for the environment.

### Pushing a new paradigm

The proponents of the environmental security concept, on the other hand, argued that with the end of the Cold War, security threats and issues were changing from the traditional military ones, making it necessary to envisage a broader concept of security. They postulated that environmental degradation can and does trigger, amplify and cause conflict and instability, and that all evidence suggested that given intensifying environmental degradation the situation would get worse.

They suggested further that a number of environmental threats could endanger countries. Constraints on natural resources, such as fresh water and cropland, the depletion of economically essential renewable and non-renewable resources, and rapid industrialisation, population growth and rapid urbanisation appeared to contribute to national insecurity. Ozone layer depletion led to wide scale cancer threats; global warming could spread disease and disrupt national water and agricultural patterns; forest destruction depleted a country's resource base and endangered its climate, water and soils threatened food security; and transboundary movement of toxic waste threatened security. So these issues had to be looked at in a broader context that called for a "redefinition" of security.

Early investigation of practical cases showed, though not always precisely and convincingly, that environmental issues contributed or could lead to con-

flict among countries, citing such cases as Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda and Burundi, where population pressures and natural resource shortages had triggered unrest. But the case studies all seemed to demonstrate that it was a combination of factors, including environment, that lay at the heart of political and social instability and conflict or potential conflict.

The proponents for widening the horizon of security to include environment prescribed a corrective policy agenda for environmental security much like that for addressing the needs for achieving sustainable development. They outlined the needs for protecting the natural resource base, which underlay a country's and the world's economy. To buttress this they recommended building environmental institutional capacity, transferring technology, providing finance, promoting human rights and supporting democratisation processes as ways to instil environmental security. In the past few years, the policy approach has emphasised measures needed to promote sustainable development.

And by citing a wide variety of international agreements the proponents also made a convincing case that countries seeking to resolve environmental and sustainability problems were in fact helping to strengthen national security by promoting cooperation, collective action and generating international good-will and trust among themselves and disputing groups and countries.

### High profile under Clinton

While differences of views among the groups and individuals over the merits of redefining security persisted, the proponents of the environmental security concept were very successful in generating support in the US during the Clinton Administration, which encouraged active environmental security discussion and activities in the 1990s. The President, Secretary of State, Director of Central Intelligence and Deputy Undersecretary of Defense all at one time or another identified the environment as a factor central to conflict and instability. In civil society, journalists, academics and environmental think-tanks analysed and publicised the issue.

In 1994, the Undersecretary of Defense grew interested in the concept

and organised in 1995 an interagency conference on "Environmental Security and National Security," which spawned a series of follow-up activities. An MOU between the Department of Defense, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set up cooperative activities in environmental security. The cooperation led to a NATO Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS) pilot study under the name of "Environment and Security in the International Context," which elaborated on environmental concerns. In April 1996, former Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced an unprecedented initiative to put environmental issues near the top of the US foreign policy agenda. The initiative ultimately contributed to the State Department decision to staff environmental nodes in a number of its embassies abroad.

This flurry of interest led to internal and cooperative action at the bilateral level as well, especially in the US-Russian cooperative environment agreement, where nuclear and Arctic-related issues gained renewed attention. It also spurred, in selected cases, environmental agencies to draw upon the strategic assets of military and intelligence agencies. The CIA worked with the EPA to combat the black market trade in ozone-depleting CFCs. The intelligence community monitored illegal drift-net fishing. Intelligence satellite data was used to monitor natural disasters, and the like.

### Academic and NGO programmes flourish

The existing and incipient environmental security programmes of a number of academic institutions and NGOs benefited from the keen governmental interest. Most prominent among these were the University of Toronto's Peace and Conflict Studies Program directed by Dr. Thomas Homer-Dixon; the Global Environmental Change and Human Security Project at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, chaired then by Dr. Stephen Loneragan; and in the US, the Environmental Change and Security Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington, DC directed by Geoffrey Dabelko.

Spurred by the governmental, NGO and academic enthusiasm for the environ-

ment and security issue, a flurry of activity around the issue grew up in North America during the late 1990s and led to cooperation with institutions and researchers in other parts of the world. Also government agencies carried out an active investigation of this issue.

The active NGOs and academic groups explored the various types of environmental changes that affect human security. These include natural disasters and cumulative environmental changes such as deforestation, water scarcity, desertification, and climate change. They also have investigated environmental effects of industrial accidents, misconceived development projects, environmental and natural resource-related conflicts due to population growth and resource wars, and the like.

They conducted valuable research on the possible role of the traditional military institutions in environmental protection; for example, the use of military and intelligence institutions' logistical and intelligence assets, the environmental damages caused by the military in armed conflict (an especially sensitive subject in some circles) and "greening the military" by encouraging the armed forces to reduce pollution at their installations, and supporting environmental initiatives and helping to work on environmental activities, transferring technology to civilian sources and promoting disaster and humanitarian assistance.

### Interest wanes during Bush Administration

But the 1990s seems to have been the high-water mark of the interest, at least at the US governmental and Washington policy level. With the election of the Bush Administration in the US in 2000 and the subsequent terrorism attacks in the US in September 2001, priority has shifted away from environmental security per se to terrorism, Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. The government does not really favour linking environment and security. Rather they see security more distinctly in a military context, and pursued actively through the use of arms, rather than foreign assistance.

### Widening the scope of security beyond environment

As a result, work in the US and, also, Canada on environmental security has lost a good bit of its momentum. And those involved in the field have sought to try to widen the net to find new aspects of environmental security that would appeal to the government's and policy makers' interests. This effort has led to a broader search for some of the underlying causes of human insecurity and conflict, of which environment is seen as but one of a number of causative factors, including political, geographic, ethnic, demographic, human development and resource scarcity.

### Relating sustainable development to security

Recently, NGOs and academic groups have moved to explore the relationship of the environmental aspects of sustainable development to security. They are analysing the ways environmental and natural resource degradation limit resources available to governments and their peoples and thereby impose constraints on nations and their ability to develop sustainably. Environmental degradation contributes to water and energy scarcity, destruction of agricultural lands and forests, and climate change, thus limiting the resources available for national development and in many cases contributing to poverty, human deprivation and even disaffection, that can become one of the causes of civil strife and conflict and even sow the seeds of terrorism.

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