

Does damage to the
environment pose
security threat politics
essay



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Traditionally the focus of security studies has been on the military and states, however with the end of the cold war focus began to shift to other security issues which had previously been neglected. The environment began to rise on the international political agenda, and numerous studies have been conducted to assess the impact environmental change can have on security. However, there is still no firm consensus on the impact it has. In fact, there is no real consensus on the meaning of security either, thus making this assessment problematic. The aim here is to establish whether damage to the environment poses a threat to security, and, if so, in what ways. This essay will start with a short analysis of what constitutes an environmental problem, and the extent to which damage to it is a security issue at all, by introducing the ongoing debate surrounding the importance of environment on the security agenda (Neo-Malthusian vs. Cornucopian); Then I will present the two opposing views regarding the focus of security studies (National Security vs. Human Security). This will be followed by an assessment of the different ways damage to the environment poses a security threat, both in terms of National Security and Human Security. I will conclude with a summary of the issue and my own perspective.

The Environment and Security

An environmental problem is a change of state in the physical environment which is brought about by human interference with the physical environment, and has effects which society deems unacceptable in the light of its shared norms[1]. Human behaviour is generating CO₂ which appears to result in depletion of the ozone layer. This causes overheating of the Earth's surface which is passed on to overheating of the core which is triggering

increased tectonic activity which results in volcanic activity, earthquakes, tsunamis and the resultant problems including radioactivity. This eventually puts undue pressure on food supplies and other resources. However, there is an ongoing debate within the environmental security literature as to the importance of environmental problems and whether they should be considered a 'security issue'. The neo Malthusian approach attempts to highlight the dangers of population growth outstripping food production. Arguably this would lead to a competition for resources, and ultimately cause conflict and possibly war, thus creating a security issue[2]. Cornucopians, or Promethians, believe that Neo-Malthusians exaggerate problem and that their pessimistic view is unnecessary because human beings will devise solutions to environmental challenges and that there is, in reality, an infinite supply of natural resources.[3] For the purpose of this essay we shall assume that environment is a security issue, not necessarily in the traditional sense of what constitutes a security issue, but indeed for a variety of reasons, which are often excluded or ignored.

The term security is taken generally to mean the protection of people against violence, or the defence against all forms of insecurity; this includes economic and environmental insecurity. Analysts have focused traditionally on the challenges posed by war and belligerence, but today the area of interest has expanded. The UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change categorised the threats facing the world currently, and along with terrorism, transnational organised crime and WMDs, the panel included economic and social threats including poverty, disease, and environmental degradation[4].

Some would argue that environmental change becomes a threat when it endangers national security, others when it threatens human welfare. NATO adheres to the former, but this maybe is to be expected given its state-centric, military approach; whereas the United Nations is more a humanitarian organisation, and subscribes to the latter. Whichever, the environment is regarded increasingly as both a human and an international security issue, albeit for somewhat different reasons.

While the focus of security has historically been on people[5], with the development of academic International Relations (IR), it fell on the State, and the concept of 'national interest' emerged. This is linked to the realist approach to International Relations, in which the interests of the State come first with the protection of national interests being vital[6]. In this view security is closely related to military power; therefore a strong Armed Forces is necessary if the State is to be protected from threats. Walker and Loader maintain that the State-centric approach is still dominant within international relations practice, characterised by an enduring attachment to the nation as the main actor in global politics. According to Page, the traditional focus of work on security has been on the investigation of military threats to the territorial integrity of a given state that arise either externally (military activity from another state) or internally (from subversive, and generally violent, activities of terrorist groups).[7]

After 1989, and the subsequent improvement in relations between NATO and the former USSR, conventional understandings of security became less relevant. Simultaneously, humanitarian concerns were increasingly coming to the fore of national and international politics and policy[8]. This review of <https://assignbuster.com/does-damage-to-the-environment-pose-security-threat-politics-essay/>

the concept of security led many to believe that the focus should not be on states but on people, and the welfare of humans. In 1995 a UN report stated too often in the past, preserving the security of the state has been used an excuse for policies that undermined the security of people[9]. The concept of human security is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human rights adopted by the UN in 1948. The Declaration states that everyone has the right to life, liberty and personal security. Human security means safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression, and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of our daily lives-whether in our homes, jobs, communities or environment[10]. Writing in 1989, Mathews argued for a broadening definition of national security to include resource, environmental and demographic issues[11], claiming that environmental protection and national security are inseparable. In 1997 Buzan wrote about broadening the concept of ' security', to include human and environmental security[12], whereas Kaplan's article, The Coming Anarchy, centred on the role of environmental degradation and anarchy, and marked a decided elevation of the environment and security debate[13].

Environmental security poses a threat if national security is undermined

Many traditionalists may find it hard to connect environmental issues to security. However, some would argue that environmental issues can become a security issue when national security is threatened. Environmental degradation leads to the depletion of resources and competition for the remaining resources can create conflict, which may in some cases lead to war, thereby undermining national security. This is a popular assumption in

the security literature[14]. Ullman argues that resource conflict is at the root of most violent conflicts in history[15]. After a decade of research into the connection between environmental scarcity and violent conflict, Thomas Homer-Dixon reached the conclusion that environmental scarcity can contribute to violence and ethnic clashes, and these incidents will probably increase as scarcities of cropland, freshwater and forest worsen[16].

However, there are other issues to consider also. The most important disputed issue in past violent conflicts has been territory, and if climate change and rising sea levels lead to diminished land area, this can lead to conflict. For example, a 45 cm rise in sea-level will potentially result in a loss of 10.9% of Bangladesh's territory, forcing over 5 million people to relocate[17]. Furthermore, measures implemented to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will also incur costs, which could be damaging to the national economy. Goldstone argues that some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, already demonstrate certain characteristics conducive to political unrest, and the situation may intensify as a result of implementation of the Kyoto Protocol[18].

Some observe that environmental changes lead to migration, which in turn can lead to conflict in the host nation. However, as Goldstone observes, the crucial element is not migration per se...What appears to matter for conflict are those cases wherein migration leads to clashes of national identity[19]. Therefore it is less the movement of people and more the social and political responses to that movement that matters most in conflicts in which immigration is a factor[20]. Nevertheless, climate-related conflicts are most likely to occur as a result of migration[21]. As soils are degraded, clean water

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supplies are depleted, infrastructure is damaged and lives are lost, migration may seem like the best solution for many people. Rises in sea-level may also induce large scale migration in the longer-term. For example, with the predicted rise in sea-level, people living on the Ganges Delta in Bangladesh will be forced to relocate. Some may move inland, but many more may move to neighbouring India and Pakistan - and previous migration of this kind has been a factor in violence in the region[22].

According to both Elliot and Homer-Dixon, environmental change can lead to conflict when it interacts with other social, economic, political and cultural factors which reduce stability in a given domain[23]. In fact, these other aspects seem to be far more important factors affecting the likelihood of violent conflict. For example, stable democracies with a high level of development also seem to experience a lower rate of violent conflict.

Damage to the environment poses a security threat if human security is threatened

While the majority of studies of environmental security focus on the way environmental change may impact national security, others would argue that this concern is misplaced[24]. Global environmental change may, in some cases lead to violent conflict, but it may also have a significant impact on human security or welfare. Insufficient access to safe water resources and inadequate food supply are detrimental to human security[25]. Furthermore, according to Smil, environmental security has become a threat similar to that of global nuclear warfare as it shares two characteristics: both are global in reach and the effects of both could be highly devastating[26].

Although the impact of climate change can be felt in many ways, either
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directly or indirectly, there are a number of ways in which human security will be harmed by manmade environmental change. In the UNDP report of Human Development of 1995 it was stated that environmental degradation poses a major threat to human security. As many as 70, 000 square kilometres of farmland are abandoned each year as a result of degradation, and about 4 million hectares of rain-fed cropland are lost annually to soil erosion[27].

The planet is currently going through a period of change; temperatures are rising, causing a melting of the ice caps, which in turn brings about a rise in water levels. Most of the observed temperature increase has been caused by increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases, which result from human activities such as the burning of fossil fuel and deforestation. The Climate Change induced rise in sea level will deeply impact coastal areas and islands. It will bring about increased salinity of fresh water and increased flooding. Flooding puts 45 million people a year at risk due to storm surges. A 50cm rise in sea level would increase this number to about 92 million[28].

However, the rise in temperatures also provokes prolonged droughts, leading to desertification and severely impacting already vulnerable areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of Southern Asia. There are also health impacts connected to the increased intensity and duration of heat waves. (eg. Malaria, yellow fever, dengue). Infectious diseases are currently the world's leading cause of death, killing nearly 17 million people a year[29].

Climate change also impacts agriculture and the subsequent availability of food. The food crisis of the mid 1970's sparked a detailed analysis into the relationship between hunger, famine and environmental causes, such as <https://assignbuster.com/does-damage-to-the-environment-pose-security-threat-politics-essay/>

drought, flooding and land degradation.[30]It is now well recognised that such events can tip already vulnerable local societies into acute distress. Almost 800 million people in the developing world do not have enough to eat, and a further 3 million in the industrialised countries and economies in transition also suffer from chronic food insecurity[31]. Poor or insufficient nutrition can eventually lead to sever health problems such as gastro-intestinal infections, measles and malaria[32].

In discussions of the possible links between environment and security we often find reference to water. It is essential to human survival, has value in economic terms, and sometimes strategic significance. Nonetheless, in 1999 it was reported that 20% of the world's population already lacks access to safe drinking water[33]. Water pollution can be extremely harmful both in terms of health and economy; not only does it further reduce the availability of clean drinking water, but it could also cause extensive damage to marine life and severely hurt the economy, as we saw in the 2010 BP oil spill[34]. At the P-7 conference in 2000, delegates from the poorest nations gathered and called for water to be treated as a fundamental human right, not as a market commodity[35]. Not only does water scarcity lead to health issues, a human security issue, but it also can lead to violent conflict if nations are in competition over the resource, thus becoming a national security issue. Indeed, damage to, or degradation of, the environment results in resource depletion which, on the one hand, causes civil unrest, leading to conflict, while, on the other, causes famine and illness, threatening human security, or welfare.

Conclusion

Traditionally the term Security was used to mean State Security, but with the fall of the Soviet Union security studies has expanded to include other threats including environmental damage. However, so far, emphasis has been placed on environmental change as cause of violent conflict, due to competition over resources or territory, but there are other possible implications, such as the effect it has on Human Security. To understand environmental damage as a security threat- in that it poses a threat to human security or welfare- we must move away from the traditional view that security is a state-centric, military led, affair. While it may be true that environmental damage can lead to conflict, albeit in conjunction with other factors, we should also be looking at how damage to the environment affects people. As mentioned in the UNDP in 1994, Human security is not a concern with weapons - it is a concern with human life and dignity[36]. Everyone has the right to live a life free from insecurity. It can be argued that environmental damage is a constant security issue for some nation-states, communities and individuals. Not only can it lead to violent conflict, and threaten national security but it can also threaten human life and welfare. Some damage, such as climate change, poses cultural, health, and life-threatening risks comparable to the impact of warfare. We often see security threats as those which come from other states, involve the military and concern national security; however, environmental damage can become a threat to security, indeed, for many states it can be the most serious security problem that these countries face, because it directly threatens their life and their wellbeing.