Environment Security, and International Equity

Reframing the relationships

I n recent decades, both industrial and developing country governments have started to view such adverse environmental changes and resource scarcities as water pollution, overfishing, desertification, and climate change as potential threats to national security. From a broad security perspective, these problems are important for many reasons.

Environmental changes have the potential to lead to violent conflict, create political instability, and undermine national governments. For example, some scholars argue that environmental problems, notably scarcities in agricultural land, aggravated ethnic violence in Rwanda in the 1990s. More often, however, environmental changes and natural resource scarcities will not directly cause violent conflict. Instead, they may hinder economic development and growth, contribute to political instability and social disharmony, cause illness, and generally harm human well-being. In China, widespread environmental degradation has exacerbated water scarcities, damaged the health of the Chinese people, undermined economic growth, and cost the government billions of dollars. According to a 1999 government report, health-related costs of air and water pollution in China totaled more than US$46 billion (nearly 7% of gross domestic product).

Environmental changes can also intensify existing conflicts or contribute to conditions that harm economic and human security, which in turn can combine with existing domestic and international animosities to decrease regional security. In *The Environment and Security in Pacific Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1998), Alan Dupont finds that confrontations between North and South Korea over fishing grounds demonstrate the increasing links between marine food resources and territorial issues in post-Cold War Pacific Asia.

To be sure, the whole notion of environmental security remains controversial. Some scholars think that environmental issues have no place in security debates. Nevertheless, environmental issues have gained the attention of policymakers, sometimes at the highest levels, including within security bureaus of foreign ministries, defense agencies, and military alliances. In the US in the mid-1990s, the State Department placed envi-

Recouping From Loss
In western Rwanda, farming families line up for seed coupons. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization replaced depleted seed stock, helping rehabilitate the country's war-ravaged agricultural sector. Drought and environmental degradation reduced agricultural productivity and may have aggravated ethnic violence in Rwanda during the 1990s.

ronmental security among its most pressing foreign policy concerns, the Department of Defense declared environmental security one of its high-priority missions, and the annual public statement of US security priorities defined environmental degradation as "an important security issue." In the early 1990s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) added environmental problems to its list of major threats facing the alliance. NATO acknowledged the connection between security and environmental change by establishing a bureau devoted to environmental security and increasing the prominence of environmental issues in NATO planning.

Some observers fear that security establishments will co-opt or corrupt responses to environmental change. Even if true, this may not be all bad. Governments take issues seen as security threats much more seriously and, consequently, may allocate additional resources to environmental protection. Furthermore, increasing concerns about environmental change may not only keep these issues on the foreign policy agendas of important developed country governments (such as the US), but may also push those governments to devote additional financial and technological resources to addressing environmental problems in the developing world. For decades, developing countries have demanded more assistance

from the world's wealthy countries, partly justifying these demands on the basis of developed countries' disproportionate responsibility for global pollution and other environmental change. Developing countries contend that because much of the pollution impacts they experience today (as well as expected future impacts) result from developed country actions, they should be assisted in adapting to or compensated for these impacts.

Most developing country demands that industrial countries take more responsibility for global environmental damage have been ignored. Until recently, neither the US nor other developed countries recognized the connections between environmental changes and their own security. As they come to see developing countries as potential sources of environmental threats to their own and global security, developed countries may be more responsive to the developing world's demands. The oldest concern of governments—protecting vital national interests—may combine with adverse environmental change to stimulate increased provisions for international cooperation. Despite some positive movements in this direction, however, prospects for the near future remain worrisome.

Masking the Problem
Hong Kong residents protest excessive air pollution. In 1999, health costs related to water and air pollution totaled over US$46 billion, nearly 7% of China's GDP. Environmental degradation's first impacts are on a society's well-being and economic development, but also can exacerbate domestic and regional political tensions.

Although the US has been among those countries concerned about environmental security, recent changes in US foreign policy lead to growing pessimism among developing country leaders. In the 1990s, the US government came to accept environmental changes as legitimate threats to national security, recognizing that environmental changes in the developing world could negatively affect US interests. Thus, while trade and traditional security concerns remained at the forefront of thinking among US policymakers, *environmental* security concerns were integrated into US foreign policy.

More recently, the US government has seemed to de-emphasize international cooperation and multilateral treaties as vehicles to address environmental problems and other global issues. The US no longer supports the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty designed to reduce developed country greenhouse gas emissions, of which the US is by far the largest contributor. The US has given notice of withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and will not support current proposals for a treaty on biological weapons.

In the near term, environmental security concerns may become even less prominent in US foreign policy. Certainly, the campaign against terrorism is likely to distract the US and other developed countries from concerns about the global environment and sustainable development in developing nations. If the US moves away from meaningful participation in international efforts to address environmental issues, the incentives for developing countries to deal with these problems will likely be reduced, as will their ability to address them. This could exacerbate existing tensions that threaten wider security and peace in the developing world.

The indifference of developed countries to developing country concerns about responsibility for global environmental change may not last. The impacts of environmental change have their own momentum and increasingly will affect developed countries' economies. Industrial nations may soon find it in their self-interest to again address environmental threats to national and human security through international cooperation. If they take this opportunity, they could simultaneously protect their own environmental security and that of the developing world, while addressing problems of unsustainable development and poverty that exacerbate existing international inequities. ▸

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