

## SHOULD ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES BE SECURITIZED?

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### **Abstract**

Even though the politics of global environmentalism is a fairly new aspect of International Relations, the environmental concerns are not new. However, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that worries about accelerating damage to the environment started to be articulated. At this stage many governments and people worldwide began to realize the environmental degradation caused as a result of human activity and development. Since environmental degradation knows no borders it was necessary to initiate international cooperation on environmental issues. Even though the consequences of environmental degradation and the impact that they have on humankind are obvious, the issue becomes complex when the following question is posed: should environmental issues be securitized? The opinion among academics, scholars and government officials is divided over this topic, between those who consider that securitization of the environmental issues is the most important step to secure the survival of humankind to those who believe that its advocates are simply a group of environmentalists who are desperately trying to shift the attention and resources of governments away from traditional security issues. Hence, this paper will discuss the concept of environmental security, international cooperation, analysing both proponents and critics of environmental security and will conclude by arguing that environmental issues should not be securitized since they are not intentional threats to a state or society, but the side effects of human civilization. If environmental issues are to be securitized they might trigger various types of intervention and imperialism.

### **Key Words**

Environment, security, threats.

### **Introduction**

Environmental security emerged as an important concept in security studies in the early 1960s. In this period, the developed countries were made aware of the impact of environmental degradation from various articles published and from books, such as - Silent Spring of Rachel Carson, who indicated the side effects of human activity on the environment. This awareness resulted in the foundation of a number of international environmental non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and World Wildlife Fund. Activities of these organizations were

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wide and included different fields of actions, as awareness raising, research, networking, lobbying, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The 1970s was beginning of more active international cooperation on environmental issues and expansion of international agreements. The first global meeting on environmental issues was held in Stockholm in 1972, the United Nations Conference for Human Environment, and the same year the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) was established. Another important meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environmental Development. As result of these meetings and activities now there are 144 regional and 97 global agreements related to environmental issues according to UNEP.<sup>2</sup>

After the end of the cold war, environmental concerns have been an important part of the discussions on global security. Whether under the umbrella of environmental security, as part of human security agenda, or as a new global threat; the environmental issues are now part of the scholarly debates in international relations and calculus of international politics.<sup>3</sup>

The debate about definitions and re-examination of security was an attempt of many scholars to critique the traditional security discourse and practices' arguing that this concept is not capable to deal with environmental threats of national and international level. They argue that traditional military-security concept should be widened, to include the environmental issues, since environmental threats can have disaster outcomes; and that the traditional security thinking does not prepare nations to deal with these threats, also unlike other traditional security issues, environmental threats are not limited to national borders.<sup>4</sup>

According to Bjorn Lomborg, the general environment challenges facing humanity, are: 'Air pollution, chemical pollution and hazardous waste, climate change, deforestation, depletion of the ozone layer, depletion of water resources, lack of energy, lack of biodiversity, and vulnerability to natural resources'.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Environmental Security Concept**

According to Peter Hough, 'it has become a matter of contention among theorists of International Relations whether Security Studies should maintain its traditional emphasis on military threats to the security of state or widen its focus.'<sup>6</sup> Some supporters of traditional concept fear that widening the definition of security will render the concept redundant by making it to all-en-

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1 John Barnett in Alan Collins, 'Contemporary Security Studies', 2007, pp. 184-185

2 Ibid

3 Simon Dalby, 'Environmental Security', 2002, pp. xix-xxii

4 John Barnett in Alan Collins, 'Contemporary Security Studies', 2007, pp. 185-188

5 Bjorn Lomborg, Ed. 'Global crisis, Global Solutions', 2004, p. 5

6 Peter Hough, 'Understanding Global Security', 2004, pp. 2-7

compassing and diluting the important task of countering military threats. Their fear is based on the belief of Realists that military threats are actually more apparent than they were during the Cold War, in era when we face with asymmetric military threats of terrorism and failed states. The concept of national security is generally considered to refer to the security of a nation from being attacked by a potential enemy. Therefore, states have the obligation, legitimate and necessary function to protect their citizens from such a threat.<sup>7</sup> The environmental security has been an important concept of security studies, but its meaning is ambiguous. Marc Levy argues that, 'environment' and 'security' are flexible notions that could comprise almost everything. However, according to his definition 'environment' emphasizes connection of physical and biological systems; and 'security' emphasizes protection of national values against external threats.<sup>8</sup> Since 1990's, security has become a contested concept in international relations in a way that was not the case during the Cold War period. The traditional realist conceptualization has come under attack, both because it was increasingly seen as unsatisfactory in its own terms, and because it was ignoring important aspects of an emerging international policy agenda. Lester Brown, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, Michael Renner, and others have proposed 'redefining national security' to encompass environmental issues, since the conventional definition of national security is unable to deal with environmental threats.<sup>9</sup>

Hugh Dyer argues that traditional security discourse is not well equipped to address serious global issues including the environmental issues. A continuing dependence on the turbulent concepts of sovereignty, national interest and foreign policy, which have historically provided the framework and rationale for military threats and actions, suggests that the notion of 'security' does not provide adequate response to emerging global changes not at least global environment change.<sup>10</sup> Michael Sheehan argues that, 'environmental security and national security are alternative values, arising in a context of alternative world-views'.<sup>11</sup> He points out that if traditional security concept will change, environmental security could stand in 'high politic' agendas, but if traditional security concept remains unchanged, there is little chance of environmental security becoming anything more than an annex to the traditional politico-military security agenda.

## **International Co-operation on Environmental Issues**

Environmental security threats are not limited to national borders and have local and global effects; therefore, international cooperation is necessary since states alone cannot provide environmental security. Hence, international environmental cooperation is essential to devise good solutions to the global environmental threats facing all countries in the form of climate change,

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7 Arthur H. Westing., Ed. 'Global Resources and International Conflict: Environmental Factors in Strategic Policy and Action', 1986, p. 192

8 Marc A. Levy, 'Is the Environment a National Security Issue', *International Security*, Vol. 20: No. (Autumn, 1995) pp. 35-62

9 Daniel Deudney, 'Environmental Security: Muddled Thinking', 1991, pp. 23-26

10 Hugh D. Dyer in John Vogler and Mark F. Imber., Eds. 'The Environmental & International Relations', 1996, p. 23

11 *Ibid*, p. 37

loss of biological diversity and dispersal of hazardous chemicals into the natural environment, caused by the intensity of human exploitation of the earth's resources in the 21st century.<sup>12</sup>

As we said earlier environmental security awareness started in 1960's when first articles about environmental degradations were published, at the same time environmentalist NGO's like Greenhouse and Friends of the Earth were established which helped in awareness about the environmental threats and did networking in different countries to promote the importance of joint effort against environmental degradation. However, the first high level international meeting on environmental issues was organized by United Nations in 1972. This meeting was held in Stockholm which led to numerous intergovernmental agreements.

The first major positive result of international environmental cooperation was recorded in 1985 after the British Antarctic Survey team found out that the earth's ozone layer had hole in it above the southern polar region. The clear and present danger prompted an unusually rapid international response. Within a few months of the discovery the Vienna Convention of Protection of the Ozone Layer established a framework treaty. In 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer was signed by 24 industrialized states binding themselves to an agreement for major cuts in the future use and emission of chloro-fluoro-carbons (CFCs) and other chemicals known to be a cause of ozone depletion.<sup>13</sup> Another important international meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 'the earth summit' where agenda for 'sustainable development' in the 21st century was drawn, agreed and signed by more than 120 nations. 'Agenda 21' with sustainable development considers the impact on our future of the balance between environmental, economic and social issues of today's activities, policies and new developments.<sup>14</sup>

Other good examples of international cooperation's on environmental issues are the 1997 Kyoto Protocol which foresaw that the developed countries cut their emission by an average of 5% in period between 2008-2012<sup>15</sup>; also the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy, prevents the exhaustion of fish stocks and plays an important role in protection of the biodiversity.<sup>16</sup>

Lothar Brock argues that focusing on environmental issues promotes cooperation among states, which builds international confidence and thus ultimately functions as an integral mechanism of peacebuilding and security policy.<sup>17</sup> Even though it was shown that international environmental cooperation is necessary, the weight of decision power still rests within national governments and as a result, national sovereignty can come in conflict with actions necessary to insure environmental security.

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12 Gareth Porter, et al. 'Global Environmental Politics', 2000, p. 1

13 Peter Hough, 'Understanding Global Security', 2004, pp. 145-146

14 John Barnett, in Alan Collins, 'Contemporary Security Studies', 2007, p. 185

15 John Vogler, in Brian White, Richard Little and Michael Smith, 'Environment', 2005, pp. 194-197

16 Peter Hough, 'Understanding Global Security', 2004, pp. 150-15

17 Michael Sheehan, 'International Security: An Analytical Survey' 2005, p. 112

## Supporters of Environmental Issues Securitization

It has been generally recognized that in International Relations, environmental issues are considered to be the matter of ‘low politics’, while security issues are generally regarded as ‘high politics’. Some scholars have argued that it is worth incorporating the environment into the ‘high politics’ realm thus making it a security issue. It is the view of such scholars that environmental protection should be linked to international security. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* ‘Redefining Security’, in 1989; Mathews wrote that such global phenomena as climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion and population growth all affect the international security. These issues are regional and global in scale and cannot be restricted to the sovereign territorial boundaries of states. Mathews argues that not only should environment be an international security issue but it should be the highest priority of all nations since not only it threatens the existence of states, but also the survival of humankind on the planet.<sup>18</sup> Myers is another scholar who has emphasized the threats from environmental degradation. He argues that rapid environmental change and growing ecological interdependence are major international threats. Myers asserts that the environmental aspect should be included in every security strategy and he has designated environmental security as the ‘ultimate security’.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, his proposals to deal with the environmental issues, throughout increase of foreign aid and reducing debt of the Third World countries are seen as unrealistic.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Thomas Homer-Dixon who was associated with the ‘Toronto school’ during the 1990s explored the possibility of a link between resource exhaustion and military conflict. He argues that environmental scarcities contribute significantly to conflicts between developing states: for example, ‘Turkey has used its control over the headwaters of Euphrates to put pressure on the Syrian government to withdraw its support for Kurdish separatists in the East Turkey...when Ethiopia proposed building dams on the upper Nile in 1978, Egyptian officials said that their country was so dependent on the Nile that they were prepared to go to war to prevent the dams from being built.’<sup>21</sup> However, he admits that environmental scarcity does not lead to conflict directly but it does cause social unrest that may later turn into a violent conflict. Also, Sara Parkin argues that environmental degradation poses more threat to national security than military invasion. According to Parkin twenty million people die each year because their locality no longer provides a life supporting environment. This figure stands in stark contrast to the twenty million who have died in armed conflicts in total since end of the World War II.<sup>22</sup> Hence, these are the arguments that proponents of environmental issues ‘securitization’ argue in favour.

## Critics of Environmental Issues Securitization

The argument for securitizing the environment has not been universally accepted and remains

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18 Jessica Tuchman Mathews, ‘Redefining Security’, *Foreign Affairs*; Spring 1989; 68:2, pp. 162-177

19 Norman Myers, ‘Environment and Security’, *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1989; Issue 74, pp. 23-41

20 Marc A. Levy, ‘Is the Environment a National Security Issue’, *International Security*, Vol. 20: No. (Autumn, 1995) pp. 35-62

21 Michael Sheehan, ‘International Security: An Analytical Survey’, 2005, pp. 109-111

22 Sara Parkin, in Fara Patricia, et al. (1996) – ‘Environmental Security: The Changing World’, p. 132

controversial to many scholars. Critics remind that usually security policies consist of urgent and crisis issues that require an urgent solution and action. Clearly this is not the case with the environmental issues. Not only are they relatively slow in development, furthermore, their continued protection requires a long-term commitment. Because the environmental issues are developing so slowly, it is argued that there is no immediate sense of threat: ‘The potential threats posed by issues like global warming and ozone depletion may be profound but they are still long-term creeping emergencies when set against imminent disasters and attacks.’<sup>23</sup>

The critics of environmental security argue that this issue is mostly of national character. Critics do not look at the issue from the global perspective but tend to concentrate on state level only. For such opponents of an environmental security concept as Deudney and Levy, security threats are defined as, ‘situation(s) in which some of the nation’s most important values are drastically degraded by external action.’<sup>24</sup>

Levy agrees that the arguments of the proponents of a link between environment and security are worth considering, however, he argues, ‘that this position has no basis except as a rhetorical device aimed at drumming up greater support for measures to protect the environment.’<sup>25</sup> He is well supported by Daniel Deudney who presents sound arguments against the inclusion of environment within the realm of security politics. Deudney is considered to be the leading challenger to the idea of environmental securitization. He cites four key differences between the environmental degradation and established security concerns. First, they are different kinds of threats. He points out that accidents, ageing and illness also kill human beings but they are not coming close to being identified as security threats. For Deudney the term ‘security’ would lose its meaning if everything that causes death is to be identified as a security threat. Both violence and environmental degradation may kill people and may reduce human well-being, but not all threats to life are threats to security. Second, there is no intention in environmental threats. Security threats of violence are planned; organized and are clearly intentional, while, in contrast, natural threats are largely unintentional. They are only an unfortunate and unintended result of human development and progress. Third, the organizations that protect the societies against violence differ significantly from those that are responsible for environmental protection. Finally, and most importantly, environmental threats are not usually purely national.<sup>26</sup>

Proponents of environmental security believe that a link to ‘high politics’ would make threats to the environment seem more pressing and important, however Deudney believes that securitizing the environment will not increase the possibility of finding suitable political solutions to environ-

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23 Peter Hough, ‘Understanding Global Security’, 2004, p. 134

24 Marc A. Levy, ‘Is the Environment a National Security Issue’, *International Security*, Vol. 20: No. (Autumn, 1995) pp. 35-62

25 Ibid

26 Daniel Deudney, ‘Environmental Security: Muddled Thinking’, 1991, p. 24

mental problems. He also warns that if environmental issues will be 'securitized', than environmental degradation from one country might be seen from other countries as a national security threat which could trigger various types of intervention and imperialism.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Environmental degradation poses a serious threat to human well-being. However, ways on how to deal with these threats; should environmental issues be securitized or not are part of lively debate between academics, scholars and state officials. Traditional security concept which prevailed during the cold war and which was concentrated in military dimension was criticized as ineffective to deal with new non-conventional threats as e.g. environmental threats. Therefore, in 1990's 'security' became a contested concept; many academics and scholars have argued that 'national security concept' should be redefined and widen to encompass other threats beside the military ones. However, there are concerns among traditional analysts that the strategy of expanding the security concept to include environmental security will affect the analytical clarity; and that security will mean everything and nothing. Supporters of the environmental security argue that 'securitizing' the environmental issues is the most important step to safeguard the humankind. On the other side, critics argue that environmentalists use the slogan 'environment security' only to grab the attention of the governments and funds. Supporters argue that, environmental threats can have catastrophic outcomes for humankind and that these threats are not confined by national boundaries. Also they say that environmental degradation is far more threatening than the military threats and may lead to collapse of the societies and collapse of states as well. On the other side, critics argue that environmental threats are different from traditional security threats and should be addressed as public safety or health issues.

Critics argue that environmental problems should not be seen as security problems because they are not generally national in character, are not caused intentionally as military threats are, and are more reliably and effectively solved through the international cooperation. National security policies often reflect a sense of urgency and crisis, and this may not be the most appropriate way to deal with kind of steady, long-term commitment that is required for effective protection of the environment. Also securitizing environmental issues may legitimize military actions if some states consider environmental problems security threat to their national interests.<sup>28</sup> The supporters criticize this approach since this view is from the national narrow perspective and undermines global environmental threats.

The environmental issues are accepted at the policy level by most states and key international organization; however, the case for securitizing the environment has not been universally accepted

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 23-26

<sup>28</sup> Bush and Blair failed to convince world that Saddam Hussein is as security threat, but they anyway attacked Iraq. (see Ralf Emmers in Alan Collins 'Contemporary Security Studies' 2007, p. 123) Therefore, if environmental issues are to be securitized, they may be used from some states for intervention and imperialism!

and remains controversial. Therefore, I would argue that environmental issues need to be treated seriously at national and international level, but they should ‘not’ be ‘securitized’ since they are fundamentally different from national security threats, and they might trigger interventions and imperialism.

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