# Reconsidering the Environment-Security Relationship

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## Under What Circumstances Should Environmental Change be Considered a Security Issue?

The global environmental crisis has forced us to rethink many fundamental assumptions about international relations, especially regarding security. In recent years, there has been an attempt to include environmental change within the broader security agenda, particularly evident in attempts to define security as 'human security'. This essay will examine the circumstances under which environmental change should be regarded as a security issue, drawing upon previous attempts to widen the security agenda. By comparing the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization with the more traditional security approach of realism, this essay will examine the conflicting implications of framing environmental change as a security threat, whilst engaging previous literature on the topic.

For the purposes of this essay, the definition of security will be adopted from the Commission on Human Security, focusing on a critical standpoint towards security (human security). The Commission states that human security is "the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats" (CHS 2003). It will also take into consideration that the environment was one of the seven key facets in the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report* in 1994, and will contrast the four essential characteristics the Report outlines on human security with environmental security. The advantage of using the Commission's definition of human security is that it differentiates between security and general well-being, by outlining the types of threats (critical or pervasive) that constitute as a security concern.

Throughout this essay, the term 'environmental change' will be used to describe anthropogenic climate change and its accompanying effects. Climate change is understood to be a security issue because of the effect it has on people's abilities to survive and their livelihoods. In order to successfully include the environment as a security issue, it is paramount to determine what is meant by 'the environment'. It is necessary to differentiate between environmental *change* and access to natural resources (McDonald 2010). As has been argued, this broad understanding is analytically weak, especially if the term 'environmental security' is seen only as the need to continue exploitation of non-renewable natural resources (see McDonald 2010; Tennberg 1995; Westing 1989). Climate change is a global issue with global implications (McDonald 2005:216). It is an issue that crosses borders, with no regard for social norms and structures such as state sovereignty.

In the post-Cold War period, there were debates surrounding the inclusion of non-military threats such as poverty, migration and the environment within the security agenda, with environmental change being the most contentious. Environmental issues first began to appear in political discourses in the 1970s, and there were a number of publications regarding their security implications (Falk 1971; Brown 1977). However, it was not until 1987 that the term 'environmental security' was used. The World Commission on Environment and Development published a report entitled *Our Common Future* (1987) in which it used the phrase for the first time and entered notions of environmental security into international political debate. The intention of including environmental security was to increase the relevance of debate within a political agenda (Trombetta 2008: 586) and to 'alarm traditional security analysts about the issues that "really" matter' (deWilde 2008: 2). The concept of environmental security was welcomed by some actors, as it challenged the "values traditionally associated with the nation-state – identity, territoriality, sovereignty – and implies a different set of values" (Dyer 2001:68). The emergence of the environmental

security agenda linked the environment with notions of vulnerability, and associated these with the possibilities of conflict.

Much literature has suggested that we will see the emergence of conflicts caused by changes in the physical environment, including resource scarcity and so-called 'water wars' (see Starr 1990; 1991, Homer-Dixon 1991, Bulloch and Darwish 1993, Gleick 1993). Although the debate subsided through the 1990s, the relationship has re-emergenced in light of natural disasters fuelled by climate change, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the persisting drought in areas of Australia and sub-Saharan Africa. Climate change was brought to the political stage most prominently in 2005, with the entrance of the Kyoto Protocol on the global level. However, whether or not environmental change should be considered a security threat is still under heavy debate.

The Copenhagen School of security studies, characterised by the work of Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, is recognized for its attempts to conceptualise the theory of securitization. This theory challenges traditional realist viewpoints of security, and identifies the inherently politicized process of 'achieving' security. This theory of securitization introduces a social-constructivist perspective that attempts to conceptualise how issues are framed as security threats (Trombetta 2008: 591). There are three key facets of the concept of securitization within the Copenhagen School: security as a 'speech act', its inter-subjective nature, and the "specific rhetorical structure" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998:26). The School identifies five sectors for analysis, in which issues can be securitized. These sectors are military, political, economic, societal and environmental. The School's research projects began in 1985, with a double strategy to avoid an overstretching of the concept of security. This strategy involved empirical analyses, based upon specific historical situations, rather than focusing on speculative threats.

Realism, by contrast, is framed around notions of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and state-centrism. It argues that the state is both the referent object of security, and the key protector of security, primarily through the use of force. The main concern for realists is security for the state, from external military threats. The preservation of the state is the key goal, in which the principle of non-intervention is paramount. The move to include environmental change within the security agenda has not been approved by realists. As realists assume a view of state-centrism, environmental change, being a a non-military threat, does not necessarily constitute a credible threat to security.. Realists consider issues regarding the environment as an aspect of the realm of 'low' politics, rather than 'high' politics, such as issues of security (Trombetta 2008:589).

However, environmental change is a global issue that holds no regard for state borders or sovereignty, nor does it differentiate between developed and developing nations: all are affected; it is merely a question of adaptation and mitigation. However, there have been attempts to frame environmental security as a national security issue. Thomas Homer-Dixon, writing in the New York Times in 2007, argues that 'climate stress may well represent a challenge to international security just as dangerous – and more intractable – than the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War or the proliferation of nuclear weapons among rogue states today' (Homer-Dixon 2007).

The debate surrounding the inclusion of environmental change in the security agenda is multi-faceted and is not easily reconcilable. Essentially, the circumstances under which environmental change should be considered a security issue, is dependent on the definition of security. As this essay is using the Commission on Human Security's definition of human security, with the notion of a 'vital core' of all human lives, the primary circumstance under which an issue is securitized is any issue that threatens this 'vital core'. The advantage of this definition is that it maintains the broad nature of the human security agenda, whilst differentiating between security and other general concepts such as development. The definition implies that security is subjective, and therefore has different meaning to each individual, dependent on their personal situation. It also remains true to the four key characteristics of human security, as outlined in the UNDP's *Human Development Report.* These characteristics are: the universal nature of concern for human security; the components of human security are interdependent; human security is easier to 'ensure through early prevention than later intervention'; and people-centred (UNDP 1994:23). These four characteristics also apply to environmental change, particularly its relationship with security.

Robert Kaplan, in his landmark essay, *The Coming Anarchy,* illustrates the linkages between environmental

degradation and security. He argues that it is time to "understand the environment for what it is: the national security issue of the early twenty-first century" (Kaplan 1994:55). As Kaplan argues, we are seeing the image of a bifurcated world more prominently with the increasing severity of climate change. He illustrates the disparities between the North and South by referring to the various states of humankind and the inequalities between them. He argues that one part of the globe is inhabited by Fukuyama's 'Last Man'; healthy, democratized and surrounded by technological luxuries, whereas the other (majority) of the planet is inhabited by Hobbes' 'First Man'; nasty, uncivilized and 'backward' in nature (Kaplan 1994:60). The Last Man has the capabilities to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as they have the infrastructure and financial and political institutions to cope, generally at the expense of the 'First Man'. Kaplan makes a convincing argument about the linkages between environmental degradation and security, and argues that "environmental scarcity will inflame existing hatreds and affect power relationships" (Kaplan 1994:60). Unfortunately, however, he lacks empirical evidence to support his claims.

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report of 1994 identified the environment as a threat to security. However, this attempt to include environmental change in the security agenda has its limitations. The Report set out to redefine security, challenging traditional thoughts of security. Rather than trying to redefine security, or broaden the agenda to include environmental change, analyses of the relationship between the environment and security must be made, and linkages made clear, especially when referring to the relationship between the environment and conflict. Furthermore, rather than redefining security overall, the notion that environmental change is a credible threat to state security must be examined. This requires a slightly different approach than realists traditionally subscribe to; the threats of violence or civil unrest that environmental change poses are generally intra-state, which have the potential to have a spill-over effect and cross borders. This can be seen in instances of mass migrations and the destabilizing of regions, especially when a nation is landlocked. These non-military aspects threaten and can undermine state sovereignty, especially in instances where a state is already 'weak' or 'failing', which can potentially lead to the emergence of 'hard' regimes (see Homer-Dixon 1998:358-9). This is particularly problematic for realists, as they prescribe the use of force as a solution to security issues. But, as evidence suggests, the "goal of national security as traditionally conceived … presents problems that are becoming increasingly resistant to military solutions" (Sprout and Sprout 1971:406). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate claims of violence erupting purely over environmental degradation. It has been argued that in conflicts such as Rwanda and Haiti, resource scarcity, land degradation and water scarcity have contributed to conflict, but we are yet to see a conflict that is entirely environmentally-motivated.

In recent years, there has been an argument that the conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan is the first 'climate conflict' we have seen, and that the war has been caused by water scarcity and desertification (Sachs 2007:24). However, the United Nations Environment Programme's report, *Sudan: Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment,* challenges the view that Darfur is primarily an environmentally motivated conflict. It does, however, acknowledge the role of the environment, and states that climate change, desertification and land degradation are indeed major factors in the conflict. It does, however, comment that they are "generally contributing factors only, not the sole cause for tension" (UNEP 2007:77). The report also identifies the conditions necessary for sustainable peace in the region, which is only possible if the environmental stresses are resolved.

The inclusion of environmental change in the security agenda is controversial, and fraught with implications. The main implication of securitization, in general, is that the 'importance' of an issue need not be the primary condition under which an issue is securitized. If all issues of importance were included in the security agenda, security becomes 'everything and nothing' (Walt 1990). There are also questions of the threshold of issues; when an issue surpasses a 'threshold' to be classified as a security issue (Owen 2008). There are also contending views regarding the referent object of security, despite attempts to redefine security based around notions of the protection and rights of the individual, rather than the state.

Essentially, when determining whether an issue should be included in a security agenda, there are many contending views. Securitization is entirely dependent on the definition of security itself, and the context in which the issue is to be securitized. In the instance of environmental change, it has contributed to both a broadening and a deepening of the security agenda, however it has not received the attention that it deserves. A critical approach to the environment-security relationship is paramount to successfully conceptualizing environmental change in world politics. A critical

approach forces us to rethink key questions surrounding security, such as what is security, what is the environment and who is the referent object of security. Different theories of security explain different aspects of securitization, and it is necessary to position the environment-security relationship between these, rather than redefining security itself. Based upon the Commission on Human Security's definition, the primary circumstance under which any issue should be considered a security issue is one that threatens the 'vital core' of all human life. Climate change poses threats that are largely uncertain, and difficult to quantify, however have the potential to be catastrophic. This speculative nature of climate change forces institutions, especially governments, to consider the long-term implications of the environment-security relationship, and facilitate the change to a more sustainable way of life.

Environmental change challenges people's capacities to survive, through water scarcity, natural disasters and sea level rise, among others. There is potential for this to lead to mass migrations, and the emergence of environmental refugees, particularly in the Asia Pacific regions, where scientific evidence has already shown accelerated rates of submerging islands. To reach a consensus on the securitization of the environment, there needs to be a focus on the relationship between the environment and pre-existing conceptions of security, on analytical, empirical and normative grounds, rather than attempting to redefine security as a whole.

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