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Securitising The Environment: A Barrier To Combating Environment Degradation Or A Solution In Itself?

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This essay argues that securitising environmental issues can constitute a solution to combating environmental degradation. This is because framing environmental degradation as a security concern gains the attention of high-level decision makers and allows mobilisation of resources towards a solution. However although the concept of security has been 'widened' to include environmental issues, the failure to 'deepen' it to include human security has meant that there is still a "fetishization of the state" (Wyn-Jones 1999:chapter 4 in Hough 2004:8). The traditional concept of 'national security' is applied, where the state is to be secured against environmental threats and the best perceived way to do this is by maximisation of power through use of the military (Hough 2004:3). This has resulted in environmental conflict discourse, which depicts environmental degradation as contributing to scarcity of resources, which then ultimately leads to conflict. Not only is this theory flawed but it also justifies military intervention in the Southern states (Detraz and Betstill 2009: 305). This type of intervention is seen by the South as a form of environmental imperialism, which operates as a barrier to cooperation with the developed states. Such emphasis on national security also ignores other effects of environmental degradation such as climate change, which are transnational and which the military can do little about. A focus on human security rather than state security will make a coordinated effort between the North and South to combat environmental degradation possible, and will help to address the underlying causes and exacerbating circumstances (such as socio-economic inequalities). Finally, this essay looks at how constructivist theory can be used to reconstruct 'security' and how this may facilitate solutions to environmental degradation.

"There is, in short, no neutral place to stand to pronounce on the meaning of the concept of security, all definitions are theory-dependant, and all definitions reflect normative commitments" (Smith 2005: 28)

The traditional meaning of the term security is an "absence of existential threats to the state emerging from another state" (Müller 2002:369 in Brauch 2008:6). Thus it has to do with the military dimension of a state's capacity to respond to violence (Smith 2005:27). The concept developed in the aftermath of the 1930's era of military threats, where the appeasement of Hitler by the British Prime Minister Chamberlain had not worked (Barnett 2001:26). This led to resurgence in realism, which claimed that maximisation of state security would be best accomplished via military power. Indeed realists believed that the state was crucial to securing its citizens' lives because without it people would pursue their own selfish interests under the condition of anarchy. As the individual interest equalled state interest, the build up of arms was justified (Hough 2004:3-11).

Table 1: The traditional meaning of 'security'

Concept of security

Reference Object

(security of whom?)

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Value at risk

(security of what?)

Source of threat

(security from whom/what?)

National Security

The state

Sovereignty, territorial integrity

Other states

(Adapted from Møller 2001, 2003; Oswald 2001 in Brauch 2008:6)

This belief was widely held up until the end of the Cold War, after which the security concept was adjusted to new dangers and concerns. These new threats were not coming from 'another state', nor did they involve the killing of people by weapons. One of the considered dangers became environmental degradation, which was 'exposed' by national and international organisations, scientific communities and the public's progressive access to information through the internet (Brauch 2008:10). Environmental degradation is "the processes by which the life-sustaining functions of the biosphere are disturbed". This includes climate change, biodiversity loss and depletion of fisheries and forests. There are two aspects to environmental degradation; firstly it concerns resource scarcities, which include the scarcity of "natural capital contributions to the economy" and secondly, the negative consequences of accumulation of waste in hydrological, soil and food cycles because of the biosphere's decreasing capacity to absorb it (Barnett 2001:14). In this way environmental degradation came to be seen as a security threat where the ecosystem and its ability to sustain certain life forms was at stake (Brauch 2008:6).

Deudney argues that just because environment degradation causes the loss of lives, does not mean to say it should be securitised. Disease, old age and accidents take lives, yet they are not considered matters of security. If everything that causes a decline in human well-being is framed as a security threat, then "the term loses any analytical usefulness and becomes a loose synonym of 'bad'" (Deudney 1990:307). There are two issues that stem from this. Firstly, environmental security concerns the "vulnerability of people to the effects of environment degradation", and so is a specific aspect of environmental degradation (Barnett 2001:17). It is not a catch-all concept because it excludes other environmental issues like sustainable development (Barnett 2001:23). It refers to what is *bad for people* more than what is simply *bad*. The second problem with Deudney's analysis is that old age, disease and accidents cannot really be equated with environmental degradation. To a certain extent these three problems are a natural part of human life. However, environmental degradation is caused by people. Climate change has been brought about by an increase in CO₂ levels because of human activity, and its associated sea level rise can displace populations living along coastlines. Bangladesh, for example, is especially vulnerable to floods (Mathews 1989:174).

In any case, any disadvantages of 'loosening' of security may not outweigh the possible benefits. Securitising the environment attracts the attention of high-level decision makers and results in the mobilisation of resources (Detraz and Betsill 2009:303) because "security encapsulates danger much better than concepts like sustainability, vulnerability or adaptation" (Barnett 2003:14). It is also ideal in that it facilitates communication between a diverse range of interests, which is important since environmental degradation impacts more than just one party (Barnett 2001:136). Consider the following scenario. Continued population growth means greater pressure on governments to provide adequate food, housing, jobs and healthcare. The task is all the more difficult for developing countries, where funds previously going to resource conservation are redirected to meet basic needs. Scarcity of resources due to lack of resource conservation is bad news for these countries' economic performance, as resources are the natural capital contributions to the economy. This could lead to political instability and conflict, pushing people out of their homes to seek refuge across borders. These refugees will create extra demand for food and place new burdens on

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the land in the place where they settle (Mathews 1989:162-168). This is one of many paths down which population growth can take states, but the point is that resource scarcity in one area can spread its effects across borders. This is especially so now due to economic interdependence. If the effects of environmental degradation do not respect borders/areas, then this presents a case for cooperation with all those people in the world that are affected. If securitisation achieves high awareness and facilitates communication from various interested parties, then it seems worthwhile. In this way securitisation may allow the meaning of environmental security to be stood and pronounced not just from one place, but from many. The amalgamation of these standpoints may just lead to the closest thing possible to a neutral one.

“The Dilemma should by now be apparent; securitising environmental issues runs the risk that the strategic/realist approach will coopt and colonise the environmental agenda rather than respond positively to environmental problems.” (Barnett 2001:137)

The realist take on ‘security’ in the post-WWII period still holds a firm grasp today, so that the state is still the referent object of security and it is still its sovereignty which is to be secured against the threat of states. The problem is that, in the context of the environment, this makes no sense because the traditional focus of national security (interstate violence) has nothing to do with the focus of environmental degradation (human impact on the environment). Furthermore, talking of national security is too restrictive because a state's ecological footprint may cross its sovereign domain. The wealthiest 20% of the world's population consume 84% of all paper, use 87% of the world's vehicles and emit 53% of all CO₂. Yet those least responsible suffer the effects the most. This is because wastes are exported to and resources come from the Southern poorer countries, so that their lands experience resource depletion and extraction (Barnett 2001:13). A focus on national security selects the military, because environmental degradation is viewed as having the potential to destabilise regional balances of power (Hough 2004:13-16). One only wonders how the military alone could prevent the effects of depletion and extraction.

The environmental-conflict literature is a good example where traditional national security concerns have been linked with the environment. The narrative within this discourse is that environment degradation will lead to resource scarcities, which will make the developing countries more militarily confrontational towards the industrialised states (Barnett 2001:38). Conflict over scarce resources undermines the security of the state (Detraz and Betsill 2009:305), so it is the state which is to be protected. Emphasis on such an account is undesirable for many reasons. Firstly, it is untrue that the only consequence of environmental degradation is conflict. Bogardi and Brauch have noted how environmental security involves freedom from want (economic and social security dimensions), freedom from hazard impacts (natural or human-induced hazards as effects of environmental degradation) and freedom from fear (violence and conflict)(Brauch 2008: 17-8). This demonstrates how conflict is but one consequence of degradation. Environmental-conflict literature ignores the root socioeconomic causes and hazard impact dimensions of environmental security; a focus on which would lead to conclusions of undertaking non-military efforts like disaster preparedness, adaptation, mitigation, early warning systems etc (Brauch 2008:17-8), and economic solutions like pricing goods to reflect the costs of their provision (Mathews (1989:172).

Secondly, the assertion that environmental degradation is a primary reason of conflict is purely speculative (Barnett 2003:10). Barnett suggests that the ‘evidence’ provided in support is a collection of historical events chosen to support the conflict-scarcity storyline and reify the realist assumption that eventually humans will resort to violence (Barnett 2001:66). This is as opposed to acknowledging that humans are equally capable of adapting. Thirdly, research shows that it is abundance of resources which drives competition, not scarcity (Barnet 2003:11). This makes sense because any territorial conquest to obtain resources will be expensive. A poor country suffering from resource scarcity would not be able to afford an offensive war(Deudney 1990: 309-11).

The second and third points mean that environmental-conflict literature counteracts any attempts at solving the problem of environmental degradation. The discourse attributes high intentionality to people-because of scarcity they decide to become violent. This ignores the fact that human actions are not intended to harm the environment. The high intentionality given to people prevents them from being seen as victims who need help. Instead they are pictured as threats to state security. This view can exacerbate ethnic tensions as the state uses minority groups as scapegoats for environmental degradation. It also means that only those involved in conflict are relevant to

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environmental security, not those who are vulnerable (Detraz and Betsill 2009:307-15). In this way the South is scripted as “primeval Other” (Barnett 2001:65), where order can only be maintained by the intervention of the North, rather than by the provision of aid. The North’s agency in creating the environmental problems is completely erased. Instead environmental degradation is seen from the perspective of the individual state, questioning how it could affect the state, i.e. increased migration (Allenby 2000:18) and this leads to the adoption of narrow policies.

Saad has said that securitising the environment in this way allows the North to justify intervening and forcing developing nations to follow policies which encapsulate the North’s norms (Saad 1991:325-7). In this way the powerful become stronger, and the weak weaker. This view may affect the South’s relations with the North. For example, Detraz and Betsill have commented on tensions between the North and South in the 2007 United Nations Security Council debate on climate change. Only 29% of the Southern states compared to 70% of Northern speakers supported the idea of the Security Council being a place to develop a global response to climate change. The reasons for this difference was that shifting decision-making to the Security Council would make Southern states unable to promote efficiently their interests in obtaining resources for climate adaptation and mitigation plans. Furthermore, Egypt and India argued that in suggesting this Northern countries were avoiding their responsibilities for controlling greenhouse gases, by trying to “shift attention to the need to address potential climate-related conflict in the South” (Detraz and Betsill 2009:312). In this way environmental security becomes a barrier because the traditional (realist) concept of security is used to *immobilise* any action towards dealing with the root causes of environmental degradation.

Table 2: ‘Environmental security’ resultant of a link made between the environment and the traditional concept of ‘security’

Concept of security
Reference Object
(security of whom?)
Value at risk
(security of what?)
Source of threat
(security from whom/what?)
Environmental Security
The state
Sovereignty, territorial integrity
Resources
Conflict and migration from the South

“For environmentalists to dress their programmes in the blood-soaked garments of the war system betrays their core values and creates confusion about the real tasks at hand”. (Deudney 1990:312)

So far this essay has discussed why securitizing the environment might create a barrier to redressing the causes of environmental degradation. Whilst Deudney’s point is a valid one, this does not mean to say that securitisation is not a worthwhile venture. Nor does it mean that it cannot be done without betraying the environmentalist’s core values.

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Security can be ‘deepened’ to mean human security. The United Nations Development Programme has said: “Human security is people-centred. It is concerned with how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities-and whether they live in conflict or peace” (in the 1994 Human Development Report, pg 23 from Barnett 2001:125). Thus human security replaces the state with the human as the referent object of security, which means the state is not depicted as a victim. Two factors become apparent from this: the North has responsibility for environmental degradation in the South and, because of socioeconomic and resource distribution inequalities as well as geographical location, some countries will feel the effects of environmental degradation more acutely (Brauch 2008:30, Detraz and Betsill 2009:306). National security can be undermined, but the human security discourse presents social, energy, food, health and livelihood threats as posing a survival dilemma for the people instead of a security dilemma for states (Brauch 2008:5). There are signs that this switch to human security is occurring. The UN Security Council in 2007 discussed climate change as a security threat to *humankind* and *human* consumption of fossil fuels as the source of threat (Brauch 2008:38).

Table 3: ‘Environmental security’ resultant of a link made between the environment and ‘human security’

Concept of security
Reference Object
(security of whom?)
Value at risk
(security of what?)
Source of threat
(security from whom/what?)
Environmental Security
Humankind
Survival
Sustainability
Humans

“Yet, rather than limiting security discourse to the domain of traditional military threats, we can usefully rehabilitate it...This move can be accomplished only on the basis of a critical constructivist reading of security that persistently asks: Whose security? What is to be secured?” (Litfin 1999:361)

Once it is accepted that environmental degradation can be better tackled if its securitisation entails a redefinition of ‘security’ to mean human security, the next question becomes; how can security be redefined as such? Litfin believes that ‘security’ can be reconstructed in a way that it becomes associated with the security of humans, not states (Litfin 1999). Constructivism contends that a security community is a social structure, whereby states identify themselves as being part of the community(Wendt 1995:73). These identities as ‘part of’ the community influences the states’ interests too, which means that ‘security’ is seen as achievable through the community peacefully rather than through power maximisation (Adler, E. and M. Barnett, *Security Communities* in Smith 2005:38). Analysis through constructivist lens highlights how security threats are socially constructed risks, and what is and what isn’t security as well as how it should be achieved, depends on the interests of those who are defining security. This uncovers the

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myth of security as an objective fact and thus aids cooperation by allowing consideration for other viewpoints. Eventually this will lay the foundations for taking cooperation between and within states on environmental issues as expected. In this way “our activities help to produce the physical conditions that will shape how environmental problems are constructed in the future” (Litfin 1999:369).

Allowing other viewpoints to be taken into account will allow those who are affected the most (i.e. the South) to communicate across how environmental degradation not only affects incidences of conflict, but also aggravates problems the developing countries have with the provision of basic material goods (food, shelter, air, healthcare), political participation etc. This challenges the global security community to ask ‘who is at risk?’ and find that human security better encapsulates the threats of environmental degradation. It should also open up the real causes of environmental degradation, such as the consumption habits of the North and the inequality of resource distribution between the North and South. Consequently the “socioeconomic complexity of both the material and intersubjective sources of insecurity” can be taken into account (Litfin 1999:366), so that suggestions of solutions like debt relief and better use of NGOs are better received when advanced.

Securitising the environment can become a barrier to preventing environmental degradation because ‘security’ is still associated with traditional conceptions of violence as linked to the state. This means that widening of the term to frame environmental issues has caused the meaning of ‘security’ to evolve from Table 1 to Table 2. Redefining security like this pits the South against the North which negatively affects chances of cooperation between the two. This is bad given that the transnational scope of environmental degradation means that international cooperation is a necessity. This can only be argument for the deepening of ‘security’ to mean human security, and it has been shown how this may be possible through a constructivist reading. Thus the real sources of environmental degradation can be exposed-including development and economic factors. The hope is to usher the evolution of ‘environmental security’ from Table 2 to Table 3, so that it is humankind’s survival from the threat of human action that is to be secured. In this regard it is difficult not to speculate what knock-on effects such a redefinition may have. If ‘security’ is reconstructed to mean the security of humankind, this may be one step closer to the sovereignty of states being pooled into one body, i.e. a “World State” (Wendt 2003). This transformation may help the environmental agenda by “amplification’ of intentionality from individuals and groups to the global level” (Wendt 2003:530), so that voices of the present South could be given an equal platform to the voices of the more affluent. However, it is equally possible that these very voices become lost within such a framework. The effectiveness of current international regimes is unknown, so there is no real evidence to suggest a ‘world state’ would do any better. However the ability of nonstate actors like NGOs, the scientific community and businesses to circumvent states to set global environmental standards could be the start of a change to global governance (Biermann and Dingwerth 2004:10-11). If this were to occur then the problems associated with ‘national security’ would be alleviated, thus removing any barriers to relieving the effects of environmental degradation. To get to such a position requires selfless political will; but if constructivists are right in saying that security is what we make of it, then it is in the hands of humankind to decide whether ‘security’ should be a barrier to combating environmental degradation, or a solution in itself.

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