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Environmental Insecurity

Peter Hough

Environmental insecurity has increasingly been invoked in political discourse around the world but subsequent political responses have proven to be highly diverse. In particular this reflects the fact that, as discussed in chapter XX, there is no consensus on what 'environmental security' actually means. Is the referent object to be secured the state, 'the human' or the environment? The question of whether environmental problems merit the politically significant label of 'security' is a complex one and highly contested. In essence there are four positions that have evolved: 1. *Traditional International Relations Realists* reject the coupling together of the environment and security either or both because environmental degradation is not considered significant enough to merit such a label and the contention that the politics of 'security' is about the military defence of the state, not tackling things like pollution; 2. *Security Wideners* consider that environmental challenges can invoke the politics of security but only if they can be seen to cause wars or threaten the sovereignty of states; 3. *Traditional Ecologists* resist 'securitization' through concerns that this risks invoking inappropriate, militaristic 'national security' responses to complex environmental problems; 4. *Human / Critical Security Ecologists*, receptive to the ontological and epistemological challenges to the conventions of International Relations that emerged following the end of the Cold War, contend that environmental problems can and should be 'securitized' by abandoning the traditional preoccupation with the state and military defence and mobilizing global responses to different kinds of threats to life.

Designating an issue as a matter of security is not just a theoretical question but carries 'real world' significance since it is indicative of where political priorities lie. Security widening can be seen in the political practice of many governments since the early 1990s, when the post-Cold War landscape provided space for concerns other than nuclear war, such as anthropogenic environmental change. Especially influential in this was the 'Resource Wars thesis', associated with Canadian academic Thomas Homer-Dixon, which posited that environmental degradation would increasingly be a spark for armed conflict. (Homer Dixon 1994). This thesis influenced the US Clinton administration and Homer-Dixon is known to have briefed Vice President Gore in the early 1990s (Floyd 2010). This government then went on to create a Deputy Under Secretary for Environmental Security and cite environmental degradation as a security risk in their 1994 'National Security Strategy'. Other instances of governments making the environment the stuff of high politics subsequently emerged elsewhere in North America and North Europe, such as in defence and foreign policy statements from Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and the UK. In 2007 the UK government used their presidency of the UN Security Council to push through, with some resistance from some other members, the first discussion in that arena of on an overtly environmental topic: climate change. Perhaps, though, the clearest illustration of the embrace of environmental security comes from its adoption by member of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation);

Based on a broad definition of security that recognizes the importance of political, economic, social and environmental factors, NATO is addressing security challenges emanating from the environment. This includes extreme weather conditions, depletion of natural resources, pollution and so on – factors that can ultimately lead to disasters, regional tensions and violence. (NATO 2013)

As this statement indicates, securitizing environmental issues in practise has tended to be in the traditional national security manner of factoring such concerns into calculations of defence needs. An exception, though, comes from the low-lying states threatened with literal extinction under the waves of the rising oceans. Following the Security Council discussion of climate change two years earlier the United Nations General Assembly in 2009 took up this theme with a resolution drafted by the government of low-lying Nauru called *Climate Change and its Possible Security Implications (A64/350)* calling on all UN agencies to prioritize global warming mitigation. Whilst the resolution was unanimously adopted international political practice for the vast majority of governments has still tended not to couple together the environment and security without thinking in military terms. The discourse of environmental change in venues of intergovernmental 'high politics' invariably cites the resource wars thesis or the apparent threat posed by a rise in environmental migration. Environmental degradation is deemed important because it **might** be a cause of war and instability rather than because it **is** a threat to life in itself. The UK UN delegation pushing for the Security Council debate in 2007 cited the following security implications of climate change; border disputes due to the melting of ice sheets and rising sea levels; increased migration with the "the potential for instability and conflict"; conflict over energy supplies; conflict due to scarcity; conflict due to poverty; and conflicts related to extreme weather events (UNSC 2007). This tendency to treat environmental insecurity as a matter of military defence has alarmed many Ecologists, wary that this serves to distract political attention from the more fundamental and multi-faceted social and economic challenges posed by issues like climate change. It was scientists not troops who saved the world from the threats posed by ozone depletion in the 1980s.

Human and Critical Security advocates share the Ecologist's misgivings about widened security but, nevertheless, support ecological securitization because, for them, the concept is far more profound than the resource war thesis. The simple and unambiguous fact that casualties of pollution far outstrip those of war and terrorism is enough to merit the urgent prioritization of tackling environmental issues in international relations from this perspective. However, in practise, in cases where human security has come to inform government policy there has been a notable lack of consistency as to whether environmental change can be given the same sort of prioritization as non-military issues such as human rights or transnational crime. Governmentally, human security been endorsed in very different ways. The 'freedom from fear' interpretation favoured by the Canadian government over recent years, for example, tends not to consider non-violent 'natural' threats as security matters. In contrast the United Nations Development Programme and the Japanese government have championed a wider 'freedom from want' variant, which does not preclude threats with less direct human causation. However, this more expansive version of human security has generally served to emphasize poverty and development rather than environmental degradation. In a more general sense human security is still somewhat problematic from an ecological perspective since this is, by definition, an anthropocentric rather than ecocentric way of framing problems.

However, not all environmental securitization has been of the state-centric and militaristic form and ecocentric thinking has been evident in some other statements of government political priorities. The Netherlands' 2006 Foreign Policy Agenda refers to the role that environmental degradation may play in triggering conflicts but notably goes on to declare as one of eight goals a commitment; 'to protect and improve the environment', without the addition of any clause indicating that this is another case of valuing the environment for instrumental rather than intrinsic reasons. (Netherlands, 2006) This ecocentric turn of making the environment the referent object of security has also been advanced in a different

political form in recent years outside of the Western World as part of the 'pink tide' in Latin America. In 2008 Ecuador's new constitution declared that nature had the; 'right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution' and mandates the government to take 'precaution and restriction measures in all the activities that can lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of the ecosystems or the permanent alteration of the natural cycles'. (Ecuador, 2008) Whilst many countries have cited environmental protection in their constitutions none have done so in such unambiguously ecocentric terms. This 'rights of nature' approach has also been followed by the Morales government in Bolivia where the 'Law of Mother Earth' proclaims the right of nature 'to not be affected by mega-infrastructure and development projects that affect the balance of ecosystems...' (Bolivia, 2011) For both of these Andean countries this idea of environmental rights comes from the impact of indigenous people identifying with nature against environmental pollution from oil and tin MNCs operating on their land. Ecocentric responses to environmental insecurities have increased in the discourse of international politics- as they have in the domestic politics of some states since the 1960s- but widened security thinking remains much more prevalent.

Conclusions

The rise of widened security- and particularly the resource wars thesis- means that environmental securitization for many still invokes a perception of militarization which jars with the pacifistic instincts of most Ecologists. National securitization may be welcomed in terms of getting governments on board and giving environmental issues the spotlight they deserve but old habits die hard and evidence suggests that this does tend to lead to the issues being framed in militaristic terms. Enquiry in International Relations (and particularly Security Studies) often, rightly, stands accused of being so preoccupied with semantics, ontology and epistemology that matter of life and death are not addressed as fully as they deserve to be. However, determining how best to address insecurities related to environmental change does necessitate such reflection on what 'security' means and how it can be optimized. Leaving aside the ever-dwindling gaggle of (chiefly non-academic) 'environmental sceptics', a lack of consensus on the precise meaning of 'environmental insecurity' is hampering political efforts to tackle some of the most urgent threats facing the world today.

Learning Resources

The links between environmental change and security, in a range of ways, are explored in this UNEP webpage:

<http://www.unep.org/roe/KeyActivities/EnvironmentalSecurity/tabid/54360/Default.aspx>

Articles on the human security implications of environmental change are collated on this United Nations University site:

<http://ehs.unu.edu/>

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