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Author(s): Nina Græger

Source: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb., 1996), pp. 109-116

Published by: [Sage Publications, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/425137>

Accessed: 26-03-2015 01:37 UTC

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Review Essay:

Environmental Security?*

NINA GRÆGER

International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)

The literature on 'environmental security' struggles with conceptual and methodological shortcomings, questioning the analytical value of the concept. Lodgaard and Westing claim that linking the environment to security – and thereby to 'high politics' – has created the political awareness and sense of urgency required to resolve environmental problems and increase our security. Despite the positive political effects, Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde warn against such linking, saying it represents an undesirable 'securitization' of the environment that restricts the range of means available for resolving environmental problems. In the long run, environmental security is more likely to be achieved if it is made part of the daily political debate, they argue. The environmental conflict perspective, focusing on the circumstances under which environmental degradation or change may lead to violent conflict, represents an effort to overcome some of the methodological problems of the security-environment linkage. This review also discusses how a multilevel approach to environmental security, involving global, regional, national and subnational decision-making levels according to the subsidiarity principle, would provide a more dynamic framework for action than the state-centred approach which still dominates security thinking and policy.

1. New Security Challenges, New Concepts?

The end of the Cold War and increasing knowledge of the negative effects of environmental degradation have intensified the search for a more comprehensive security concept in the scientific, political and military community. Increasingly, security is being defined as the security of individuals as human beings as such, and not only as citizens of a particular state. To preserve security, the entire human environment is being taken into consideration, including the need to resolve environmental problems and ensure a sustainable future.

Despite these changes, the question remains: Do the new challenges to security justify a revised concept of security that includes the environment? Or would this 'stretch' the security concept far beyond its academic and political potential? For years now, the concept of environmental security has figured in international research debates, without ever really taking off as an analytical tool. Why is that? This article reviews different approaches, indicating various problems with the concept, and seeks to indicate its main conceptual and political contribution.

2. Linking Security and the Environment

It seems virtually impossible to agree on an unambiguous definition of environmental security – or, indeed, whether it is a fruitful concept at all. There are, however, at least four clear reasons for making a theoretical and operational linkage between security and changes in the environment caused by human activity.

First, environmental degradation is in itself a severe threat to human security and all life on earth. Air and water pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, etc., resulting from civilian and military activities can and do change our living conditions dramatically. This is why many definitions of environmental security have focused on sustainable utilization and protection of

* A Review Essay on the literature on environmental security, in particular Buzan et al. (1995), Käkönen (1994), Lodgaard & af Ornäs (1992), and Westing (1989). This article draws heavily on Dokken & Græger (1995).

the human environment (see e.g. Westing, 1989, p. 7). Nature is no longer the opponent of society, against which humanity must struggle to survive: it is something that we must protect from the negative consequences of our own activities.

Second, environmental degradation or change can be both cause and consequence of violent conflict. Environmental degradation, but also poor respect for environmentally attuned resource management, may lead to disputes within countries and between otherwise friendly countries. General theories for the circumstances under which environmental degradation becomes intolerable and generates violent conflict are not far advanced, neither are theories for when environmental degradation leads to migration from the environmentally devastated area instead of conflict. This must be determined empirically, on a case-by-case basis.

When environmental degradation is a consequence of intentional acts of warfare, it often escalates the conflict. Environmental degradation may also exacerbate a conflict that originated for other reasons, e.g. ethnic or religious tension or socio-economic inequalities.

Regular non-warfare military activity may also have a negative impact on the environment in terms of pollution and resource use as well as the more severe threats implied by nuclear testing, accidents in nuclear-powered submarines or ice-breakers, dumping of radioactive material in the ocean, and so on. Military preparations represent a potential threat to the environment and to individuals even if they may not represent a threat to state security in the traditional sense of the word. Discussions about the use of military means to protect the rainforest, and to protect fish stocks in the Barents Sea from illegal fishing, possibly through Russian-Norwegian cooperation, are examples of positive linkages between the military sector and the environment.

Third, predictability and control are essential elements of military security considerations, and these are also important elements in the safeguarding of the environment. According to Sverre Lodgaard (1990, p. 17), there is 'a conceptual kinship which makes it natural to speak of "security" in both connections'. Under certain circumstances, irreparable environmental degradation or ecological systems in dramatic change may increase the likelihood of violent conflict erupting.

Lodgaard's definition of environmental security includes not only sustainable utilization and protection of the environment but also minimization of risk – or rather of the probability for experiencing negative consequences of environmental change (Lodgaard, 1992, p. 20). This, in turn, may be related to industrial activities and technology where there is a potential for major damage to the environment.

Establishing close political links with Russia and the former Communist countries in Europe is one means of preventing such damage, or at least of ensuring greater predictability and early warning systems which can facilitate rapid action and reduce vulnerabilities if prevention fails. The reliability of such predictions is, of course, a major challenge in ensuring environmental security.

The improved political climate in East/West relations in Europe has also resulted in co-operation in environmental matters. Focusing on the interactions between political and environmental security and how they may be conducive to comprehensive human security, Westing also claims that environmental security, by way of its international confidence-building effects and by alleviating some causes of military insecurity, may lead to improvements in political security, citing environmental cooperation in the Baltic Sea region as an example (Westing, 1989, p. 117). Thus, solving environmental problems may promote cooperation and therefore may be seen as security policy or peace-building. Environmental security may then be defined as a normative linkage designed to cope with the negative linkages between the environment and human activities (Brock, 1991, p. 407).

It is also vital to be able to predict and control wide-scale spontaneous migration or displacement of huge population masses from environmentally devastated areas into neighbouring regions. So-called environmental migration may cause social tension and political instability that leads to violent conflict within a state or between two or more states. Migration may be an alternative to violent conflict – fight or flight – or an intervening variable; it comes about because of environmental degradation and then strains further the resources of the recipient region or state (Homer-Dixon, 1991, 1994).

Finally, a cognitive linkage between the environment and security has been established. It has become legitimate for mainstream politicians to speak out in favour of an environmentally responsible security policy. Environmental security may still be mostly a politically attractive slogan, but environmental sustainability has indeed become part of the ‘high politics’ sphere in several Western countries.

3. ‘Securitizing’ the Environment?

Although the authors of the literature reviewed agree that there are linkages between the environment and security, several have questioned the analogy between the logic of the military and that of the environmental security concept. Some warn against a ‘securitization’ of environmental problems because this represents a militarization of our thinking about the relationship between humanity and the environment. The traditional logic of security involves threats issued among states with specific wills captured by nationalism or ideology. These are often directed against and conceptualized in terms of ‘The Other’ (Wæver, 1993, pp. 13-14).

Securitization of the environment invites a state-centred thinking about security, with the ability to withdraw from or respond to environmental problems depending heavily on the character of the state in question. Politically unstable and/or economically poor or dependent states may have to choose between cheap and quick industrialization and environmental protection. The two strategies may be mutually exclusive but equally important to satisfy the international community.

Others have argued, on the contrary, that by including a non-military threat like the environment, the concept of environmental security represents a *demilitarization* of security thinking. The concept of environmental security acknowledges the need for a political leadership to ensure the security of its citizens above and beyond their *military* security. A wider concept of security may also increase the range of legitimate policy choices available (Ullman, 1983, p. 133).

However, by securitizing environmental issues and making them part of high politics, the range of policy choices available is not increased but reduced. Securitization of the environment describes a way of handling environmental issues where threats to the environment are seen as urgent and immediate, requiring a quick response at top political level (Buzan et al., 1995).¹ Indeed, for politicians to devote themselves to a given issue, it helps a great deal if this issue falls within the realm of high politics. This is the most important political contribution of the concept of environmental security – not its potential demilitarization of security thinking.

Yet in the long run, desecuritization, or politicization, may be preferable to securitization. Politicization is ‘a recognition of social-political responsibilities for changes in the quality of environmental conditions’ which makes environmental issues part of the usual day-to-day political business (Buzan et al., 1995, p. 15).

When environmental concerns become part of ‘low politics’ and lose their sense of political importance and urgency, they attract less public interest. Elections in Europe and in the USA

in the 1990s show that the environment no longer triggers the same active public involvement as in the 1980s. Popular mobilization against environmental degradation seems to be at its peak in the case of potentially dangerous man-made environmental degradation, such as the French nuclear tests in French Polynesia. In the longer run, however, a positive mobilization basis of human aspirations, rather than fear, may be necessary if individual action is to be sustained (Deudney, 1990, p. 469). In any case, the degree of popular mobilization is likely to depend heavily on perceptions of its efficacy.

4. The Transnational Element

Possibly the weightiest argument against a securitization of the environmental issue concerns the linkage between security and the state. The field of international relations, including environmental problems, has long been constrained by legal and political respect for state sovereignty.

International interdependence is high where security and the environment are concerned. The question of environmental security should therefore be posed at the regional and global level, focusing on individuals and not states as the primary unit. Decisions made by one state to appropriate, or degrade, common property resources will affect other states. Traditional sovereignty-based solutions which relate property rights to territorially based units cannot be applicable to such issues. Without international or supranational law, states cannot protect themselves from the negative consequences of environmental degradation originating outside their borders.

Most existing international environmental treaties are inadequate because they fail to take these facts into account. These treaties are generally weak in compliance or enforcement measures – if indeed they provide for such measures at all. International agreements are generally a result of processes of intergovernmental negotiations based on notions of state sovereignty that permit clashes of interest perceptions as a legitimate reason for not signing such treaties (cf. recent conferences on global warming) or for postponing signature (cf. the on-going French nuclear testing). The incentives for taking protective steps depend on a state's vulnerability to a potential environmental threat. Low-lying states like the Netherlands and the Maldives have particularly strong incentives to have CO₂ emissions reduced to prevent global warming because rising sea levels represent an existential threat to them.

In addition, due to the time-frame for negotiating international environmental treaties and for their entry into force, decades may pass before substantial changes in behaviour are actually achieved. By that time, new and more pressing environmental challenges may have emerged, or the challenges at which agreements were originally directed may have exceeded the level at which they are resolvable (Mathews, 1989, p. 176).

The intergovernmental negotiation model originates in the realist paradigm which stresses the role of states as rational unitary actors and divides the world into territorially distinct countries. The objectives of state security policies remain twofold: to protect state territory and maintain the preferred form of government. The realist paradigm pays scant attention to the increasingly transboundary character of state economies, politics, technology and, indeed, of environmental problems.

This is an important problem in marrying the environment to a traditional security perspective. The transboundary character of most environmental problems makes it difficult for them to fit into the state-centred ideology of security policies. The state-centred security concept also carries with it values like enemy perceptions – which presuppose an important role for the

state, and the allocation of resources in order to defend its sovereignty. However, world security cannot continue to depend on such conceptions and institutions of state security alone. Few environmental threats can be sufficiently stemmed by claiming national sovereignty: some 'pooling' of sovereignty will be essential.

5. *A Useless Analytical Tool?*

A major problem with definitions of the concept of environmental security is the propensity to include almost any and every aspect of security thinking. Conceptions range from including the negative impacts of war and of peace-time military operations as well as the impacts of industrial activities and technology, to strategies for a sustainable development where the Western/Northern consumer culture, high-yield agriculture, etc., are abandoned. This has stripped 'environmental security' of much of its value as a policy instrument and conceptual tool.

If defined too broadly, environmental security risks the same destiny as the concept of 'sustainable development' – a catchword bandied about by all kinds of lobbies to achieve all sorts of goals. Indeed, by removing the words 'sustainable' from sustainable development and 'environmental' from environmental security we end up with two different research agendas fixed by different disciplines and interpreted by different policy-making institutions.

A perspective that focuses on the relationship between the environment and conflict rather than security overcomes some of the problems of methodological rigour. Such an approach facilitates rich case-studies, which in turn can contribute to making the environmental dimension of security more empirical and therefore more applicable to the political community.² The environmental conflict perspective is less ambitious but also more precise.

In other words, environmental security may best be defined by reference to its converse – environmental *insecurity*, defined as a situation where an environmental problem is likely to lead to violent conflict.

Perhaps a wider concept of environmental security is needed, one which includes not only the *absence* of environmental conflict, but also environmental degradation resulting from military preparedness activity, the conversion of arms to civilian use, and/or the safety of technological and industrial installations because these in turn may lead to a situation of environmental insecurity. In that case, these broader aspects must be very precisely defined if the analytical value of the concept is to be retained.

6. *The Normative Burden*

The concept of environmental security has been criticized for its normative connotations – occasionally combined with lofty ideas about going 'back to nature'. Mixing political activism with research is not in itself a problem as long as the two can be kept as analytically distinct categories – as in peace research, conceptualized as research on and for peace. The traditional security paradigm also has strong normative connotations – for example, seeing the nation-state as a territorial and organizational form to be defended with no need of further legitimation.

The concept of security will hardly ever – nor should it – be detached from political concerns; that is, from normative assertions. Security concerns always involve questions of security for whom, and for what purpose. But to avoid mixing instrumental and normative recommendations with assumptions about definitional and causal linkages, we should distinguish between the analytical conceptualization of the impact of the environment on security and the practical political approach to achieving environmental security.

7. *A Multilevel Approach*

Despite its shortcomings, the concept of environmental security facilitates – indeed invites – a focus that is not necessarily state- or sovereignty-centred. The very idea of environmental security implies a comprehensive, multilevel approach to security in the conceptual and political sense. Some environmental security problems are global, and thus are best dealt with at the highest possible level of governance. But although the state level may be too restricted for resolving problems which require global action, it may be too wide for others which require a subnational approach. Environmental security issues will often be more precisely geographically located than the traditional superpower security image – and will therefore be of more immediate political concern to those affected.

Many global environmental problems may be seen as a sum of local environmental problems which in isolation appear relatively innocent. In consequence, waiting for global initiatives might be costly, and not necessarily rational. Environmental cleanup in one region is not contingent on environmental cleanup in another, even if both regions may suffer from the same problem (Buzan et al., 1995, p. 22).

Whereas a ‘region’ is usually defined as a group of countries linked together by historical, geographical, cultural, economic or other ties, Arthur H. Westing thinks in terms of *ecogeographical regions*, defined as ‘a unit made up of living and non-living components of the environment that interact to form a life-support system’ (Westing, 1989, p. 2). Such a region may be trans-national, encompassing parts of several countries, or sub-national.

A multilevel security perspective is both comprehensive and universal. The security of human beings, not only the security of states, legitimates action and budgets. By defining states as global actors as well as entities of regional and local actors, it provides a more dynamic frame of reference than the sovereign nation-state. State sovereignty is not a static or an absolute. As pointed out by Geoffrey Howe (1994, p. 4): ‘(sovereignty) is not like virginity (“now you have it, now you don’t”)’. Sovereignty can dwell in different spheres and at different levels according to which issue is being dealt with.

Pooling of sovereignty at the global or regional level may take the form of international laws, treaties, and agreements, or stronger commitments based on transfer of legislative power to a supranational governance system. The European Union, the Barents region and the Baltic Sea region are examples where various formal arrangements on regional environmental cooperation based on environmental treaties – binding supranational legislation in the case of the EU – are now in force. In West Africa the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River which operates in the conflict area between two of the member-states, Mauritania and Senegal, is an example of continued environmental cooperation in a region of otherwise hostile neighbours (see Dokken, 1995).

8. *The Subsidiarity Principle*

If the state level no longer is decisive in a comprehensive security context, then which level is? The principle of *subsidiarity* is based on the idea that an issue should be dealt with at the appropriate level. In the EU, this means the lowest possible one. The argument for a decentralized approach to resolving environmental problems is based on the assumption that the best knowledge and experience about local conditions will generally be found at the local level. The commitment to ensuring the lives of future generations in the area is also likely to be stronger among those who actually live there. The lowest possible level may still be quite large – the relevant ecogeographical region, or even the global level.

In the EU the principle of subsidiarity has been introduced in full to help in ensuring a manageable, functional and desirable sharing of power and tasks between the European level and the member-states, and to an increasing extent, the subnational level. There is not always agreement within the EU on the appropriate level for dealing with a specific issue: balancing European and national interests is not so simple.

The EU cannot use the subsidiarity principle to assign tasks to entities outside the larger European entity. It can, for example, decentralize decisions concerning maritime pollution in the Channel to Bretagne and Normandie in France and to local authorities in Southern England, but has no authority over environmental security in the Baltic Sea.

On the other hand, the principle of subsidiarity may serve as a means of incorporating the supra- and subnational levels into environmental security, by encouraging a multi-layered structure of political action and overlapping authorities. Such a division of responsibility may make it possible to operationalize environmental security without 'securitizing' the environment. Subsidiarity favours a definition of different zones of security whereby environmental security problems are treated at the level where they occur, and not necessarily within the sphere of high politics.

Several problems remain, however. Who would have the authority, legitimacy and capacity – in terms of resources (money) and efficiency – to enforce the principle in an environmental context? No global or regional institution today can undertake such a task. The EU or the United Nations might provide a point of departure but would have to be considerably reformed. This represents more than a 'management' problem: it is a question of harmonizing national interests, and, more ambitiously, of harmonizing national sovereignties.

9. *An Extended and Disintegrated Security Concept*

Despite several obvious linkages between the environment and security, the many problematic aspects must be taken seriously, especially where operationalization is concerned. Each form of linkage must be *dis*-integrated into its underlying components, defining the legitimate use of 'environmental security' as a discursive category that indicates a conceptual area which includes various problems that can be addressed under the heading of security. This would enable studies of the effects on conflict of environmental scarcity, environmental degradation, poverty, population pressures, migration and so on (Græger & Smith, 1994).

Its conceptual shortcomings notwithstanding, the literature under review has served a purpose in drawing attention and political priority to environmental issues by linking them to security. Environmental security is also fruitful in the sense that the concept invites a comprehensive, multilevel approach to security.

A new concept of security that includes the environment seems to be justified. On the other hand, 'environmental security' cannot be completely dismissed as a concept just because no single definition has been universally accepted. Indeed, different definitions may serve different purposes. Rather than looking for a new definition of environmental security, we should define its various zones or areas of application. This includes the various components of the concept as well as the appropriate levels for dealing with environmental security. Components of environmental security include military preparedness, technological and industrial installations, and other activities that may damage the environment in a way that creates a security threat without necessarily leading to overt conflict. Determining the extent of such threats must be based on detailed empirical studies.

NOTES

1. This discussion is based on a Working Paper from the Centre for Peace and Conflict Research in Copenhagen, composed of four chapters which represent parts of a forthcoming book provisionally titled: *A Theory of International Security: Threats, Sectors, Regions* by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde.
2. The publication series *Occasional Papers of the Environment and Conflicts Project* of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and the Swiss Peace Foundation and the series *Occasional Papers of the Project on Environmental Change and Acute Conflict* (1990-93) and the more recent *Project on Environment, Population and Security* of the University of Toronto provide a number of comprehensive case-studies. These projects also contribute to theoretical research on the relationship between environmental change, environmental scarcity, and conflict.

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NINA GRÆGER, b. 1965, Cand.polit in Political Science (University of Oslo, 1994); Researcher at the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO). Co-editor of *Environment, Poverty, Conflict* (PRIO Report, no. 2, 1994). Major research interests: the concept and policy of security, European security and Europeanization of democracy.