ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

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Summary

This article identifies three major approaches to environmental security, each of which embodies a distinctive although not necessarily mutually exclusive security referent. These approaches can be understood as:

- Geopolitical environmental security, where the security referent is the nation-state against whose sovereignty environmental or other "threats" are assessed. The articulation of environment threats with national security has emanated from developed nations concerned about the cross-border impacts on their national interest arising from environmentally caused conflict in the developing world.

- Comprehensive (environmental) security, where the security referent is the global ecosystem upon which all human life depends. The security threat is the cumulative destructive impact of human activities on the global ecosystem that places the global commons and all humanity at ecological risk.

- Social justice approaches to environmental security, where the security referent is the impoverished global majority, most of whom are in the developing world. The security threat is the interrelationship between increasing polarization of wealth and

the differentiated impacts of environmental change that are maintained through new forms of colonial relationships in a globalizing world.

The persistence of all three approaches to environmental security into the twenty-first century signals deeper issues to which debates about environmental security have been harnessed. Developed nations' geopolitical concerns about national sovereignty and the destruction of the global commons associated with comprehensive security have largely dominated policies and practices associated with environmental security issues to date. However, criticisms from a social justice perspective have signaled crucial problems with these two approaches, especially for their failure to address the causes of inequality and injustice that underpin poverty and environmental degradation at local and global levels. Social justice environmental security challenges ethnocentric assumptions that underpin comprehensive and geopolitical environmental security, and places the social and environmental needs of the majority poor at the center of any strategies that deal with environmental change.

1. Introduction

The notion of "environmental security" emerged in international discussion and debate about environmental change in the late 1970s. In 1977 a spokesperson from Worldwatch proposed that "environmental security" was rapidly becoming an important issue because of the increasing risk of violent conflict arising from environmental change and natural resource scarcity. In 1981 these same concerns were reflected in *Global 2000*, a report commissioned by the U.S. Government. The 1987 Brundtland World Commission on Sustainable Development reiterated those concerns and proposed the implementation of a global management plan in its report *Our Common Future*. The 1990 United Nations General Assembly and the 1995 United Nations Commission on Human Rights linked environmental security to peace and human rights issues. Also in 1995, the Commission of Global Governance suggested the need for global security strategies that would reverse the deterioration of the global ecosystem.

However, in spite of the widespread recognition of the importance of environmental security, no consensus over its meaning has yet been achieved. What environmental security means and how best to achieve it remains controversial. To clarify the basis upon which environmental security continues to be controversial, this article identifies three major approaches, referred to as geopolitical, comprehensive, and social justice. Each approach is characterized by a distinctive, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, security referent. The security referents are, respectively, the security of the nation-state, of the global ecosystem, and of human welfare. These different ways of thinking about environmental security contribute to challenging or legitimizing a status quo of global inequality, and this issue is at the heart of the controversy over its meaning.

Since its emergence in the late 1970s, the environmental security agenda has been dominated by international security preoccupations with geopolitical security. From this development, geopolitical environmental security has emerged. The security referent of geopolitical security is the nation-state against whose sovereignty environmental or other "threats" are assessed. The articulation of environmental threats with national

security has been largely an issue for North governments and their associated military establishments. The environmental security threat is potential cross-border effects on the North arising from environment-caused conflicts in and between the South nations. Strategies to reduce or eliminate security "threats" range from developmental assistance to military interventions. Some international security critics of geopolitical environmental security argue that the emphasis on conflict and its repercussions for sovereignty deflects attention from a more important problem—the degradation of the global ecosystem upon which all life depends. Some other critics claim that geopolitical environmental security neglects to address the social causes of environmental change, leaving welfare deeply comprised for about two-thirds of the world's population, mostly in the South, due to unabated environmental deterioration.

An alternative to geopolitical environmental security is comprehensive security. The security referent for comprehensive security is the global ecosystem upon which all human life depends. The security threat is the cumulative destructive impact of human activities on the global ecosystem that places the "global commons" and all humanity at ecological risk. Strategies for achieving comprehensive security entail the establishment of international and supra-national forums and agreements for procuring the voluntary cooperation of sovereign nation-states in the "common cause" of global environmental protection. Although geopolitical critics of comprehensive security recognize the importance of global environmental problems, they are reluctant to review them as security matters. In addition, they have expressed skepticism about supra-national forums in relation to the capacity of these forums cooperating effectively and their potential for undermining national sovereignty. Other critics have more fundamental criticisms of comprehensive security, particularly its global focus, and argue that the global focus inherently privileges North interests over those of the South by deflecting attention from the local environmental issues that affect the welfare of the world's majority poor. Furthermore, they claim that the failure to deal with the underlying social causes of environmental degradation in the North and the South undermines the capacity of current comprehensive security strategies successfully to address planetary ecological issues.

Geopolitical and comprehensive interpretations of environmental security have been incorporated, to varying degrees, into domestic and international security and development policy since the 1980s. However, largely in response to the increasing prominence of environmental security, social justice issues have been introduced into the debate. These issues form the basis of the third approach to environmental security, which highlights the human welfare dimension of environmental change, including health, livelihood, and cultural diversity. The security referent is human welfare, and in particular those who currently possess very little of it, most of whom are in the South. The security threat is understood as massive global inequalities that foster increasing polarization of wealth between rich and poor in the South, and between North and South. These global inequalities have profound implications for environmental change. Among the specific security threats are the policies of international economic and development agencies as well as global environmental management forums. Their policies are seen as substantially contributing to global inequality and new forms of colonization among nominally sovereign nations. This approach to environmental security is premised on social justice considerations including historical and cultural

factors that have contributed to the pervasiveness of environmental insecurity. Alternative development linked to participatory practices and sustainability is seen as crucial for achieving environmental security.

Following is a discussion of the different approaches to environmental security and their different origins in the international arena. Major criticisms of each approach are outlined to clarify the controversial basis of environmental security. The discussion begins with geopolitical environmental security, moves on to comprehensive security, and finishes with social justice environmental security, which emerged slightly later as a response to geopolitical and comprehensive shortcomings. The social justice perspective raises profound problems with the geopolitical and comprehensive security approaches that compromise the capacity for the achievement of human welfare and environmental integrity at local and global levels.

2. Securing the Nation

2.1. Geopolitical Security and the Nation

Since being raised in the late 1970s, the notion of environmental security, or at least the notion of an environmental threat of some kind, has been put firmly on the national security agenda of many nations. The accelerating pace of environmental degradation around the world has been perceived as having potential cross-border repercussions that could threaten the security of otherwise non-involved nations. Concerns have been primarily raised by North nations, with their attention on the South as the main source of this kind of cross-border threat.

These security threats centered on the potential for violent conflicts over distribution and quality of resources necessary for economic development, traditional livelihoods, and immediate living environments. This understanding of environmental "threats" has its origin in geopolitical approaches to national security. Geopolitical security has traditionally been centrally concerned with protecting national borders from unwelcome intrusions, generally by military means. It originated in the pre-twentieth-century European experience of territorial expansionism of empires by military means. The emphasis on "national" security has continued to dominate Western security policy through its reformulation as realism and neo-realism in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

The national security orthodoxies assert a nation-oriented approach to security whereby 1) the international system ideally consists of independent and sovereign nation-states in an anarchic arena of competing national interests; 2) national sovereignty is highly valued; and 3) citizens' interests are conflated with the national interest. The security referent is the sovereignty of the nation, and the threat involves internal or external factors that undermine sovereignty or otherwise threaten the nation. However, particularly since the 1970s, a range of new issues has emerged as national security threats, defined in relation to their capacity to limit significantly policy options of national governments. Central to this reformulation has been "economic security." The importance of economic security must be understood in the context of the post-World War II Cold War period.

From the mid twentieth century until the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the super powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—played major roles in establishing international security regimes that were also linked to development assistance strategies. The Soviet Union sought to increase its sphere of influence through annexing neighboring territories and gaining cooperation from willing newly independent nations through providing development assistance. The United States and other North nations of the "free" world also competed for the loyalty and cooperation of the many newly independent nations who were desperate for development assistance. Developmental assistance on these terms addressed the interrelated issues of enhancing the spheres of influence enjoyed by each super power, and securing access to necessary natural resources located outside their own territorial boundaries. Since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, new regional security alignments have emerged, still largely premised on conventional security orthodoxy. However, the Cold War legacy of the integration of the newly independent nations into an international capitalist market remains, usually couched in terms of free trade.

The nexus between development assistance based on free trade policies and security considerations remains fundamental to North foreign policy. Free trade has continued to be a central mechanism for economic, social, and political development. This strategy has been implemented through the establishment of international development agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and through international trade organizations such as General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and, later, the World Trade Organization (WTO). The notion of an international division of labor between nations that capitalized on the differing comparative advantages of the developed and developing nations justified the structure of the international economy; developed nations provided capital and technical support, while the developing nations provided natural resources and cheap labor. From this perspective, an international market dominated by the principles of free trade would provide mechanisms for promoting mutually dependent international relationships that would undermine the propensity for overt international conflicts. By the 1970s, the apparent capriciousness of natural-resource-rich South nations, as exemplified in the oil price rises and the increasing interventions by South "socialist" governments, was seen as undermining the North development-security nexus by impeding the flow of capital into those North nations. Thus economic interests were attributed an explicit national security dimension. On this basis, protecting economic interests by securing free trade could justify overt and covert military interventions in the affairs of other nations in the name of national security. These developments had significant implications for emerging notions of environmental security that were later incorporated into conventional geopolitical security.

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Biographical Sketch

Elizabeth Eddy is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. Her involvement in social justice and environmental movements in Australia since the late 1970s has substantially shaped her teaching and research interests. Dr. Eddy teaches in a multidisciplinary undergraduate program that spans welfare and environmental issues, and emphasizes the importance of understanding local issues in relation to changes in the global systems. Her research interests include environmental justice, contemporary social movements, and, more recently, the international anti-globalization movement.