

Environment and Security— The Role of the United Nations

Roundtable Conference

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental changes can threaten global, national, and human security. Environmental issues include land degradation, climate change, water quality and quantity, and the management and distribution of natural-resource assets (such as oil, forests, and minerals). These factors can contribute directly to conflict, or can be linked to conflict, by exacerbating other causes such as poverty, migration, small arms, and infectious diseases. For example, experts predict that climate change will trigger enormous physical and social changes like water shortages, natural disasters, decreased agricultural productivity, increased rates and scope of infectious diseases, and shifts in human migration; these changes could significantly impact international security by leading to competition for natural resources, destabilizing weak states, and by increasing humanitarian crises. However, managing environmental issues and natural resources can also build confidence and contribute to peace through cooperation across lines of tension.

Environmental issues are firmly on the United Nations' (UN) agenda, but they tend to remain discrete topics that lack sufficient coordination across UN agencies; for example, over 20 different units have programs addressing water issues. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has repeatedly maintained that environmental issues must be integrated into the UN's larger development and security agenda, as outlined in his 2003 *Interim report of the Secretary-General on the prevention of armed conflict*. The High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, appointed by the Secretary-General in November 2003, carries a mandate to assess global threats and propose bold recommendations for action. With regard to the environment, the Panel seeks recommendations (in preparation for its December 2004 report) that, if adopted, would inject environmental issues into the security dialogue and transform speech into results.

INSIGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. Environment, Population, Development, and Security

- **Environmental problems can constitute security threats:** both environmental scarcity and natural resource abundance are linked to violent conflict. By threatening human livelihoods and contributing to social and economic inequities, environmental problems exacerbate proximate causes of conflict such as migration, relative deprivation, tense ethnic divisions, poor governance, and declining economic productivity. Environmental problems constitute security issues for the UN because they are linked to violent conflicts within states that can spill over international borders.
- **The environmental, security, and development communities speak different languages** and therefore do not adequately communicate, cooperate, or coordinate within international organizations, national governments, or NGOs. These three communities have too few incentives to integrate activities; sustainable development has proven to be an inadequate integrating concept. Natural resources and the environment are not part of the UN's conflict prevention efforts (and vice versa).

- **There is a considerable mismatch between the extent and magnitude of the environmental challenges we face and the depth and breadth of policy responses** in many quarters, including within the UN system. The UN Charter and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not feature key population and environmental concerns (except for water and biodiversity). The UN needs to coordinate efforts among agencies, remove institutional barriers, and mainstream environmental concerns in all of its agencies.
- **Shared vulnerabilities can translate into common interests;** increased interdependency can augment capacity and shared benefits can demonstrate the advantages of cooperation over conflict. “Environmental diplomacy” can promote environmental issues as a pathway to dialogue between parties in tension. “Peace dividends” can encourage and justify greater monetary investments, while mitigating security problems creates more opportunities for development. Further analysis could pinpoint best practices in cases where the environment has served as a tool to build confidence and peace.
- **Is the environment a “soft” or “hard” security issue? Casualties of war are not “more dead” than casualties of dirty water.** Environmental problems are high on many states’ security agendas and threaten a large percentage of the world’s population. Most participants agreed that environmental changes endanger human security, and some recommended demilitarizing and redefining security. Others questioned the efficacy of redefining security as human security, casting doubt on the concept’s appeal to the security community and its ability to integrate environmental issues into the security agenda.
- **Leadership is critical to turning the UN’s response to environment-related conflict from rhetoric into action.** Some participants asserted that the UN’s senior and mid-level management lacks the expertise and commitment required to integrate environmental issues into its broader security agenda.
- **Early-warning systems can provide an integrated mechanism** to identify when large numbers of people are suddenly physically threatened (e.g., by disease, homelessness, hunger, etc.) as a result of environmental change or natural disasters.
- **Disaster response could be more effective if viewed as part of a broader environmental security agenda.** The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs does not have the leverage it needs to mitigate humanitarian crises; it should be linked with development and early warning programs to form an integrated approach to disaster prevention. Disaster response suffers from the “CNN syndrome” (catastrophic events receive the most attention); therefore, funds are disproportionately devoted to relief rather than prevention.
- **The environmental agenda needs to be refashioned** so that it fits not only the North’s security goals but also the South’s development goals by promoting sustainable development. For example, WTO trade rules and member countries’ environmental regimes are often in conflict, and trade interests have generally trumped advances in domestic environmental legislation. Current sustainable development institutions are weak in comparison to trade and development regimes.

2. *Climate Change and Security*

- **Climate change poses a large threat:** it could lead to floods, droughts, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, increased tropical diseases, water scarcity, famines, declines in agricultural productivity, and shifts in migration and trade patterns. These changes are likely to be incremental, but may also occur suddenly and dramatically. While climate change's precise manifestations are still uncertain, the participants agreed that it was a significant and present threat, and that its impacts will likely become manifest over a very long period of time.
- **Climate change will disproportionately affect those who have contributed the least to it.** The developing world will suffer the most, while the industrialized world is responsible for most of the CO₂ emissions.
- **The effects of climate change can threaten security** by increasing the severity and frequency of natural disasters and humanitarian crises, by destabilizing vulnerable nations, and thereby possibly contributing to state failure:
 - Natural disasters—which already kill six times more people than armed conflict—have been increasing in frequency and impact over the last three decades, and disproportionately affect developing countries in terms of lives lost (while industrialized countries lose more infrastructure).
 - States that are less developed, weak, or undemocratic, and small island states, will likely suffer most from climate change-induced problems because they have limited adaptive capacity.
- **Mitigation will have modest results but is a necessary component of a climate change strategy.** Participants debated two strategies for confronting climate change: mitigation and adaptation. Countries can mitigate climate change by moving away from hydrocarbons and abating emissions. While all participants conceded that the Kyoto Protocol has been relatively ineffective, most agreed that mitigation must be pursued.
 - Integrating climate and development planning—specifically energy development—could be an important mitigation strategy, as could reconciling climate change and trade regimes.
- **Adaptation requires strengthening ongoing disaster work, and allotting more money for reduction and prevention.** Little attention or money is devoted to prevention and risk reduction compared to relief efforts. Risk reduction could be enhanced by exploring options from the private sector or by integrating risk management into sustainable development programs. Some participants were disturbed at the discussion's emphasis on adaptation strategies rather than mitigation efforts.
 - High-risk states need improved early warning systems, vulnerability indices, and contingency plans to prepare for disasters and potential conflicts. The participants disagreed whether contingency planning was the role of the UN or should be fostered through a National Action Program model involving national governments, civil society, and local communities.

- **There are large information gaps between the developed and developing world** about climate change; coordinating the message at the highest levels of the UN—using practical applicable statistics—could create a sense of urgency that would move the debate beyond finger pointing and raise the level of concern.
- **Some UN programs work at cross-purposes when addressing climate change.** Participants viewed the MDGs' silence on climate change as a great disadvantage.

3. *Water, Conflict, and Cooperation*

- **Scarcity of clean, fresh water, which impedes development and undercuts human health, can contribute to conflict between and within states.** Water security is essential to both economic development and political security.
- **Little historical evidence substantiates widespread fears of water wars *between* states.** However, tensions that arise over shared river basins impede meaningful cooperation among the states that share them and prevent considerable development opportunities. “Basins at risk” for increased tensions and potential violence have weak governance institutions, unilateral development projects that control water flow across international borders (such as dams), or member states that are historically at odds.
- **Water is, however, a common source of conflict at local and individual levels.** Within local domains, most water disputes occur not as a result of water scarcity *per se* but due to the mismanagement of water resources or the inequitable distribution of benefits. Just as on the national and international stage, water can also be a sticking point in ending conflict within a given locale.
- **Conversely, transboundary water institutions have proven to be robust forces for cooperation.** Shared management of river basins can foster a high level of cooperation and provide a pathway for confidence building and conflict prevention; sharing and codifying data can establish the basis for such cooperation.
- **Improving water quality and sanitation can save many of the 2-3 million people that die each year from water-related illnesses.** Experts generally agree on this subject, in contrast to more controversial areas of environmental science like climate change. Moreover, the costs of providing clean water and sanitation are relatively modest. Some participants asserted, however, that these goals—while noble—did not rise to the level of a collective security interest.
- While the UN recognizes the importance of water policy and has incorporated it into the MDGs, the Commission on Sustainable Development, and many of its agencies, **the UN's expertise on water security is diffuse and disjointed:**
 - The 13th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development will focus on water policy but is unlikely to address how this might be incorporated into the UN's conflict and security agenda.
 - The UN's World Water Assessment Programme, an umbrella process encompassing 23 agencies, is not widely known and does not venture significantly beyond producing the *UN World Water Development Report*.
 - The UN has largely ceded transboundary water negotiations to the World Bank.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

1. General

- **The UN Security Council should take a leadership role** by making environmental security a priority and moving environmental issues from the technical to the security domain. The Secretary-General should commit to integrating this issue by adding staff members who are knowledgeable about the links between environment and conflict, and should report annually to the Security Council on emerging environmental threats to security.
- **Coordinate international efforts on environmental security**, especially within the UN system. Alternative proposals include creating a new post of High Commissioner for Environment or Sustainable Development, assigning a Special Rapporteur for the Environment to bridge agencies and report to the Security Council, and establishing a high-level policy forum (though, participants cautioned, not in the form of a “World Environment Organization” or the existing UN Economic and Social Council). The focus should be on streamlining networks within the organizational structure rather than establishing new organizations:
 - A new High Commissioner, for example, could assess the capacities of various UN agencies, improve early-warning methodologies, and report on progress made in integrating environmental policy into the UN’s global agenda.
- **Form a “global think tank” for environmental security**, fostering data sharing, technology transfers, and institutional learning across international organizations.
- **Utilize environmental cooperation as a practical pathway to building confidence and peace.** Develop a method to quantify peace dividends to justify the additional costs of investing in environmental projects in conflict zones.
- **Improve management, leadership, and coordination among UN agencies** by conducting regular rotations of management staff among environment, development, and security agencies.
- **Create a “fusion center” to coordinate early-warning intelligence** across agencies. Integrate environmental considerations into the production of the Security Council’s confidential “watch list” of countries at risk.
- **Identify conflicts between the trade, human rights, and environmental regimes;** for example, modify trade rules that encourage unsustainable development. Integrate climate change and development planning; for example, use renewable energy to meet growing demand in the developing world and provide carbon-free energy to those “off the grid.”
- **Carry environmental security through to the project and program level.** The UN should work with communities, not just with governments, and perform on-the-ground follow-up where it invests its resources.
- **Create incentives to shift expenditures from conventional security to human security** by creating a UN fund to match reductions in military spending with money devoted to sustainable development or human security.

2. Climate Change

- **The Secretary-General should elevate mitigation by making it a matter of personal diplomacy and advocating it directly to world leaders.** While not ignoring the ten-year negotiation process that led to Kyoto, consider using the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (rather than the Kyoto Protocol) as the point of reference. Do not ignore prevention in favor of adaptation; mitigation makes sense in its own right. Focus on reduced carbon growth as a matter of sustainable development.
- **Increase the public's awareness of climate change and reduce the public's vulnerability to hazards through education.** Some participants advocated for developing better models to predict the direction of climate change, while others did not think this was sufficient.
- **Undertake an internal review** of how climate change affects the UN's mission and conduct an "accountability examination" to assess the impact of UN policies on climate change.
- **Integrate climate change and disaster planning** while strengthening programs dedicated to disaster and humanitarian relief (for example, by creating a high-level humanitarian disaster-reduction commission). Invest in and enhance risk-reduction and prevention approaches. Improve early-warning and vulnerability indices and establish contingency plans for high-risk states as part of efforts toward "preventive diplomacy."
- **Seek the participation of the private sector and encourage technological investment** in climate change mitigation.

3. Water

- **Establish water as a human right and focus on improving water quality and sanitation to save lives.**
- **Integrate UN work on water across agencies** by building on the UN-declared International Water Decade (2005-2015).
 - Survey UN water activities across agencies to identify successful programs and areas of integration.
 - Establish a Global Fund for Water (like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria) to provide a locus for funding and coordinating the UN's water activities.
 - Create a forum to identify and articulate the needs of stakeholders in the Global South for transboundary water management, dispute resolution, and conflict transformation.
 - Components of the UN system working on water policy must move beyond mere technical management questions and instead assess water and development issues within the broader context of peace and security.
- **Develop an integrated, systematic program of preventive water diplomacy** based on World Bank and Global Environment Facility frameworks. This program would bolster early-warning systems, enhance institutional capacity between nations, and craft a one-stop shop for programs designed to enhance cooperation.

- **Facilitate development of institutional frameworks for dialogue on water issues at the basin level** to encourage cooperation among parties with weak or nonexistent agreements. Establish a coordinating mechanism to replicate aspects of the Nile Basin Initiative (20-year donor commitment, significant funding, lessons learned, shared vision, benefit sharing), but find ways to include stakeholders throughout the process.
- **Support institutional frameworks and investments** in appropriate and strategic water projects. Provide third-party independent facilitators to minimize donor turf battles and coordinate the parties at the micro level. Recruit and train facilitators in hydrology, international law, and conflict prevention.
- **Establish international standards for gathering and analyzing hydrological data** and develop a database that can be accepted by all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Land degradation, climate change, and water quality—these are just a few of the environmental issues that threaten our security. By exacerbating deprivation, ethnic divisions, poor governance, and economic inequity, among other problems, the environment can contribute to conflict—at times violent—within and between states. Like other “soft” security issues, environmental issues offer avenues for confronting and preventing conflict, but the UN has not effectively integrated this concept into its security agenda. The High-Level Panel’s report should recommend that the Security Council mainstream environmental issues into its security operations, add environmental conflict experts to its staff, and facilitate sharing conflict-related environmental data and analysis across UN agencies. In summary, the High-Level Panel should recommend that the UN coordinate international efforts to sever the ties that bind environment and conflict. By protecting the earth, the UN Security Council can help preserve the peace.

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