

From Threat to Opportunity: Exploiting Environmental Pathways to Peace

Prepared for “Environment, Peace and the Dialogue Among Civilizations and Cultures”

May 9-10, 2006

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

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Recent reports direct the attention of policymakers and scholars to the links between environmental issues and security, promoting a new understanding of the 21st century's threats to peace. From UN reports, such as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's *In Larger Freedom* (2005) or the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change's *A More Secure World* (2004), to NGO publications like Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 2005*, these documents place environmental issues in the broader context of economic development, foreign policy, and security. In their view, these issues cannot be separated: sustainable development is critical to ensuring global security, and peace is required for effective development.²

In the response to these calls for action, policymakers and scholars have rushed to uncover and sever links between the environment and conflict or insecurity.³ In our haste, however, we have often failed to leverage opportunities to manage environmental problems in ways that build confidence, trust, and peace between parties in conflict. Instead of focusing exclusively on the threats posed by environmental degradation or depletion, we should actively exploit the peacemaking potential of natural resource management.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEMAKING?

At its most fundamental level, environmental peacemaking utilizes cooperative efforts to manage environmental resources as a way to transform insecurities and create more peaceful relations between parties in dispute. Environmental management may help overcome political tensions by promoting interaction, confidence building, and technical cooperation.

While there are opportunities at all levels, this paper focuses primarily on opportunities to make peace between nations or within regions. Such efforts attempt to capitalize on parties' environmental interdependence, which encourages them to communicate across contested borders or other lines of tension. These pathways to peace can be state-to-state interactions, civil society-to-civil society dialogue, or perhaps most importantly, the interplay between the two (Conca, 2002; Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Conca et al., 2005).

Building on the dynamics of environmental interdependence, we find at least four distinct environmental pathways to peace and confidence-building. They run along a conflict

continuum that moves from conflict prevention, to conflict, to post-conflict reconciliation. They are:

1. Environment plays a role in preventing conflict;
2. Environment plays a role as a lifeline during conflict;
3. Environment plays a role in ending conflict; and
4. Environment plays a role in making peace sustainable and long-lasting.

Environmental issues have a number of characteristics that make them good candidates for bringing parties together:

- Many environmental issues ignore political boundaries, making it difficult—if not impossible—for countries or groups to address them unilaterally; instead, parties must work together to sustain and manage resources or mitigate negative impacts. This interdependence can drive parties to the table even when they are fighting over other issues.
- Environmental issues often require long-term cooperation, providing an opportunity to build up trust over time. Shared environmental challenges are rarely solved or managed in “one and done” agreements. More commonly, they require ongoing consultation to effectively address shared environmental conditions that can change rapidly with little warning.
- Environmental issues lend themselves to civil society-to-civil society interactions more than other bilateral issues, such as currency trading or nuclear proliferation, which are more tightly controlled by elite financial institutions or the state. Civil society’s ability to act on environmental issues enables cross-border linkages that may serve as precursors to state-to-state dialogue.
- At times, environmental issues constitute “high politics” and, at other times, “low politics.” When environmental issues are a high political priority, parties are often compelled to come together and devote political attention, as environmental issues cannot be dismissed as insignificant. A groundwater aquifer shared by two or more states in a water-scarce region, for example, demands the highest level of political attention.

When environmental issues are a low political priority, they can offer an oasis of cooperation within a larger conflict. In this case, environmental issues do not threaten the most contentious issues in the relationship and thereby may provide a safe first step for dialogue. Given the diversity of potential environmental pathways to confidence-building, both high and low political circumstances can prove useful.

FOUR ENVIRONMENTAL PATHWAYS TO PEACE: EXAMPLES

1. The environment plays a role in preventing conflict

Environmental management and the sustainable use of a natural resource can undercut the grievances that exacerbate tensions. In this pathway, the parties are not engaged in outright hostilities, but their bilateral or multilateral relationships may be unsettled or tense. Grievances stemming from poverty or perceived inequalities in resource use may contribute to these tensions. Addressing these grievances, even when the efforts are couched officially as development activities or natural resource management, can constitute a peacemaking strategy.

Transboundary river basin cooperation: Politicians frequently warn that water wars are imminent in the Nile River basin, where regional power Egypt is highly dependent on the water flowing downstream through nine other countries. However, research indicates that nations do not go to war over water (Wolf et al., 2003, 2005). Since 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), facilitated by the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, and the Canadian International Development Agency, has included all the Nile's riparians in ministerial-level negotiations to formulate a shared vision for sustainable development within the basin.⁴ While not explicitly framed as a peacemaking effort, this cooperative program provides vital avenues for dialogue and promises tangible advances in development, which can reduce tensions along the river.

In the wake of the Angolan civil war, some have identified the Okavango River Basin as another “basin at risk” (Wolf et al., 2003). Angola, Namibia, and Botswana want to use the river's water in different and not necessarily compatible ways, which could reopen old wounds in this former war zone. Basin-wide institutions such as the Okavango River Commission, however, are actively fostering cooperation to meet the countries' changing needs and head off future conflict (Pinherio, 2003; Nicol, 2003; Earle & Mendez, 2004). In part because the states and international institutions have limited resources, they are willing to collaborate with civil society groups to conduct monitoring, consultation, and assessment. This inclusive attitude could be a model for improving participation in international environmental management structures.

2. Environment plays a role as a lifeline during conflict

During active conflict, lines of communication are often scarce. Environmental issues can be a productive avenue for dialogue, a lifeline that allows warring parties to maintain contact when other avenues are unavailable. When environmental issues are considered low politics, they can be a safe area for dialogue. When environmental issues are high politics—critical to survival—they can be too important to fight over. In the case of water resources, for example, cooperation has persisted even in the face of bitter conflict.

Environmental cooperation as avenue for military-to-military dialogue: As the Cold War ended, the militaries of the United States, Norway, and the Soviet Union (and later Russia) met to discuss the environmental threat posed by radioactive waste in Russia's

Northwest. The military-to-military exchanges, formalized in the 1994 Arctic Military Environment Cooperation (AMEC) agreement among the three defense ministers, provided an opportunity for face-to-face confidence building that sought to ensure political stability and security. Radioactive waste disposal was a relatively safe topic for the two superpowers to discuss as they emerged from the tensions of the Cold War (VanDeveer & Dabelko, 1999).

Cooperative water management in times of conflict: Two hundred and sixty-three rivers are shared by two or more countries, providing ample opportunities for states in conflict to share water. With its high levels of variability, water is frequently used as a lifeline for dialogue and cooperation during conflict. The Indus Waters Treaty stayed in force despite three major wars between India and Pakistan since its signing in 1960. Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand formed the Mekong Committee in 1957 and continued exchanging water data throughout the Southeast Asian wars of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. And from the 1980s until the early 1990s, while both nations were formally at war, water managers for Israel and Jordan held secret “picnic table” talks to arrange sharing the water from the Jordan and Yarmuk rivers. These dialogues are not limited to states; the NGO Friends of the Earth Middle East, directed jointly by an Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian, has facilitated community-to-community dialogue throughout the second Intifada with its Good Water Makes Good Neighbors program.⁵

3. Environment plays a role in ending conflict

Environmental degradation or depletion may not be a cause of conflict between parties in a given dispute. But innovative environmental management structures can sometimes help parties in conflict find ways to address unrelated causes of conflict, such as disputed borders. In other situations, even if the control of environmental assets was not the cause of the conflict, parties must negotiate the allocation and/or management of transboundary natural resources in order to reach a lasting peace settlement.

Joint environmental management helps broker peace agreements: Integrated joint management of the remote rainforest shared by Peru and Ecuador helped settle an intermittently violent, decades-long dispute over the border between the two countries. Adopting an ecosystem-level approach, the governments established joint management structures and the Cordillera del Condor Transboundary Park in this remote area. The 1998 peace agreement brokered by Brazil, Chile, and the United States specifically included these environmental management structures. Some observers have recommended the creation of peace parks in similarly contested border areas, such as the K2-Siachen region between India and Pakistan, to encourage a climate of cooperation (Ali, 2004).

Environmental agreements are required to reach peace: Neither the conflict between Israel and Palestine nor the conflict between India and Pakistan began as a water conflict. Water scarcity did not cause the wars these parties have fought. Nevertheless, water resources are key strategic assets that each party must agree how to share before conflict

can end. By dedicating working groups to negotiating water issues, the respective peace processes have explicitly recognized the importance of shared water resources.

4. Environment plays a role in making peace sustainable and long-lasting

Recovering from war requires a safe and healthy environment, which—contrary to widely held perspectives on post-conflict reconstruction—are not “luxury items” that can be addressed after attending to immediate needs. As a critical tool to jump-start post-conflict development, natural resources offer a key avenue for dialogue and confidence building. Where peace has taken hold but relations remain unsettled, more ambitious efforts, such as joint management of border areas, may encourage economic development that benefits all the former adversaries.

Environmental assessment in post-conflict settings: The new UN Environment Programme’s Post-Conflict Assessment Unit (PCAU) assesses much more than war’s environmental damage. At a country’s invitation, the PCAU conducts independent scientific assessments on environmental conditions that provide key information for supporting post-conflict development and reconstruction.⁶ PCAU’s activities are beginning to move into the domain of environmental peacemaking. By helping establish environmental management structures that promote dialogue and cooperation among former combatants, PCAU is taking steps to prevent the reemergence of conflict. As Pekka Haavisto, head of PCAU, writes in *State of the World 2005*, efforts to restore the transboundary Mesopotamian marshlands have brought Iraqi and Iranian scientists together for the first time in 29 years (Haavisto, 2005a, 2005b).

Peace parks: In post-apartheid southern Africa, peace parks (or transfrontier conservation areas) are literally tearing down the borders between former adversaries. This ecosystem approach seeks to encourage development and political peacemaking, as well as conservation. However, early attempts suffered from a lack of consultation with local groups. And, it is still uncertain whether increased tourism income can benefit local residents, not just elites. But by facilitating cooperation on water issues, conservation, local livelihood development, and eco-tourism, these transboundary mechanisms for peacemaking are worthy of further analysis.⁷

LESSONS LEARNED, KEY QUESTIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

The examples of environmental pathways to peace listed above are clearly illustrative and not exhaustive. A more complete list requires considerably more research and investigation. Until there is comprehensive accounting of the different roles the environment can play in confidence building, any conclusions or lessons learned will be preliminary. Similarly, many of the ad hoc efforts identified here have not been given enough time or resources for us to judge their efficacy.

With these caveats, we can identify some possible short-term and medium-term actions to remedy these shortfalls. It is also possible to suggest some lessons learned for the design of future environmental peacemaking programs.

1. Prioritize the natural resources most likely to provide successful environmental pathways to peace

The likelihood of various natural resources contributing to confidence building differs. Scholars should conduct systematic comparisons to identify the characteristics that make certain resources more likely to play positive environmental peacemaking roles than others. For example, water issues (particularly at the transboundary level) have demonstrated perhaps the greatest potential for environmental peacemaking (Conca & Dabelko, 2002). As noted earlier, despite the rhetoric regarding looming “water wars,” interactions between states on water issues have historically been cooperative rather than conflictive (Wolf et al., 2003, 2005).

On the other hand, minerals and valuable stones—such as diamonds, gold, and coltan—could be at the opposite end of the spectrum. Their high level of fungibility, value, and ease of transport, combined with the diffuse nature of artisanal mining, make controlling these resources—and therefore, capturing their confidence-building benefits—particularly difficult.

Natural resources like forests, land, and biodiversity fall somewhere in between water and minerals. The environmental peacemaking properties of environmental services, such as air quality, remain under-explored.

2. Find optimal mixes of transparency and participation in environmental peacemaking efforts

Conflict prevention and peacemaking have typically been the preserve of states, and civil society efforts have been perceived as secondary. Too little attention has been given to the interaction between these two levels. Can, for example, civil society pave the way for more productive state-to-state interactions? Will state-to-state agreements fail without civil society participation throughout the process? Is there an optimal balance of transparency and secrecy that builds legitimacy while still enabling states to negotiate (Conca & Dabelko, 2002)?

The Nile Basin Initiative’s experience shows that participation and transparency are critical issues for the long-term implementation and perceived legitimacy of regional development efforts with environmental peacemaking benefits. The adjustments made by the Nile Basin Initiative process, such as establishing the Nile Basin Discourse to ensure greater civil society participation, indicate that processes can adapt and become more inclusive (Kameri-Mbote, 2004).

3. Overcome barriers to collaboration among environment, development, and security institutions

We must break through the barriers preventing collaboration among environment, development, peace, and security institutions, such as the United Nations, international

financial institutions, regional organizations, states, NGOs, and academia (Carius & Dabelko, 2004). By its very definition, environmental peacemaking requires expertise across a range of portfolios and involves actors with little or no experience in cooperating. Often, institutions representing environment, development, and security compete for political attention and resources. To effectively exploit environmental pathways to peace, these fault lines must be crossed. To help achieve interdisciplinary and inter-agency cooperation, practitioners and scholars need training and capacity enhancement that gives them the necessary skills to undertake cross-cutting efforts.

The Environmental Security Initiative (ENVSEC) in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, for example, is such a nontraditional collaboration. A joint effort of UNDP, UNEP, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, ENVSEC conducts regional environmental security assessments using the comparative advantages of the three institutions (UNEP et al., 2004). In light of the UN Secretary General's recent calls for greater collaboration and integration, political support for such innovative efforts may be more forthcoming than in the past (UN 2003, 2004; Annan, 2005).

4. Pursue environmental peacemaking without calling it peacemaking

In many cases, the goal—peacemaking—must be left unstated in order to move forward and to capitalize on the environment's cooperation-inducing characteristics. If explicitly deemed conflict prevention efforts, environmental peacemaking can be overwhelmed by more contentious issues central to the conflict. Representatives from the security sector—rather than development, environment, health, or energy sectors—are forced to the table if conflict is placed on it. If environmental issues are low politics, they can provide a non-threatening avenue for dialogue. The conflict prevention rationale must sometimes remain in the background to first help build a pattern of confidence and trust across lines of tension.

5. Emphasize multilateral institutions rather than bilateral arrangements

When donors or external facilitators try environmental peacemaking, they must devote great care and attention to the perceived neutrality of the parties involved. The peacemaking process may be impeded, for example, if an external actor favors one basin riparian over others. Hence, wherever possible, multilateral institutions—such as the UN, regional organizations, international financial institutions, or NGOs—should provide financial support and human capacity for these processes, thus balancing the large role bilateral aid agencies continue to play.

6. Share lessons learned

Attempts to collect lessons learned have been few and incomplete, largely because few policymakers or scholars have focused on the broad sweep of possible environmental pathways to peace. We have drawn lessons specific to certain projects, resources, or regions, but performed too little meta-analysis. Both scholars and policy analysts should pursue this analysis; currently, too much knowledge and experience is bottled up in

foreign assistance agencies, on-the-ground NGOs, or separate international agencies within the UN system (Carius & Dabelko, 2004).⁸

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, environmental peacemaking is not a magic bullet that will single-handedly solve conflicts. And in many settings, the environment and natural resources are contributing to conflict and insecurity, whether from their scarcity or their abundance. But practitioners must try to better utilize environmental pathways to peace rather than ignore this tool. Without systematic policy efforts to capitalize on these peacemaking opportunities (and better analysis of existing programs), states and societies may deny themselves a valuable tactic for achieving peace.

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Notes

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² By awarding the 2004 prize to Kenya environmental activist Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace Prize committee also recognized the critical connections among environmental management, local livelihoods, governance, and conflict.

³ Since the mid-1980s, interest in environment and security linkages has grown, accelerating as the Cold War ended. The 10 annual issues (1995-2004) of the *Environmental Change and Security Project Report* reflect the evolution of this literature (available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/ecsp>, under Publications).

⁴ See the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) Secretariat's website at <http://www.nilebasin.org/>. For lessons learned from NBI and its civil society counterpart, the Nile Basin Discourse, see Patricia Kameri-Mbote's 2004 Wilton Park presentation at http://www.ielrc.org/activities/presentation_0409.htm.

⁵ For more on Friends of the Earth Middle East and its Good Water Makes Good Neighbors program, see <http://www.foeme.org/>.

⁶ For more information on the PCAU, see <http://postconflict.unep.ch/>. PCAU has conducted assessments and desk studies in Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, Liberia, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

⁷ See, for example, the South Africa-based Peace Parks Foundation at <http://www.peaceparks.org/> and IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas Task Force on Transboundary Protected Areas at <http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/theme/parks/parks.html>. For a critical view of Southern Africa's peace parks, see Swatuk (2002).

⁸ See, for example, the toolkits on conflict and natural resources produced by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation to share lessons across issue areas. Selected toolkits are available at http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/conflict/publications/toolkits.html.