



Environmental security



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Environmental security topics:

Environmental security should be viewed as one of the key areas for national security, as it covers a number of overlapping topics:

- **The impairment of ecosystems** encompasses climate change; shrinking biodiversity; deforestation, desertification and other forms of erosion; depletion of the ozone layer and various forms of pollution.
- **Energy issues** concern the exhausting of natural resources, various forms of pollution, energy shortages and the uneven distribution of energy resources.
- **Population issues** include population growth and consumption in excess of the planet's sustainable capacity; epidemics and poor health conditions in general; declining literacy; the politically and socially uncontrollable migration of persons and the beginning of uncontrollable urbanisation.
- **Food issues**, which concern poverty, famine, excessive consumption and various diseases; the loss of fertile soil and sources of drinking water; epidemics and poor health conditions in general; food shortages and the uneven distribution of food.
- **Economic issues** include the persistence of production methods that are unsustainable in the long term, social instability caused by the imperative for growth and structural asymmetries and inequalities.
- **Civil disputes** concern harm to the environment as a consequence of conflicts, and acts of violence that result from the degradation of the environment.

“The impairment of ecosystems” comes closest to a purely environmental topic. The other items on the above list overlap with other sectors in security (e.g. economic, political, military, etc.), but here they are viewed from the perspective of the environment. And although the role of the environment in questions of peace, conflict, (de)stabilisation and the (in)adequate safeguarding of the survival of the human race is constantly discussed, it has become increasingly apparent that it is a fundamental cause of instability and the outbreak of conflicts and unrest.

Types of threats in environmental security:

The potential universe of environmental security is in principle defined by three types of relationships:

1. **Threats** to human civilisation that come from the **natural environment** and are not caused by human activity. They include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and concerns over the natural cyclical return of the ice age.
2. **Threats caused by human activity** and affecting natural systems or planetary structures, where the changes observed evidently **represent a threat to the existence of**

human civilisation or parts thereof. Obvious examples at the global level include greenhouse gas emissions and the effect of freons and other substances emitted by industry on the ozone layer. At regional and local level those threats relate to excessive burdens on nature beyond the sustainable capacity of smaller ecosystems, which in the countries affected has led to the impairment of the economic base and the social structure.

3. **Threats resulting from human activity** and affecting natural systems or planetary structures, where the changes observed evidently *do not represent a threat to the existence of human civilisation*. An example is the exhausting of various mineral reserves; while this presents certain complications it is almost certain that technological progress will be able to cope with it.

The discussion on environmental security primarily concerns the second type. There is a circular relation of threats between civilisation and the surrounding environment, where civilisation processes involve an interference with nature that in some respects has self-destructive dimensions. From a global perspective this circular relation is the consequence of two trends: **the worldwide population explosion** and **the rapid expansion of economic activities in the latter half of the 20th century**. We can therefore include here population, food and economic issues and the consequent civil conflicts. For instance **urbanisation** is typically related to local overpopulation; **pollution** usually results from problems in local industry; **soil erosion** tends to be caused by a combination of geographically defined economic and population pressures; another example is the decline of the Aral and Caspian regions, where numerous projects are taking water from tributaries and therefore are causing both **lakes to dry up**. These are *creeping disasters*: the slow but steady worsening of living conditions. In many cases of course creeping environmental disasters cannot be ranked alongside fires, riots and wars; it is more a matter of slow decay. For instance soil erosion and overpopulation will not harm humanity's living conditions overnight: a longer period of time is required for certain thresholds or points of no return to be reached.

The devastation of the environment can provoke wars between countries, ethnic conflicts, the collapse of political structures, civil unrest and economic deprivation (hunger and poverty). **Natural resources** such as minerals, oil and gas very often lead to conflicts, not only due to **shortages**, but also to **surpluses**. Extracting minerals, oil, coal and gas can present serious threats to the environment through pollution, the infrastructure, corruption and armed conflicts; environmental security is diminished. The struggle for the control of natural resources is a catalyst for conflict in many countries, because those involved in the conflict often finance their fighters from wealth acquired illegally from large deposits of diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, etc.

Actors in environmental security:

A **large number of actors** operate in the environmental sector. **Economic actors** (multinational corporations, state-owned companies, agriculture, the chemical and nuclear industries, etc.) comprise a large group on whose activity the quality of the environment directly depends.

Another group comprises **governments and government institutions**, together with certain intergovernmental organisations. Environmental security is reflected in every country's domestic and foreign policy as governments set out the rules for economic actors relating to the environment and decide how vigorously (or not) compliance with those rules will be enforced. The creation of ministries of the environment and other departments, the establishing of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), developments in international law and the expansion of the activities of existing non-governmental organisations (e.g. the FAO and the World Bank) support a certain institutionalisation of environmental security concerns. However, governments and government agencies share some of the responsibility borne by economic actors. They make use of the

environment for their own ends and in relation to their military and defensive functions: these are activities such as testing nuclear weapons, military exercises, the production of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, the liquidation of surplus weapon systems, the decommissioning of ships, etc.

The European Union and environmental security:

At a European Council summit in spring 2008 the European Commission and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, presented a report on the influence of climate change on international security.

In the report climate change is seen as a threat to international security because it facilitates the expansion of conflicts. The resulting risks are not only humanitarian ones, but also include political and security aspects that directly influence European interests.

According to the report the most significant threats are:

- **Conflicts over resources:** insufficient arable land and drinking water, diminishing food stocks, increased flooding and also prolonged droughts are affecting more and more regions in the world. Water shortages may cause civil unrest and lead to significant economic losses. The situation in the Middle East and Central Asia is sufficient proof of that. The drying up of the Jordan and Yarmuk rivers will affect Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Existing tensions may intensify and lead to further political instability with serious consequences for Europe's energy security. Water shortages are also increasingly affecting Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. There is a greater risk of conflict breaking out in all of those countries, and EU members should realise that they are regions whose strategic, political and economic development directly and indirectly affects EU interests.
- **Economic damage and risk to coastal populations:** coastal regions are home to a fifth of the world's population; as sea levels rise and the frequency and intensity of natural disasters increase there is a serious threat to those regions and their economic prospects. In the European Union that situation especially concerns the Netherlands, whose coast has changed substantially due to human intervention and the natural disasters that have stricken the country. It is therefore essential to identify the regions in the EU most at risk and which require constant attention, and to work on improving the civil protection system.
- **Loss of territory and border disputes:** receding coastlines and the subsequent submergence of those areas could result in loss of territory, including entire countries such as small states. That is related to migration to developed countries (see below).
- **Environmentally-induced migration:** those parts of the population that already suffer from poor health conditions, unemployment or social exclusion are more vulnerable to climate change. That particularly concerns South Asia and the majority of African countries. Migration from those countries may result in conflict in the transit or destination countries.
- **Destabilisation and radicalisation:** climate change may significantly increase instability in weak or failing states that are already unable to combat complicated problems. A government's inability to meet the needs of the population or provide protection from climate change may result in frustrations that then lead to tension between different ethnic and religious groups within the country.
- **Tension over energy supply:** the struggle for access to and control of resources has become one of the most significant potential conflicts. As the majority of those resources are found in regions vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and as many oil and gas

producing states already face significant social, economic and demographic problems, instability is likely to increase in those countries.

- **Pressure on the international community:** the multilateral system is at risk if the international community neglects the aforementioned threats. The impacts of climate change will worsen relations between those countries most responsible for climate change and those most affected by it.

At the European Union level the report recommends that its own capacities be improved, which means improving the prevention of and preparedness for potential conflicts and disasters. Financing that security policy should be projected into the European budget. There should be concrete improvements in research, monitoring, the early warning system, civil protection and the use of crisis management and natural disaster response instruments. The Commission also proposes focusing more carefully on all regions and recommending security measures for them on an individual basis, paying attention to how European interests will be influenced.

At the international level the report focuses on looking for multilateral solutions: that entails better cooperation in the UN Security Council and the G8, which will require the involvement of important players such as the USA, China, India and Russia. The report also proposes improving cooperation in the detection and monitoring of the security threats related to climate change, and improving prevention and preparedness capacities. It is essential to take account of ongoing migration from third-world countries and attempt to devise a more comprehensive European migration policy.

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