

Assess the Strengths and Weaknesses of 'securitizing' Environmental Degradation

Written by Oliver Lewis

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OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 2 2007

The end of the Cold War accelerated the widespread realisation that human action, particularly that associated with conflict and industry, had broadly comprised the environmental component of security. The discourse to redefine security to include a wider variety of issues catapulted concepts of threats that target the individual rather than exclusively state-centric to the fore; human security declared that people and communities should be the referent of security. The United Nations expanded the definition of human security to include the impact of environmental degradation: That to be secure, individuals should have access to non-degraded land, clean air and fresh water.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are shortly expected to publish a report declaring that emissions from humankind are now the only explanation for major changes to the environment. While there will remain levels of uncertainty as to the pace and nature of future change, it is eminently possible that the melting of ice-caps could raise sea-levels, endangering land mass and altering human ecospheres.

In this essay I will initially define the concepts of 'securitisation' and 'environmental degradation' before progressing onto an assessment of whether environmental degradation should be placed on the security agenda. To achieve this, I will evaluate the strengths of considering the environment as a security issue and the weaknesses of perceiving the environment through a security framework.

Security is an increasingly complicated concept to define in a globalised world lacking the distinct conflictual bipolarity of the Cold War. Within the confines of this essay it is not realistic to discuss the wide variety of conceptualisations of security, therefore, to relate closely to the securitisation of environmental degradation, one will use Buzan's definition of security as "threats and vulnerabilities... staged as existential threats to a referent object by a securitising actor"[1]. Such threats need not emanate solely from the traditional military sphere but can also be non-military and even of a nature that is not directly threatening to states. As Hough comments, this approach of widening the security agenda encompasses a "varied range of perceived threats to humankind, which takes the subject area well beyond the framework of traditional treatments of international security politics"[2]. Securitisation is a framework for conceptualising a widened security agenda, and thus is intended to transcend the realm of politicisation of an issue (where there are strict rules governing the conduct of and policy-options available to decision-makers). To securitize a subject, the issue must threaten the very existence of the referent object (an individual, a society, the state or all of humankind &c.) to such a perceived level of danger that it legitimises the breaking of conventional rules of politics; consequently, emergency powers commonly associated with 'national security' are designated permissible. Furthermore, complete securitisation requires that the issue is publicly recognised as an existential threat to the referent, only then can it be considered a constituent of the security agenda[3].

Buzan defines the 'environmental sector' of security as "about relationships between human activity and the planetary biosphere" furthermore, environmental security concerns "the maintenance of the local and the planetary biosphere as the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend"[4]. Crucially, while Buzan et al. divide security issues into sectors, they recognise that it is absolutely crucial that these sectors – after analysis – are reassembled to highlight the interdependence between many of these security issues. Environmental degradation

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is often used interchangeably with environmental 'change' and environmental 'security' therefore it can broadly be understood as the negative processes, primarily attributed to humankind, that are altering the environment to an extent that it threatens the conduct, quality and existence of a referent object; given the global context of the biosphere, this is all of humankind. Environmental threats include the depletion of the Ozone, global warming, Persistent Organic Pollutants, deforestation, desertification, and, arguably, the scarcity and depletion of renewable and non-renewable resources. All have ramifications for the long-term survival not only of states, but of humanity.

However, there are many critics of the securitisation of environmental degradation. Traditional state-centric thought, associated with the 'realist' camps, suggests that only military issues that directly threaten a state (usually threats emanating from another state, but other tangible actors are now recognised) should be placed on the security agenda: Consequently, it is argued that to widen security is to dilute its potency through a confusion of what issues can be perceived as explicitly in the realm of security studies. For example, street crime is undeniably a threat to an individual's well-being and even their very existence, but it would be highly problematic to securitize this into a national security rather than law enforcement paradigm. An increase in the threats that must be secured against increases the amount of resources necessary to secure the referent object, thereby making ultimate security more difficult, expensive and time-consuming. Following Buzan's framework, securitisation should only be necessary if it can legitimately uphold the use of extraordinary powers; street crime does not. However, many would argue that environmental security could legitimately claim the use of emergency powers. Crucial, however, is the temporal nature of the specific environmental threat which dictates the priority it is given by actors, especially securitising actors. As Buzan asserts, the environmental sector is "complicated by its great variety of issues"[5] and the different timescales at which the issue will become a tangible threat. The disruption of ecosystems is both immediate and long-term, often depending on the specific global region one assesses. Population issues, such as growth, consumption and health problems also differ in importance when one looks at a strategic scale or specific locality. Civil strife, poverty, famine, structural asymmetries and inequities further complicate the securitisation of environmental degradation because their perceived threat level greatly differs depending on the referent object and the securitising actor. Consequently, elevating certain issues within the broader environmental sector to the security agenda is an inherent weakness in the approach; furthermore "not all of [the issues] are permanently subject to securitisation"[6].

A further weakness in the securitisation of environmental degradation concerns the specific referent object; it is highly ambiguous, as many theorists and policy-makers cannot determine what actor should necessarily be secured against environmental threats. Buzan suggests that it is "the environment itself and the nexus of civilisation and environment"[7] that are the two referent objects in the environmental sector. However, many would argue that this is potentially problematic in the contemporary state-centric system of international relations. The levels of tension, diversity between states and societies, the conflicting national interests and the differing levels of political and civil society development all contribute to the incredible difficulty of achieving the global cooperation necessary to actively perceive 'collective human civilisation' as the security referent and then initiate counter-measures on a universal global scale. The Kyoto Protocol and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have attempted to create a united intergovernmental treaty with the aim of the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system"[8]. However, the United States – one of the largest pollutants – has failed to ratify the agreement, while India and China – two emerging global industrial powers – are not currently required to reduce carbon emissions. While historical examples may seem largely detached from the modern world, it is still possible to draw parallels with modern governments desire to maintain the benefits and immediate interests of the moment – to maintain the status quo – and to ignore the strategic implications of environmental degradation. McNeill posits that the Soviet Politburo fell into this category, and that the United States' attitude to fossil fuels may also prove to[9]. President Bush's chief environmental advisor, the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, recently asserted that it is "pointless discussing a safe CO₂ level as we could not be sure how resistant the world would be to greenhouse gases"[10]. Connaughton is correct that one cannot be certain as to the reaction of the environment in the future, as there are a wide variety of nonlinear effects that occur suddenly and are unpredictable by geophysicists, ecologists or climatologists. However, to not only remove environmental degradation from a security agenda, but to end all discourse is a naïve and simplistic approach to an issue that will certainly impact all states at some future stage. One can recognise that to securitize environmental degradation, even if it is not necessarily the singularly best framework, ensures that this major global issue remains in the public and political discourse. Similarly, there have been conflicts

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in the United States and United Kingdom between government departments responsible for environmental policy and those charged with safe-guarding economic and industrial interests; the former proposing high targets for cutting pollutant emissions and the latter arguing in favour of considerably lower targets and less rigorous enforcement procedures. In such situations it is difficult to ascertain within which agenda environmental degradation is placed; the environmental departments commonly arguing that it becomes an issue of human security, morality and strategic sustainability, with other departments claiming it to be an exclusively economic or political consideration and therefore should not be securitised.

An active increase in human and societal vulnerability by a recognisable factor would arguably necessitate the securitisation of that issue. Environmental factors, such as the overuse of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems undermine the quality of life for the people of a state and therefore foster an unstable environment that could create or exacerbate violent conflict[11]. In this regard, it is prudent to consider environmental degradation as a security issue because its extension into the realm of armed conflict raises it into the sphere of 'high politics'. Sverre Lodgaard suggests that "where there is environmental degradation, or acute scarcity of resources, war may follow"[12]. Gleditsch argues that the prospect of warfare over environmental degradation and the consequential depletion of resources and their availability is not a new concept, and has long been a consideration of security policy-makers[13]. Furthermore, he argues that environmental degradation itself is not new, that "streets with running sewers in ancient Rome [or] conditions in industrial cities in Britain in the nineteenth century" were of environmental concern. However, Gleditsch qualifies this assertion, commenting that while environmental degradation is not a new phenomenon, it is of much greater concern today because as we further deplete our resource base it increases the likelihood of conflict over the distribution of resources and systemic paranoia of straining global limits in "an unprecedented way"[14]. But to securitize environmental degradation on the strength that it increases the propensity for conflict is not necessarily accurate; other factors that are commonly associated as the cause of conflict have also been referenced as the source of environmental degradation. Globalisation, weak states, poverty and a lack of international cooperation are issues that contribute to environmental degradation while also generating conflict between and within states. Hauge and Ellingsen studied environmental degradation as a potential cause of intra-state conflict and concluded that while deforestation, soil erosion and a lack of fresh water does contribute to violence; it does not do so to the same extent as political, economic and socio-cultural factors[15]. Therefore, it is possible to trace the roots of environmental degradation to a series of underlying causes, commonly systemic and structuralised violence, such as over-consumption of unsustainable resources in Western states, demographic pressures in developing countries and large-scale inequity in the distribution of resources to developing countries.

Furthermore, there are political and social negativities in securitising any issue, including environmental degradation. Placing the environment within a security framework dictates the use of a specific set of tools, a distinct logic and an often predetermined mindset. Security implies the use of force against an enemy, but environmental degradation can be recognised as "threats without enemies"[16] therefore strict military action in the conventional sense is impossible and betrays a further weakness in securitising environmental degradation. It is only the resultant factors (conflict over the scarcity and availability of resources &c.), as Admiral Sir Julian Oswald argues, that will "lead to escalating insecurity and instabilities in which the forces of traditional security will be heavily engaged"[17]. As asserted earlier, to perceive the environment as a security issue enables the use of special powers which have the potential to curtail civil liberties: It can be argued that restricting the fuel consumption of a community or individual, or limiting further human behaviour when it is difficult to conceptualise the environment as an entity which can be harmed is an unacceptable intrusion into an individual or community's way of life.

Therefore, it is clear that environmental security is a highly complicated issue, and that environmental degradation is not exclusively a securitisation issue but that at some moments in time a security mindset (with all the tools available to national security enterprises) is a prudent approach to tackling environmental problems. But it is vital that environmental concerns are constantly reevaluated – by the political and scientific sectors – to determine whether it is within their continuing interest to be positioned with the politicised or securitised agendas. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that the most pressing security issues of our time are environmental, and that the traditional states system, without major change, is unlikely to be able to meet the demands of truly global cooperation.

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[2]Hough, P. (2004) *Understanding Global Security*. Abingdon: Routledge: 6.

[3]Buzan, *Security*: 24.

[4]*Ibid*: 8.

[5]*Ibid*: 74

[6]*Ibid*: 75

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Date: 2005*

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