Executive Summary

This Paper attempts to apply an environmental stress-national security (i.e., violent conflict) analytical framework to China. The linkages between environmental and national security concerns are of increasing interest to decision-makers and members of the public. Understanding the link between the environment and national security requires that a distinction be made between environmental stress, i.e., negative environmental effects, and the more general, but intricately linked, case of scarcity of resources. This distinction is seldom explicitly recognized in the literature. There is also a need to clarify the context in which the term national security is being used.

The first part of the Paper develops a conceptual framework for facilitating the understanding of how environmental stress may contribute to violent conflict. Most importantly, the framework serves to highlight: the case-specific nature of environmental stress-national security linkages; the fact that conflict may be intrastate or interstate; the large number of variables (such as population, technology and social factors) that influence causation; and the anecdotal nature of empirical evidence on causation.

The second part identifies and where possible elucidates the linkages between environmental stress and national security in the Chinese context. Because of the multidimensional nature of the linkage and data limitations, such as Chinese peasants' motivation for moving from interior rural regions to coastal urban areas, empirical analysis of how environmental factors in China work through the conceptual framework and how the myriad variables interact is not rigorous. Nevertheless, given these limitations, our analysis does point to a longer term potential for environmental stress to contribute to violent conflict, while reaffirming that such an outcome is not imminent nor inevitable. Moreover, and significantly, violent conflict in China, if it occurs, is likely to be the result of multiple causation.

It is widely recognized that China faces severe environmental problems, including widespread pollution and ecological degradation. But such environmental stress in itself, no matter how severe, does not necessarily imply violent conflict. For the social effects of environmental stress to become violent, certain conditions appear to be needed. First, there must be sustained public dissatisfaction with the environmental conditions. Second, there must be obstacles to the public expressing preferences on environmental issues in a peaceful manner, or a lack of governmental response to environmental problems of interest to the populace. Third, for serious challenges to authority, although not necessarily through violent confrontation, disenchantment needs to be organized.