

3.3 Types of Environmental Stress and Their National Security Implications

The typology of environmental stress goes some way to clarifying that the environmental threat to national security is really a set of simultaneous yet diverse threats. In a hypothetical situation where there were no threat of global warming or ozone depletion, other environmental threats would still exist, including unsustainable agricultural practices and production levels and the reduction of biodiversity of plants and animals. This said, the environmental threats are interrelated. For example, changes in climatic conditions could exacerbate regional and national environmental problems, such as soil and water degradation.

With the traditional definition of national security, i.e., military violence, the source of the threat is mainly outside the country. With the traditional definition, the source of the threat, country X or country Y, is also clearly identifiable. The sources of environmental stress are less identifiable. Sources are both inside and outside a country, and many individual agents, firms, people and governments contribute to environmental degradation. This is important, as there is a danger that political thinking may tend to fall into an "us" versus "them" cross-border mentality. This could result in over-emphasizing the "foreign" component of environmental degradation, with less serious attention given to domestic causes.

The timeframe over which a specific type of environmental degradation occurs, or more correctly has the potential to occur if appropriate policy responses are not taken, influences the relationship between the degradation and national security concerns. While the most potentially devastating environmental problems are global in nature (e.g., ozone depletion, climate change), it is not clear that this set of issues is the most important with respect to potential environmental causes of violence over the next decade or two. The most likely candidates for causes of violence over this period are water and local land degradation. Problems related to fresh water, in particular, may contribute to interstate conflict.¹² While climate change may be the most serious threat over the longer term, the most immediate threat to national security may be conflict arising from the degradation of the fresh water supply. Many bodies of fresh water cross international borders. Increased demand for water may add or create tension over upstream pollution control. Moreover, having degraded one's own supply, a country or sub-national region may begin to look elsewhere for the resource.

¹²Conflict over the degradation of fresh water is likely to be intricately linked with more general water scarcity issues.