

Natural Resources – the New Kid on the Security and Conflict Block

Bridging the Nature-Security Divide

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Earlier this summer, water treatment plants in Finland's southern coast reported break-ins. Russian involvement was suspected though not confirmed. The idea of a state actor, especially one already embroiled in a conflict, targeting a vital natural resource to stoke further tension or advance their goals is not new – we've seen it repeatedly from deliberate flooding during the 1938 Sino-Japanese War to attacks by Iraqi and Syrian governments in areas that seemed sympathetic to ISIS. Similar attacks by non-state actors have also demonstrated a tendency to use water or other vital natural resources as a force for destruction or to instil fear. ISIS seized large dams, reservoirs and electricity grids in part of northern Iraq, to achieve military aims through 2013 and 2014. In February of 2021 a hacker tried to poison the water supply near Tampa, Florida through controlling the online systems. Technology has made us and our resources both safer and more open to newer forms of risk.

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Traditional discourse on conflict continues to be heavily influenced by notions of hard security. The increase in military and defence spending is telling: a 35 year high in 2023, not only by European nations but globally following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As is the expansion of NATO and a growing global discussion of potential Chinese aggression that previously might have only been a concern in certain Asian circles. Climate related hazards, and conflicts related to natural resources do not command the same attention, energy or finances despite a rise in competition over natural resources. Security actors - from traditional militaries to state security structures - do not always see themselves as a part of the climate discourse. This, despite the fact that 2023 broke records on heat, wildfires and drought and saw an uptick in resulting fissures.

Climate security is still often seen as a sum of its parts, where energy and

water security or heat and pollution for example are dealt with in siloes and are not part of a larger security debate. The question arises then if they should be, and what role do traditional security actors play, if any, in conflicts relating to natural resources and climate change. It is a question that many have been grappling with especially as resources become scarce. As UN Secretary General Guterres warned in 2018, **competition over resource is rising, as are the risks of new conflicts or the escalation of existing ones.**

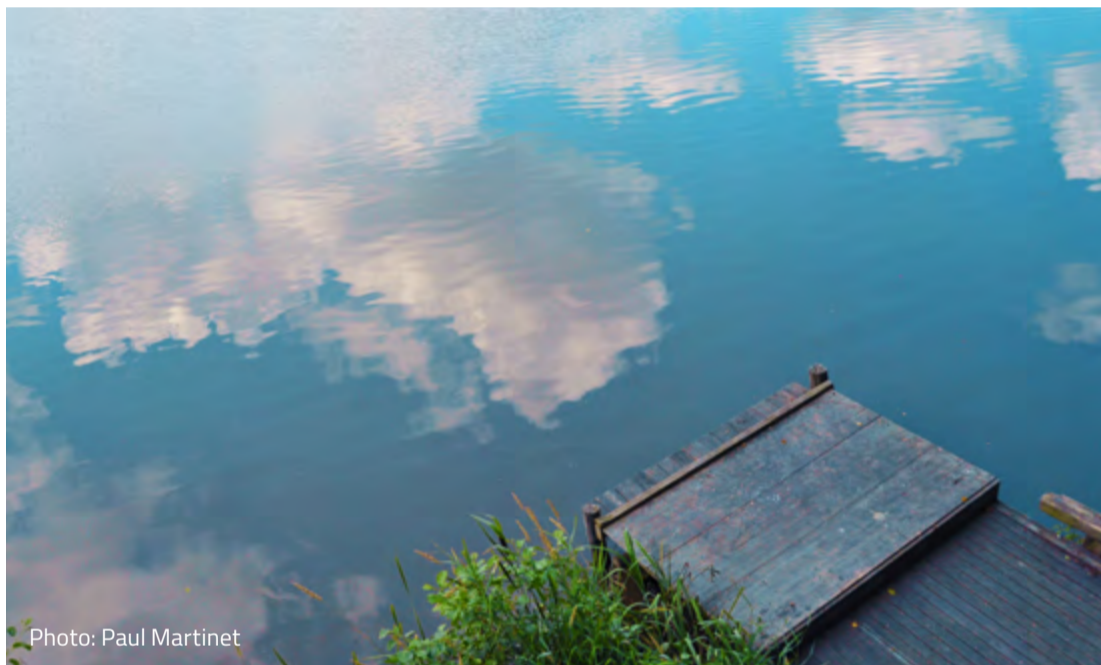


Photo: Paul Martinet

However, the bigger question that we need to ask is if security actors and the security apparatus need to play a role in preventing such conflicts and not continue to only be reactive. Today, as we experience new and often unknown drivers of conflict, that are not always played out in the traditional arenas of land, sea and air, there is a need to expand the concept of both conflict - often viewed from a hard security/military lens - and how we envision security – protection of political boundaries, borders and citizens within. While natural resource such as land, water or critical minerals might not, yet, be a primary driver of conflict, they can often be threat multipliers. It therefore becomes **important to understand the intersection of natural resources with existing conflicts and also existing vulnerabilities within and between nations.** The increased use of incendiary rhetoric between India and Pakistan over the Indus Water Treaty that occurs when there is an uptick in border clashes or attacks is a case in point. **It is equally important to acknowledge that soon these resources will become the primary drivers of large-scale conflicts.** While water is an obvious example, we also need to think beyond and consider the control and use of resources and structures, such as land or electricity

grids, as weapons or tools. Governments therefore need to examine and understand conflicts rooted in the decline of nature and availability of basic resources, and adjust their security planning and find the opportunities for investment that are not only in military equipment or training.

On the one hand, a more equitable distribution of resources, more finances for development endeavours and a just transition system that benefits all would be the way forward, where all nations are able to reap the benefits of a mod-

ern world. And while this is no doubt necessary, the reality is that till we get there, with populations rising and climate changes affecting the very nature of how we live, **we need to re-imagine the relationship between security and conflict.** Just as environmental degradation and economic growth are part of a cycle of socio-economic drivers that lead to conflict, it is those very conflicts that contribute to the degradation and biodiversity loss, forming a nature-security nexus. By expanding the Civil-Military cooperation to address the root causes of environmental degradation and exploitation and using existing intelligence apparatus to address threats, we can work towards stemming a dangerous cycle.

Defence establishments and militaries are key stakeholders, well positioned to aid in mitigating environmentally linked conflict. The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice, amongst other indicators, tell us that Some of the primary resources tied to conflict are land, water and energy, accounting for nearly 75 percent of hostilities. These vary from being low intensity and simmering – such as increase in gang violence in Haiti after Hurricane Matthew in 2016, to others that are entrenched over time and affect a large population – such as the drought that contributed

to the civil war in Syria, displacing millions, or increased tensions in Sri Lanka between the government and LTTE following the 2004 Tsunami. These tensions can be localised, or in the most severe expression can lead to war. In every case the local populations are the hardest hit, leading to further cycles of discontent and further conflict within those countries, migration to neighbouring regions that lead to a rise in cycles of resentment, and different forms of stressors on available resources.

Several governments, from Germany to Japan, and defence establishments including multilateral institutions such as NATO, have begun incorporating a climate lens into their security strategies. These are primarily focused on recognising the impact of climate change on infrastructure, personnel and conduct of operation, and introducing capabilities to combat these changes. Rarely, however, do these focus on recognising the interplay of a nature-security nexus with strategies to prevent a resource from being used as a weapon, tool or long term driver of conflict. Shifting focus to this more holistic approach to security will not only bring greater

attention to the importance of safeguarding resources, with more research and finances, but will potentially aid in ensuring that the climate discourse is brought to a much wider audience; not only as something that affects far away fragile economies or 'undemocratic' lands.

By placing the environment and nature at the centre we can assess a much wider gamut of peace and security in a more proactive manner. We ignore these intersections in present and future security conversations at our own peril.

Hackers attempting to control water or energy infrastructure or attacks akin to what Finland faced are only likely to continue. As we integrate various forms of artificial intelligence into our systems, technology becomes a key factor in the nature-security nexus. By placing the environment and nature at the centre we can assess a much wider gamut of peace and security in a more proactive manner. We ignore these intersections in present and future security conversations at our own peril. ■