

## PERSPECTIVE

## Environmental Security and United States Engagement Strategy

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*Decisions today regarding the environment and natural resources can affect our security for generations. Environmental threats do not heed national borders and can pose long-term dangers to our security and well being. Natural resource scarcities can trigger and exacerbate conflict.*

National Security Strategy<sup>1</sup>

This article will highlight some of the concepts and applications involving environmental security, our national security, and the engagement process. The National Security Strategy is the capstone document that describes threats to US security, means of defeating those threats, and regional security objectives throughout the world. This document looks at all means of enhancing US security to include military, economic, informational, scientific, and diplomatic resources. The military analyzes the National Security Strategy and produces the National Military Strategy. This document focuses on military threats and the military means to support the objectives of the National Security Strategy. Engagement is the process of the coordinated effort by the Departments of State and Defense to interact with and influence other nations or regions to enhance stability and US security objectives. A definition of engagement includes:

- a strategic concept that guides coordinated application of political, economic, informational, and military means to enhance stability and promote democratic ideals;
- a coordinated Department of State and Department of Defense operation controlled by the country team; and
- predominantly non-hostile activity characterized by the benign (non-lethal) use of military forces to stabilize potential crises.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental security is a commonly used, often abused and misunderstood

phrase and concept, in part, because there are no completely accurate or commonly accepted consensus definitions. Most of the traditional definitions are focused on preservation, remediation, and security of the environment. Newer definitions discuss the relationship of the people and national power to the environment. Most organizations craft a definition or description that supports their area of interest. A study conducted by the Millennium Project of the American Council for the United Nations University determined that most environmental security definitions contained the following common elements:

- public safety from environmental dangers caused by natural or human processes due to ignorance, accident, mismanagement, or design;
- amelioration of natural resource scarcity;
- maintenance of a healthy environment;
- amelioration of environmental degradation; and
- prevention of social disorder and conflict (promotion of social stability).<sup>3</sup>

Department of Defense Directive 4715.1 “defines” environmental security in the form of a descriptive policy statement: “The environmental security program enhances readiness by institutionalizing the Department of Defense’s environmental safety, and occupational health awareness, making it an integral part of the Department’s daily activities.”<sup>4</sup>

Ms. Sherri Goodman, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Environmental Security, described environmental security in terms of the Prepare, Shape and Respond Strategy promulgated by the Secretary of Defense:

- PREPARE by sustaining access to land, air and sea for training through responsible management of our installations and training land.
- SHAPE the international environment in ways favorable to US interests, promoting regional stability through military-to-military cooperation.
- RESPOND by supporting critical environmental and health requirements for military operations.<sup>5</sup>

From a practical point of view, environmental security involves the interrelationship of the environment, health of a population, economy, stability, and security. Not all environmental issues are environmental security issues. Environmental security issues are those environmental issues that may cause instability in a nation or a region, decreased quality of life, or pose threats to the security or quality of life in the United States. One example is the actual or potential health effects, diplomatic tensions, and conflict with regard to the usage and control of the water from the Tigris-Euphrates or the Jordan River systems. Another environmental security issue involves the change in habitat of disease vectors (insects and rodents) and the spread or mutation of disease-producing parasites, bacteria, and viruses due to global warming and man-made interactions with discrete ecosystems. Saddam Hussein’s deliberate release of crude oil into the Persian Gulf and its potential effects on desalinization plants is another illustration of an environmental security issue. Each of these examples has the real and significant potential to destabilize a nation or region. The results of these examples may have a direct effect on our national security, health, and quality of life.

The early recognition of environmental security issues and assistance in the form of environmental security engagement activities may enhance quality of life, regional stability, and preservation of the environment. Imagine a third world nation located near the equator. This is a new nation comprised of three tribal or religious groups surrounded by other nations that are also comprised of these same tribal groups. The population barely exists at a subsistence level, health care is essentially nonexistent, water quality and quantity are poor, and in a good year crops are barely adequate. A drought occurs and crops fail. People migrate to the few “main” cities in the area. Family integrity and unity suffer. Females become prostitutes in the city leading to increases in sexually transmitted and other communicable diseases. The migration puts an increased strain on the over-taxed infrastructure. Potable water supplies, food, public health, and sanitation are stressed to the breaking point. The crowded

conditions and malnutrition lead to an epidemic of antibiotic-resistant diseases. The diseases spread to other cities in the region as the migration continues. As the neighboring nations are alarmed at these “invaders,” they decide to control the situation by force, relocation, and a new government. Other nations in the region are concerned about these destabilizing factors and put their military forces on alert to “remedy” this threatening situation. In this environmental security-based scenario, an environmental crisis continues and a regional war begins.

During the last ten years numerous articles have been written on the destabilizing effects of environmental security issues on nations and regions as well as potential direct and indirect threats to the US. These researchers and authors include Thomas Homer-Dixon,<sup>6</sup> Kent Butts<sup>7</sup> and Robert Kaplan.<sup>8</sup> Environmental security issues have also been cited as significant challenges by NATO (Committee of the Challenges of Modern Society), a United Nations Environmental Program report titled *Environmental Conditions, Resources and Conflicts*,<sup>9</sup> and in the recently released Hart-Rudman Commission Report on National Security Challenges of the 21st century.

Unlike war or traditional natural disasters, most environmental security issues evolve slowly. It is difficult to determine when a critical environmental change is occurring or when an environmental issue becomes an environmental security issue. It is just as difficult to determine when and which environmental security issues will cause regional instability or pose a direct threat to US security interests. Some of these environmental security issues include global warming, population increases and migration, desertification, deforestation, industrial pollution, infectious disease, water scarcity, and the production and use of weapons of mass destruction. It is important that information gathering and analysis be focused on these environmental security threats in much the same way that we apply our intelligence assets against more traditional national security threats.

The National Security Strategy frequently states the importance of the environment and engagement:

Other problems that once seemed quite distant—such as resource depletion, rapid population growth, environmental damage, new infectious diseases and uncontrolled refugee migration—have implications for American security.

American leadership and engagement in the world are vital for our security, and our nation and the world are safer and more prosperous as a result.<sup>10</sup>

Environmental security activities can be a very positive and effective component of our engagement policy. Environmental security engagement activities, directly and indirectly, will promote national security objectives, enhance regional stability, and minimize transboundary threats. There are a variety of US government departments and agencies that participate in environmental security engagement activities throughout the world. For example, the US Agency for International Development provides financial, technical, logistical, and research support, directly and indirectly, to a number of nations in support of diverse environmental security activities to include agriculture, potable water supply, public health, and economic development throughout the world.<sup>11</sup> Another organization is the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), part of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The NCEH collaborates with UN agencies, government and non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions to study, assess and develop programs to assist other nations in such areas as childhood lead poisoning, mega-city development, urban health, and emergency preparedness and response.<sup>12</sup>

Department of Defense environmental security-focused engagement activities may take many forms and may include conferences in the US or the host nation, attendance at various training courses by host nation personnel, military-to-military training, bilateral or multilateral exercises, and baseline environmental assessments and technical assistance. These activities produce significant direct and indirect benefits for the US, the host nation, and the re-

gion. Some of the benefits include the following:

- Allows the US to perform engagement activities in a non-threatening or non-aggressive manner.
- May allow bilateral or multilateral training where traditional military training is inappropriate or illegal.
- Enhance the image of the US military to the senior civilian leadership and citizens of the partner nation(s).
- Demonstrate the robust and wide-ranging technical and public service capabilities of our military.
- May facilitate and promote negotiations and cooperation leading to increased regional stability.

The partner nation's and regional benefits include:

- Receives US assistance at many levels in many different disciplines.
- Creates a more positive relationship between the host nation's military, the senior civilian leadership, and the citizens.
- Improves the long term quality of life and stability.
- Facilitates additional assistance by non-governmental and private volunteer organizations.

The needs, goals, and priorities of the partner nation(s) are very important and must be understood. We must not force US “assistance” on them. Many nations are skeptical of US assistance and objectives. Environmental security remains a vague concept in most of the world and environmental issues remain a low priority in most of their military organizations. The relationship between the partner nation's military, civilian leadership and its people must be understood and factored into the engagement activity. A conference discussing numerous environmental security engagement options and the partner nation's or multilateral regional goals should be a basis for initial and periodic follow-up.

The Department of Defense has the requisite skills and capabilities to support environmental security engagement activities. Many department personnel, military and civilian, active and reserve, perform environmental security-related activities on a

daily basis. These include medical, engineering, and environmental specialists. For some military units, the environmental security-related expertise and capabilities represent their core competencies and "go to war" mission. Environmental security training and engagement activities present an excellent individual and collective training opportunity for US personnel. There are significant challenges for all environmental practitioners in the planning, preparation and execution of environmental security engagement activities. Often times there is less overall environmental awareness, concern, and capability in the host nation; additionally there are cultural and linguistic challenges to overcome. Environmental practitioners must diplomatically apply their specialized skills and education in complex and often ambiguous situations.

## Conclusion

It is important to identify and assess the relationship between environmental issues and environmental security risks. Environmental security issues alone, or in combination with other social, political, or military factors, pose a real and dangerous threat to nations and regions throughout the world, and direct challenges to the health and well being of our nation. Engagement activities focused on environmental security objectives may allow access to many nations and multilateral benefits

that can not be achieved using traditional engagement activities. These engagement activities require a multidisciplinary approach from the many interrelated environmental specialties. The skills of the environmental specialist are essential to determine the criticality and magnitude of environmental security issues as well as cost-effective engagement activities. US environmental security engagement activities will demonstrate American interest in a non-threatening manner, enhance our influence throughout the world, and prevent or mitigate the direct or indirect threats to our security.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government.

## Notes

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