

THE SECURITY THREAT THAT BINDS US

COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC RISKS

The CSR incorporates the Center for Climate & Security. This extract is from The Security Threat That Binds Us (February 2021), and is reproduced by kind permission.

‘Ecological factors can contribute to a number of outcomes that most experts would recognize as ‘traditional’ security threats. These include state conflict, political instability, resource disputes, and transnational organized crime. The changing nature of the risk landscape argues for a doctrinal reboot that infuses ecological concerns into security to better anticipate and address the challenges ahead.’

Global ecological disruption is arguably the 21st Century’s most underappreciated security threat. Human societies are producing rapid, novel, and foundational changes across multiple Earth systems with concomitant – and sometimes severe – consequences for people, societies, and security worldwide. These changes are significant and globally consequential, and include the transformation of the atmosphere’s composition, overloaded and depleted soils, toxified and acidified oceans, and reconfigured freshwater systems. Due to human activities, the biosphere—the Earth system that encompasses all living entities—is destabilizing rapidly and fraying the ecological fabric on which human society depends. Many scientists warn that Earth is entering a sixth mass extinction, a period of rapid loss of biodiversity so consequential that it affects the fate of the majority of multicellular organisms on the planet.

Humanity’s alteration of the Earth’s climate, driven primarily by the discharge of greenhouse gases into the troposphere, is now receiving well-deserved and long-overdue attention from the media, governments, security institutions, and publics worldwide. Broader activities related to ecological or natural security – ones that more directly alter ecosystems and transform the biosphere – have been no less dramatic or consequential but have

been absent from most of these discussions. Further, both climate and broader ecological security risks continue to be under-recognized as issues with tangible and present consequences for safety, security, and strategic interests.

The national security structures and agencies of many countries were designed to protect their respective citizens against malign nation-state actors, having shifted over the past few decades to also recognize threats from non-state actors. Actorless security threats, or threats without ‘proximate’ actors or explicit actor intention, such as infectious disease outbreaks, pandemics, and intensified natural disasters that harm people and infrastructure, present threats to which national security structures and agencies must adapt, and restructure where necessary, in order to meet their missions in the coming years and decades.

The term *ecological security* describes the elements of human, national, and global security that arise from ecological destruction and disruption, and the collapse of ecosystems.

National security must adapt to an era of ecological stress

The January 2020 World Economic Forum report on global risk perceptions identified, for the first time, biodiversity loss as one of its Top 5 Global Risks in terms of both likelihood and impact over the next ten years. The same report also identified the failure of climate action, extreme weather, natural disasters, human-made environmental disasters, and water crises as top risks. Those who closely monitor the global risk landscape increasingly recognize the deepening relevance of ecological and environmental stressors.

But ecological disruption affects people and societies in the context of other dynamic risks. Biophysical pressures from climate change, ocean acidification, and toxification intermingle with social stress factors such as economic instability, national and global governance failures, pervasive inequality, and the retrenchment of both information integrity and expertise. Unmitigated, these compounding factors portend a worrying period of global turbulence and shocks with high geographic variability. The complexity of the Earth, and the deep interconnectedness of its living and non-living components, will stymie efforts to address any of these stressors in isolation.

Ecological factors can contribute to a number of outcomes that most experts would recognize as ‘traditional’ security threats. These include state conflict, political instability, resource disputes, and transnational organized crime. However, the amalgamated risks that nations face over the next several decades are arguably more diffuse, obfuscated, and actorless than those experienced by previous generations. The changing nature of the risk landscape argues for a doctrinal reboot that infuses ecological concerns into security to better anticipate and address the challenges ahead.

What constitutes ‘national security’ has evolved since World War II, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War. This is especially true as the United States and its allies have grappled with a number of threats that stemmed not from conflict or Cold War rivalries, but that still challenged the nation at the strategic level, such as those arising from energy and economic crises, and drug trafficking concerns. In a ground breaking 1974 Foreign Affairs article, former Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor warned that ‘the most formidable threats to this nation are in the non-military field.’ Indeed, the systemic shock arising from COVID-19 throughout 2020 and likely beyond is a brutal illustration that nations can incur mass casualties, economic devastation, and social disruption that surpass violent conflicts.

Despite such calls to widen the security aperture, attention to environmental and ecological threats nearly always lags attention compared to more traditional security frameworks. In 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released an exhaustive global level assessment report by 145 authors from 50 countries that clarified the unprecedented degree and pace of ongoing ecological damage, with startling details about species extinctions, population declines, land degradation, overexploitation of resources, and overall degradation of ecological processes worldwide.

Despite its disquieting implications for humanity itself, the release of the IPBES report seemingly made no waves within the security community, where it remains essentially unknown.

Recognition of these issues is growing, but there is currently little indication that the scale of the threat is broadly understood or that mitigating policy actions are likely to follow without a change in course.