The Environmental Factor

Do the world's environmental problems threaten American national security? A look inside a decade-long debate.

by Geoffrey D. Dabelko

I t should have been the best of times for a little-known assistant professor at the University of Toronto. In a lengthy 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article that electrified readers all the way to the White House, journalist Robert Kaplan not only paid homage to the research of then 37-year-old Thomas Homer-Dixon but compared him to George F. Kennan, the architect of the containment doctrine that guided the United States during a half-century of cold war. Citing Homer-Dixon's 1991 work in the academic journal *International Security*—"even bolder and more detailed" than Kennan's "X" article of 1947—Kaplan sketched a dark view of the global future in which growing scarcities of water, forests, arable land, and fish, along with rapid population growth and other ills, would breed civil strife and war. The environment will be *the* national security issue of the 21st century, Kaplan declared, and Homer-Dixon held the keys to understanding it.

Kaplan's own travels through the chaos of West Africa, where he saw governments and entire societies in places such as Sierra Leone and Togo crumbling under the weight of unbearable environmental and demographic stresses, seemed to bring these academic hypotheses to life. "Africa may be as relevant to the future character of world politics as the Balkans were a hundred years ago, prior to the two Balkan wars and the First World War," he suggested.

"The Coming Anarchy," as Kaplan's arti-cle was called, touched a nerve in Washington. Vice President Al Gore asked the Central Intelligence Agency to oversee a systematic investigation of the causes of "state failure" it described. Samuel R. Berger, then deputy national security adviser, scheduled a hurried meeting to address the issues Kaplan had raised. Homer-Dixon became a regular on flights between Washington and Toronto.

The article appeared at an opportune moment, arriving on the heels of a series of foreign-policy crises far afield of usual American interests: the 1993 military debacle in Somalia, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and the simmering civil war in Liberia. President Bill Clinton suggested that "the coming anarchy" might be the successor vision to Mel Gibson's emblematic depiction of a broken and lawless post-nuclear holo-caust world in the film *The Road Warrior* (1982). American foreign policy officials were struggling to understand the roots of these conflicts, casting about for a new vision to replace containment as a guide in the post-Cold War world. Was the violence in the less developed world finally sufficiently menac-ing to warrant sustained attention from secu-rity thinkers? Were the long-ignored environ-mental and population crises in these areas finally reaching a boiling point?

As they read Kaplan's account of anarchy in West Africa, moreover, officials in Washington were faced with what seemed a parallel case much closer to home. For years

Capital Growth *(1997), by Martin Langford*

there had been a steady influx of impover-ished refugees from Haiti, but in 1994 it sud-denly turned into a torrent, as thousands of Haitians attempted the desperate raft trip to southern Florida. In October, President Clinton felt compelled to respond, ordering the U.S. military not only to stem the tide of refugees but to restore the democratically elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in Port-au-Prince. Haiti's dismal ecological state seemed a likely root cause of its problems. Decades of rapid pop-ulation growth had pushed poor farmers onto ever more marginal lands, stripping the island nation of its forests and the precious topsoil they protected. As the lives of hillside farmers tending tiny plots became increas-ingly precarious, Haitians migrated by the thousands to the cities, where overcrowding and deteriorating conditions provoked protests and riots. The instability weakened Aristide's government and encouraged the 1991 military coup against him—and ulti-mately helped spur the exodus to Florida.

But inevitably the "coming anar-chy" bubble burst. Kaplan's thesis was beset by critics on all sides—by defense planners and intellectuals con-cerned about diverting money and attention from the Pentagon's core war-fighting mis-sion (was the army supposed to plant trees on

Haitian hillsides?), as well as by environmentalists who objected to the idea of defining the environment as a security issue. Some academics criticized Homer-Dixon for going beyond his evidence—he spoke in Kaplan's article of proliferating dictatorships and predicted the collapse of India and Pakistan. Most important, Kaplan's "anarchy" thesis suffered an obvious logical flaw. While poverty and environmental destruction were grievous problems in the less developed countries, most of them remained far from the complete collapse suffered in Haiti and West Africa. "The Coming Anarchy" looked to many critics like little more than a perverse form of travel journalism with intellectual window-dressing. It certainly was no guide to the world's future.

The nature of the environment's contribution to conflict—"sub-national, persistent, and diffuse," to quote Homer-Dixon in one of his more characteristic cautious moments—also made responses difficult to devise and even harder to justify. There is something appealing about taking aim at the root causes of conflict, but reactive steps aimed at the symptoms (seal off the borders, and if that doesn't work, send in the troops) always seem to take precedence. American foreign policy and security spending patterns strongly reflect that predilection—just over $18 billion in 1997 for foreign aid (which includes military assistance) and more than $300 billion for the Department of Defense and intelligence community.

Yes, there are meaningful connections between environmental problems and organized violence, many concluded, but in the backlash after Kaplan's article, few were prepared to say that the environment plays a more significant role than the traditionally understood political, economic, and social causes of conflict. As the meltdown of Yugoslavia commanded more of its attention, the policy crowd moved on to other theories about the roots of conflict. Ethnicity and "the clash of civilizations," as Harvard University's Samuel Huntington put it in a

1993 article, now claimed the spotlight. (Kaplan added fuel to these fires as well with a 1993 book, *Balkan Ghosts*.) The job of figuring out precisely what role the environment does play as a source of conflict is now back in the hands of a growing group of scholars and specialists. A handful of these people work at places that represent the tentative institutionalization of environmental thinking in the traditional national security apparatus, such as the Pentagon's Office of Environmental Security.

The environment has often been used as a tool of war, from the salting of Carthage to the Russians' scorched earth retreats before the armies of Napoleon and Hitler. Plato, mocking the notion of a republic of leisure, argued that such a regime would soon resort to war to satisfy its taste for more space and natural resources. But sustained thinking about the environment-conflict connection is a product only of the last few decades. While clashes over non-renewable resources such as oil or gold are as familiar as the Persian Gulf War, the question now is about the role of renewable resources such as water, fish, forests, and arable land.

Many of the first systematic thinkers took a sweeping view, speaking not only of new environmental challenges but of entirely new definitions of national security, as the Worldwatch Institute's Lester Brown did in a 1977 monograph, *Redefining National Security*. Jessica Tuchman Mathews, now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argued in a much-noted 1989 article in *Foreign Affairs* that just as the meaning of national security was expanded during the 1970s "to include international economics as it became clear that the U.S. economy was . . . powerfully affected by economic policies in dozens of other countries," so it would need to be enlarged in the 1990s to "include resource, environmental and demographic issues." As a case in point she cited Haiti, observing that bulldozers were

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The Cost of Progress *(India, 1992), by Bhudev Bhagat*

needed to clear Port-au-Prince streets of top-soil swept off the mountains during the rainy season. "Until Haiti is reforested," she predicted, "it will never be politically stable." Former leaders Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway and Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union joined the argument, contending that the environment at least deserved to join economics and politics as a stabilizing third leg of the security stool.

In the less developed countries of the world, these ideas have elicited mixed emotions. Obtaining food and water is a daily struggle for the world's 800 million malnourished people, and according their problems the high priority of a security issue obviously has great appeal. But leaders in Brasília, Cairo, and Kuala Lumpur also fear that such an approach will invite violations of their national sovereignty as outside powers intervene to "help." They gave a frosty reception, for example, to Gorbachev's 1988 proposal to complement the blue-helmeted armed forces serving under the United Nations with a "Green Helmet" force to react to natural catastrophes and environmental crises.

Also skeptical of arguments for "securitizing" environmental problems are a number of scholars such as Daniel Deudney, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University. Long before Kaplan's article appeared, Deudney had attacked the notion that environmental scarcities necessarily breed conflict and scolded his fellow environmentalists. "The nationalist and militarist mindsets closely associated with 'national security' thinking directly conflict with the core of the environmentalist world view. Harnessing these sentiments for a 'war on pollution' is a dangerous and probably self-defeating enterprise," he declared in 1990.

Mathews and others who argued for a broad redefinition of security sought to place the physical health of the individual or the society, rather than just the territory of the state, at the center of what was to be secured. Beginning in

the early 1990s, Homer-Dixon and other "second wave" scholars and practitioners—many based in peace research institutes in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Germany—narrowed the scope to focus on environmental stress that causes or triggers violence: what environmental problems breed armed threats to territory and populations? Their findings have been surprising.

It is an article of faith, for example, that the world faces imminent "water wars." Former United Nations secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali once predicted that "the next war in the Middle East will be over water, not oil." But scrutiny of the historical record reveals that scarcities of renewable environmental resources have rarely been a direct cause of wars *between* states. There are arguably only two relevant cases in recent history. During the intermittent Anglo-Icelandic "Cod War" of the 1970s, a dispute over access to dwindling fish stocks, British and Icelandic vessels played chicken in the frigid waters off Iceland. The 100-hour Honduran-Salvadoran "Soccer War" of 1969 was a far more serious affair. Sparked by soccer match incidents, its root causes lay in overcrowding and severe deforestation that over the years had driven thousands of Salvadorans across the border to an unwelcoming Honduras. The brief war left several thousand dead.

Environmental woes do, however, contribute to conflicts *within* nations—and the overwhelming majority of armed conflicts occurring around the world today are internal battles. Writing in 1994, Homer-Dixon pointed to an environmental influence on two types of internal conflicts: "ethnic clashes arising from population migration and deepened social cleavages due to environmental scarcity," and "civil strife (including insurgency, banditry, and coups d'état) caused by environmental scarcity that affects economic productivity and, in turn, people's livelihoods, the behavior of elite groups, and the ability of states to meet these changing demands." Researchers at Homer-Dixon's Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of Toronto (where he is now an associate pro-fessor of political science and director of the program) and the Swiss Environmental Conflicts Project have identified and studied more than 50 cases.

The states of Assam and Tripura in eastern India, for example, have been inundated in recent decades by tens of thousands of Bangladeshi immigrants seeking to escape flooding, drought, and famine in their low-lying, land-poor homeland. The newcomers altered the local balances in landownership, political power, ethnicity, and religion, stirring local resentments, riots, and an anti-immigrant movement that advocated independence from India and deportation of "alien land-grabbers." The violence, which was particularly intense in the early 1980s, has claimed thousands of lives.

In Chiapas, Mexico, another set of environmental disturbances—soil erosion and deforestation, along with rapid population growth among the local Indian populations—helped fuel the angry demands for land reform that propelled the 1994 Zapatista uprising. The Zapatistas' attacks shocked Mexico and the world, speeding the peso crisis that rocked not only Mexico but world financial markets.

Yet for every Chiapas, there is at least one other case where severe environmental stress does not lead to conflict—Taiwan with its severely polluted air and water, Madagascar with its rapid loss of biodiversity, or Costa Rica with its appalling deforestation. During the second wave, researchers asked only how the environment might contribute to conflict, not why it might do so in some cases and not in others. This is one of the subjects of the current "third wave" of research.

Efforts in the third wave include the continuing statistical work of American scholars on the U.S. government-sponsored State Failure Task Force and other quantitative research conducted by Norwegian peace researchers Wenche Hauge, Tanja Ellingsen, and Nils Petter Gleditsch. These massive number-crunching efforts seek to find correlations between "state failures" or "civil wars" and environmental stress. Both studies are quick to identify other political, economic, and social variables as more critical than

the environment. They highlight instead the weaker indirect effects of the environment on other factors that correlate with state failure or civil war, such as infant mortality and other quality of life indicators.

They also seek to identify both the specific vulnerabilities of states and what researchers call their "capacity," or ability to cope with environmental challenges. These are difficult statistical exercises, hampered by the absence of even the most basic data on such matters as deforestation, air quality, and water quality. For vulnerability, one can ask, as the State Failure Task Force did, What proportion of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture? How much storm damage is experienced each year? For capacity: How professional or corrupt are the state bureaucracies? How developed are rail and road systems? In his new book, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (1999), Homer-Dixon points to the importance of addressing the "ingenuity gap" many less developed countries suffer.

In a sense, this focus on the ability of governments and societies to cope with environmental challenges merely puts the problem back in terms of age-old concerns. The ability to adapt has always been paramount in the survival of peoples, nations, and civilizations. But it also does something new if until now you have been thinking only in terms of targeting root causes (environmental stress) or obvious symptoms (violence).

Homer-Dixon argues that "the world will probably see a steady increase in the incidence of violent conflict that is caused, at least in part, by environmental scarcity." This is the kind of statement that has earned him criticism in the past for violating the scholarly taboo against "using the future as evidence." Looking over the horizon is the business of practitioners and politicians, these critics maintain, while scholars properly confine themselves to the evidence of the past and present. Yet, at the same time, policymakers complain that Homer-Dixon and others fail to offer specific policy recommendations. It may be a good sign that both sides are unhappy, a sign that progress toward some kind of new understanding is under way.

An important question now is how the environment and conflict research will be used. Will the more industrialized countries use this knowledge to anticipate conflicts and attempt to seal them off from the rest of the world, or will they try to fashion cooperative remedies for environmental and demographic problems and strengthen the ability of less developed countries to meet challenges?

Some encouraging signs suggest that the industrial powers will take the wiser way. Earlier this year, for example, a pilot study on environment and security by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization included in its recommendations a call for environmental and developmental aid. Recognizing shared environmental problems—which are in a sense common enemies of our own creation—holds the potential to bring countries together. The promise can be glimpsed not only in all-encompassing efforts such as the 1987 Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion, but in much smaller realms. In southern Africa, joint water projects have eased tensions between semi-arid South Africa and its once hostile neighbors. Despite intense differences over human rights, Taiwan, spying charges, and other issues during the last three years, the United States and China have managed to sign more than 20 cooperative bilateral agreements involving water, energy, forest, and other environmental projects.

Our new understanding of the impact of environmental challenges tends to blur some of the hard and fast distinctions between traditional definitions of security and more ambitious modern ones. Helping a Haiti or a Sierra Leone may not yield an immediately identifiable payoff in averting a particular conflict, yet it does aid the cause of peace and tranquility. In the future, a definition of security that leans exclusively on conflict and its prevention will be too cramped to accommodate the reality of a world in which renewable resources will be ever scarcer and in which it will be increasingly difficult to seal ourselves off—morally, emotionally, and physically—from poverty, disease, and environmental degradation in the less developed nations.