GCSP Policy Brief Series
The GCSP policy brief series publishes papers in order to assess the policy challenges, dilemmas, and policy recommendations in all aspects of transnational security and globalization. The series was created and is edited by Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security.

Editorial of GCSP Policy Brief No. 20
US Environmental Policy and Global Security

Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan
Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and
Director of the Program on the
Geopolitical Implications of Globalization
and Transnational Security
Geneva Centre for Security Policy

December 6, 2006

To comment, please email Bethany Webster at b.webster@gcsp.ch.
Review and Critique

Environmental security encompasses a gamut of challenges, such as global climate change, water and air pollution, and degradation of scarce resources. As Frank McNeil notes, environmental damage can lead to the increased severity of natural disasters, wreak severe economic harm, cause societal instability, and even contribute to conflicts within nations, as well as across borders. At the most fundamental level, environmental damage and degradation affect human security. Disease caused by water pollution is perhaps one of the most elementary examples of the connection between the environment and human security. Another source of human insecurity linked to environmental damage or degradation is damage to livelihoods.

The challenge of environmental security is often a problem of governance and institutions. At one level, environmental crises are not just linked to environmental degradation and scarcity of resources but also to the lack of, or the inadequate nature of, environmental management policies. As research on the situation in South Asia shows, lack of institutional or governance capacities can often help to account for human insecurity resulting from a lack of scarce resources or the degradation of environmental resources. Environmental degradation does not simply turn into conflict, but it may lead to conflict where there are inadequate means to address the problem.

Yet, environmental security represents a challenge not only at the domestic level but also at the transnational level since the impact of environmental damage or degradation can affect a number of countries. Environmental issues can therefore also become state-level security issues. There have been numerous examples of international conflicts stemming from disputes over transboundary water management, such as in the Nile Basin, the Jordan Basin, the Ganges Basin, and between Mexico and the United States (US).

As Jennifer Wallace points out in her brief, the competing interests of domestic environmental lobbies and industrial business lobbies often provide a major impediment to addressing issues of environmental security. The US case demonstrates this very well. At issue is a conflict between short-term, economic interests and long-term, security interests. Interestingly, the US is not only the largest net contributor of carbon dioxide emissions but is also home to the strongest environmental lobbies. Nevertheless, the US refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol. The US case is interesting not only from this point of view but also because of its influence on the global agenda.

As Wallace highlights, progress is further complicated by the complexity of identifying the root causes of environmental degradation or damage, which include both natural trends and those induced by man. The scientific evidence linking carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases
to global climate change is also contested. This presents a significant challenge to any agreement on multilateral measures aimed at reducing such emissions.

**Dilemmas and Our Recommendations**

Thus, improving environmental security poses considerable challenges. First and foremost, it poses a challenge to states to develop the necessary institutional and governmental capacities to support environmental management. It also requires prioritization of long-term security interests over short-term economic gains. The US case is pertinent in that it demonstrates some of the obstacles that may be encountered in addressing issues of environmental security. We suggest eight dilemmas or challenges facing US policy makers, as well as eight corresponding recommendations to overcome these challenges.
As mentioned, the impact of environmental damage and degradation is felt at both the individual and state level. Thus, policy makers face the challenge of reconciling the human-security with the national-security implications of environmental policy. Doing so requires emphasizing the human-security aspects of environmental security within the larger context of national security. At the same time, it is essential that the transnational implications of environmental damage and degradation form part of policy considerations. It is essential that states engage in transnational cooperation in order to deal with environmental-security questions. Because of US influence, Washington should take the moral and strategic lead on this issue.

One of the factors explaining the lack of US leadership on environmental issues appears to be the conflict of interest between the domestic environmental lobby and the industrial business lobby, and the greater degree of influence exerted by the latter. Ideally, environmental matters should be balanced with economic concerns. This, however, is not the case at present. This is at least partly because the scientific evidence is open to question, leaving policy makers in a relatively weak position from which to promote stricter environmental laws. In order to achieve a better balance between environmental and economic issues, elected officials should be empowered with scientific facts, as well as media-driven, public support. More funding ought to be made available to support further research on global warming. Documentation confirming the consequences of global warming should be provided in a clear and scientific manner.

Policy makers also face the dilemma of whether to focus on long-term environmental-protection policies or seemingly more pressing challenges. A key consideration determining the choices made by elected officials is their re-election. Faced with the possibility of a backlash from special interest groups and the public as the result of potentially unpopular policies, elected officials are likely to avoid making hard decisions from which the benefit will only be felt over the long term. Elected officials should be empowered to make hard decisions and to support aggressive campaigns to increase public support for environmental laws, without affecting their own chances of being re-elected.

Another dilemma is whether to establish environmental-impact assessments of federal programs under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Though it was established some time ago, NEPA still constitutes effective guidelines for federal environmental regulation. In the absence of updated regulatory mechanisms, NEPA standards should be applied in all situations, except in urgent or impossible situations. The independence of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should also be ensured through the strict prohibition of the use of industry funds.
Conclusion

Environmental degradation and damage must be considered a security concern. An examination of the US case illustrates some of the difficulties encountered in addressing environmental issues. Reconciling the human- and state-level dimensions of environmental issues requires recognition of the human-security aspects of environmental policies within the broader context of national security. Safeguards also need to be put in place to reduce the influence of the industry business lobby within political and scientific processes.

References