

‘Environmental Security in Southeast Asia’

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Introduction to Environmental Security

? The concept of environmental security consists of two key elements:

- (a) the relationship between environmental degradation and conflict – this speaks to the ‘traditional’ national security concern about environmental factors contributing to potentially violent inter-state conflicts
- (b) the relationship between environmental degradation and social welfare – this is the ‘non-traditional’ area of ‘human security’ which concerns itself with the potentially adverse effect of environmental scarcity and degradation on the well-being of communities.

? The urgency of the need to address environmental security issues is obvious when we consider the ecological rationale:

There is increasingly persuasive evidence that human activities have caused the serious degradation of natural resources and the biosystems which support human life. The potential collapse of these ecological systems poses an obvious security threat.

Over recent years, there has been an emerging international consensus on the securitization of major international environmental issues. Most important has been the recognition that unlimited economic growth in fact causes serious environmental damage, and that economic development must instead be ‘sustainable’ in ecological and social terms.

Securitizing environmental issues involves relating the ecological system to human systems: environmental security, therefore, involves issues in which environmental degradation and scarcity lead to conflicts between states, and/or sub-state actors and trans-national communities.

? Within SE Asia, we may make four general observations about environmental security issues:

- (1) *Resource scarcity and depletion* is a major cause of concern – SE Asia is being subjected to severe environmental stress due to rapid industrialization and population growth, and the associated problems of urbanization, pollution and deforestation. In Indonesia, the loss of traditional lands and severe land degradation as a result of mining activities, for instance, have led to rebellion in Irian Jaya.
- (2) *Allocation* in instances of shared resources is also a serious cause of conflict, particularly in maritime territory and resource issues. Regional tensions of this nature include those arising from fishery disputes between Myanmar and Thailand, the water issue between Singapore and Malaysia, the development of the Mekong River Basin, and the Spratlys dispute.
- (3) The *capacity to manage threats* to environmental security varies significantly across the region – it depends on the level of democratization and the attitude of the state in question. NGOs have been most successful in mobilizing affected communities in Thailand and the Philippines, but in Myanmar, there is virtually no room for such activism.
- (4) The increasingly evident *economic costs* of environmental degradation is the key motivating factor in forcing governments to take action. The best instance of this is the forest fires in Indonesia and the resulting haze, which cost Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore US\$4.5 billion in 1997 alone in terms of lost revenue from tourism, health problems, and the loss of forests and agricultural land.

Summary of IDSS-Ford Papers on Southeast Asian Security

In the SE Asia section of the project, four main papers were prepared on environmental security. In what remains of my presentation, I will briefly summarize the findings of each paper.

(1) Lorraine Elliott, 'Regional Environmental Security: Pursuing a Non-Traditional Approach'.

- ? This paper lays out a conceptual framework for the discussion.
- ? Elliott argues that debates on environmental security so far have not adequately addressed the nature of the threats nor who or what is made insecure by environmental degradation or conflicts.
- ? She proposes a framework for analyzing the relationship between environmental scarcity and regional insecurity in SE Asia that draws on three key variables: political stability, economic development, and human welfare.
- ? She argues that in adapting a non-traditional approach to environmental security, attention must be paid to:
 - (a) *conflicts short of outright war*, i.e., limited military engagements, the corrosion of political relationships because of transboundary environmental disputes; and possibly sub-national instability caused by environmental scarcity
 - (b) the extent to which environmental degradation undermines *economic growth*, i.e. the relationship between environmental and economic security
 - (c) *human security* – the social, economic and political consequences of unsustainable development for individuals and communities, e.g. poverty, vulnerability, dislocation.
- ? Elliott suggests that appropriate response strategies for a comprehensive regional environmental security policy should include the following dimensions:
 - (a) *confidence building measures* and *preventive diplomacy* – integrating environmental scarcity issues into the regional security architecture at Track 1 and 2 levels
 - (b) adoption of an environmental *early warning system*

- (c) *preventive strategies*, including strengthening the conditions for regional environmental cooperation and protection – would involve regional actors such as ADB, APEC ESCAP
- (d) policy attention to *human security imperatives* and the socio-economic drivers of environmental decline – paying attention to governance issues and the role of civil society in decision-making and implementation.

Evelyn Goh, ‘The Hydro-Politics of the Mekong River Basin: Regional Cooperation and Environmental Security’.

- ? This paper analyses one of the most important regional case studies of conflicts over trans-boundary resources. The Mekong River is shared between Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and China, and the exploitation of the river basin, particularly in the form of hydropower development, carries serious implications for the national and regional security of the riparian states.
- ? In the first section, I assess the competing and conflicting interests of the riparian states over Mekong resources in terms of the asymmetries in distribution, demand and dependency. I identify the upstream/downstream allocation of water as the key cause of inter-state disputes: increasing demands for large water development projects in the upper basin (China, Laos and Thailand) exacerbate the extreme ecological vulnerability of the downstream states, Cambodia and Vietnam.
- ? In the second section, I explore three levels at which conflicts over resources and environmental issues have impinged on security in the Mekong basin, using Elliott’s three key variables:
 - (a) *National resource security* in the form of inter-state water allocation conflicts, particularly in the negotiations for rules of water utilization in the lower basin.
 - (b) *Economic security* in the case of hydropower development in Laos and the implications for Laos’ national development and its bilateral relations with Thailand, which is the main electricity importer.
 - (c) *Human security* in terms of the impact of hydropower development projects on local communities and their implications for domestic political stability.
- ? I assess the extent to which existing regional and international institutional frameworks can address these conflicts. I argue that the Mekong River Commission, which is responsible for ensuring the ‘sustainable development’ of the basin, has been rendered increasingly irrelevant in key development projects funded by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank – lending institutions not primarily concerned with environmental issues.
- ? I conclude with some key recommendations:
 - (a) Conceptual: overcoming the zero-sum problem.

The need for governments to recognize that beyond the narrow conflicting national interests in developing the resources of the Mekong, they also have a shared interest in ensuring the social, political and economic viability and strength of the weaker riparian states through helping to assure their environmental security. This is because economic interdependence means that the latter is crucial to the developmental prospects of the entire region.

(b) Institutional.

In trying to build institutional capacity to manage developments in the Mekong basin in ways that will protect environmental security, there are three crucial elements:

- i) Inclusivity – the crucial need for greater Chinese involvement in Mekong institutions;
- ii) Division of labour – finding an effective way in which the two key regional institutions, the MRC and ADB, can cooperate to ensure sustainable development; and
- iii) Accountability – convincing riparian governments about the need to take into account environmental security and to commit to constructing effective institutional and legislative structures.

(2) N. Ganesan, 'Illegal Fishing and Illegal Migration in Thailand's Bilateral Relations with Malaysia and Myanmar'.

- ? This paper explores a different set of resource exploitation problems in a bilateral context.
- ? Illegal fishing and migration have seriously frayed relations between Thailand and its neighbours, Malaysia and Myanmar.
- ? Ganesan demonstrates that these non-traditional security issues are conflated with a number of other considerations, such as territoriality, sovereignty, firearm possession and smuggling.
- ? He argues that in spite of the frequency of tensions deriving from illegal fishing and migration, these issues have not been sufficiently acknowledged and the affected countries have not been active in seeking effective joint resolution of these problems.
- ? Ganesan warns that if these issues are not properly managed, they could deteriorate into traditional security conflicts, given the scarcity of land and maritime resources for meeting future national needs.

(3) Mark Valencia, 'Building Confidence and Security in the South China Sea'

- ? This is a case study in which the interaction between environmental and traditional strategic security concerns is particularly close. The Spratly Islands dispute is an issue in which the competition for natural resources is closely paralleled, and now overshadowed, by competitive claims to strategically important territory and sea lanes.
- ? Valencia shows how, in the post-Cold War era, the S. China Sea disputes have been securitized: the disputes are no longer about oil or fish stocks, but rather about the strategic significance of control of the sea and islands, and the nationalism behind these sovereignty claims. More crucially, these disputes not only involve the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei, but also China directly, and Japan and US security interests indirectly.
- ? He reviews recent developments related to the dispute and argues that despite tentative agreement on a code of conduct for the S. China Sea, this remains a draft that is not clearly accepted by all claimants. Fissures are increasingly apparent in the ASEAN stance over the issue, and the situation remains volatile.
- ? In exploring options for cooperative approaches to reducing tension and managing resources, Valencia makes suggestions at three levels:
 - (a) Cooperative *approaches* to reducing tension – bilateral negotiation of provisional arrangements; allocation of disputed geographical features; or multilateral management regime for the area.
 - (b) *Process* – eminent persons' group; preventive diplomacy; institutionalisation of an informal dialogue process.
 - (c) *Concrete steps* – robust code of conduct; a 'S. China Sea Institute for Marine Resources Management'; UN-led joint assessment of hydrocarbon potential in multiple claim area; maritime reserve; maritime safety regime; cooperation among regional coast guards; agreements covering incidents at sea; agreement for the demilitarization of the islands.
- ? Valencia counsels an incremental approach: to start small, using a gradual building block process and both unilateral and bilateral measures towards multilateral confidence building.

Conclusions

Together, the four papers highlight three points about environmental security in SE Asia:

1. Importance of economic dimension to environmental security issues in SE Asia – economic development is the fundamental cause of much resource competition, but the imperative for sustainable long-term economic growth in the region also provides the main impetus for seeking cooperative management of these problems.
2. The close relationship between non-traditional environmental security issues and traditional national security concerns in the region – the prominence of the state remains, and national interests are still tied up with concerns of national stability, as well as competing national sovereignty claims which might deteriorate into violent inter-state conflict.
3. SE Asia still has a long way to go in building up the institutional capacity to deal with the complex issue of environmental security – chief priorities are:
 - (a) Developing awareness on the part of governments about the relationship between environmental degradation and resource scarcity, and political, economic and human security
 - (b) Developing mechanisms for sustained dialogue and policy coordination on environmental security questions at the intra-national, bilateral and multilateral levels.