Reframing the relationships

More recently, the US government has seemed to de-emphasize international cooperation and multilateral treaties as vehicles to address environmental problems and other global issues. The US no longer supports the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty designed to reduce developed country greenhouse gas emissions, of which the US is by far the largest contributor. The US has given notice of withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and started to repudiate current proposals for a treaty on biological weapons.

In the near term, environmental security concerns may become even more prominent in US foreign policy. Certainly, the campaign against terrorism is likely to distract the US and other developed countries from concerns about the global environment and sustainable development in developing nations. If the US moves away from meaningful participation in international efforts to address environmental issues, the incentives for developing countries to deal with these problems will likely be reduced, as will their ability to address them. This could exacerbate existing tensions that threaten wider security and peace in the developing world.

In the intermediate term, developed countries’ concerns about developing countries’ environmental policies may be less pressing as the latter countries develop more advanced technologies and adopt more stringent environmental policies. The US government may work to promote sustainable development in developing nations, recognizing that environmental changes in the developing world could negatively affect US interests. Thus, while trade and traditional security concerns remain at the forefront of thinking among US policymakers, environmental security concerns were integrated into US foreign policy.

The US has been among those countries concerned about environmental security, recent changes in US foreign policy towards China is due to growing political and economic ties between the two countries. In the 1990s, the US government changed its position on environmental changes as legitimate threats to national security, recognizing that environmental changes in the developing world could negatively affect US interests. Thus, trade and traditional security concerns remained at the forefront of thinking among US policymakers, while environmental security concerns were integrated into US foreign policy.

Moreover, the US government has been among those countries that have placed environmental security among its pressing foreign policy concerns, declaring environmental security one of its priority missions, and the annual report of the US security strategy, identifying environmental degradation as an "important security issue." In the early 1990s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) added environmental problems to its list of major threats facing the alliance. NATO acknowledged the connection between security and environmental change by establishing a bureau dedicated to environmental security and the protection of environmental issues in NATO planning.

Some observers fear that security establishment will react or correct responses to environmental change. Even if true, this may not be all. Governments take issues seen as security threats much more seriously and, consequently, may allocate additional resources to environmental protection. Furthermore, increasing concerns about environmental change may not only keep these issues on the foreign policy agendas of important developed country governments (such as the US), but may also push those governments to devote additional financial and technological resources to addressing environmental problems in the developing world. For decades, developing countries have demanded more assistance from the world’s wealthy countries, partly justifying these demands on the basis of developed countries’ disproportionate responsibility for global pollution and other environmental change. Developing countries contend that because much of the pollution impacts they experience today (as well as expected future impacts) result from developed country actions, they should be assisted in adapting or compensated for these impacts.

Most developing countries contend that industrial countries take more responsibility for global environmental damage than have been rigorously engaged. Until recently, neither the US nor other developed countries recognized the connection between environmental changes and their own security. As they come to view developing countries as potential sources of environmental threats to their own and global security, developed countries may be more responsive to the developing world’s demands. The oldest concerns of governments—protecting vital national interests—continue to have adverse environmental change to stimulate increased provisions for international cooperation. Some positive movements in this direction are evidence that the near future may remain worrisome.

Nevertheless, environmental issues have gained the attention of policymakers, summit participants at the highest levels, including within security bureaucracies in foreign ministries, defense agencies, and military alliances. In the US in the mid-1990s, the State Department placed environmental security among its pressing foreign policy concerns, declaring environmental security one of its priority missions, and the annual report of the US security strategy, identifying environmental degradation as an "important security issue." In the early 1990s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) added environmental problems to its list of major threats facing the alliance. NATO acknowledged the connection between security and environmental change by establishing a bureau dedicated to environmental security and increasing the prominence of environmental issues in NATO planning.

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