

Threat level green: Conceding ecology for security in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union

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Abstract

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the predicted scenarios of Central Asian water wars and catastrophic nuclear accidents have failed to materialize. However, the Aral Sea continues to shrink apace, and dangerous Soviet-built nuclear reactors have since proliferated in the former eastern bloc. These seemingly paradoxical outcomes can in part be attributed to the framing of these environmental issues as security matters by leading international regulatory, aid and lending institutions. Integrating these environmental concerns with the realist worldview of security studies systematically emphasized security dimensions at the expense of ecological concerns even amongst organizations distant from traditional defense affairs. This article proposes that international security strategy in this period is one of environmental appeasement defined as the systematic granting of ecologically unfriendly concessions in order to reduce short-term security risks. The article presents evidence that this appeasement strategy generated seemingly impressive results in terms of ameliorating short-term security risks, while actually exacerbating the underlying ecological situation. The article argues that while the foundational environmental risks remain unaddressed, the associated security threats have likewise not been ultimately resolved.

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1. Introduction

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s brusquely exposed the deep ecological crises previously concealed behind the Iron Curtain, as the euphoria associated with the onward march of democracy was tempered with an awareness of a complex and developing ecological catastrophe. In the world media, heroic images of Boris Yeltsin delivering defiant proclamations atop a tank defending the Russian White House from a hard-line coup competed with disheartening pictures of dying victims of radiological contamination from the Chernobyl¹ disaster, or images of the rusting hulls of Aral Sea fishing boats now beached in the desert—miles from the ever-receding shoreline. Even more alarming were the predictions that these disasters

posed continued risks for local, regional, and even global security. Dire proclamations from both journalists and specialists warned that, with the weakening power of Moscow, water politics in the Aral basin threatened to degenerate into regional turmoil, and that Europe would be perpetually threatened by the immanent specter of nuclear meltdowns of the numerous Soviet-built nuclear reactors in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

More than a decade later, Central Asia has not descended into warfare, and Europe has not been rendered uninhabitable from nuclear fallout—both due in part to international regulation and aid efforts. International organizations and multinational development banks have brokered water-sharing agreements between potentially antagonistic communities in the Aral Basin and demonstrably increased the safety of the aging Soviet reactors. However, the Aral Sea continues to shrink apace; and rather than being decommissioned, the flawed, Chernobyl¹-type nuclear reactors have actually proliferated in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union over the past 15 years. How are we

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to account for this seemingly paradoxical outcome? Have international efforts at ameliorating East–West environmental insecurity actually succeeded, or merely postponed the inevitable?

I suggest that a key to understanding such situations lies partly in the framing of issues as distinct security threats within the environmental security paradigm that gained widespread adherence with the alleviation of the traditional military tensions of the Cold War era. First, the linking of environmental issues to the realist rhetoric and worldview of security studies systematically emphasized the potential for conflict rather than the possibility of cooperation on environmental issues, leading to sensationalist proclamations in both cases. Second, informed in part by such alarmist perspectives, international aid efforts designed to address these ecological disasters focused their attention on ameliorating the short-term security risk rather than addressing the underlying ecological concerns themselves. Either explicitly or implicitly, the ensuing politics of environmental appeasement, or the systematic granting of ecologically unfriendly concessions in order to reduce short-term security risks, served to bolster rather than remove impediments to the promotion of environmentally sound policy, in the form of powerful individuals or groups with a vested interest in the continuation of the destructive practices of the Soviet past. Third, this appeasement approach by the relevant international organizations resulted in the seemingly paradoxical situation of generating impressive results in terms of apparently enhanced security, while at the same time exacerbating the ecological risks that underlie the security situation itself. Finally, in that these environmental risks remain, the associated security issues will likewise remain—to be addressed at some undetermined future point in time.

These processes will become clearer through a discussion of the relevant environmental security literature, as well as the two cases of East–West environmental security addressed here. The potential for inter-group conflict arising from competition over scarce water resources in the Aral basin, and the health and pollution risk posed by the unsafe, Soviet-designed reactors of Eastern Europe were selected not only as the most pronounced ecological legacies of the Soviet Union, but also because they constitute fundamentally different types of risk within the expanded conception of environmental security. Put simply: competition over scarce water resources, as in the Aral basin, can exacerbate inter-group and inter-state tensions, raising the risk of violent conflict; whereas radioactive contamination from unsafe reactors poses a direct threat to the health of the affected population. Additionally, these issues vary in terms of the type of environmental degradation addressed: slow, “creeping” environmental degradation of the Aral Sea, versus the horrible immediacy of the Chernobyl’ disaster. Finally, and not inconsequentially, the two issues vary in terms of their geographic proximity to the donor community—primarily the states of Western Europe and Scandinavia. Variation

across all of these relevant axes will serve to ensure that the results of this study are not applicable to only one type of environmental threat or a singular conception of the risk that it presents to “security,” however defined.

Before elaborating the process of environmental appeasement, it will first be necessary to chronicle the effort to expand definitions of security beyond traditional military implications. A subsequent section will uncover how the environmental security paradigm has contributed to the policies of environmental appeasement, before presenting the case studies of East–West environmental security: water politics in the Aral basin and nuclear safety in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. A concluding section will examine the implications for these findings for international relations theorizing in general, and for the prospects for the environmental security paradigm in particular.

2. Expanding definitions of security

Calls for expanding the scope of national security beyond its traditional military connotations did not begin with the end of the Cold War. Throughout the 1970s, scholars and military officials alike noted the inadequacy of the concept of “national security” in a world that had become increasingly interdependent economically, ecologically and politically (Taylor, 1974; Falk, 1971; Brown, 1977). By the late 1980s, one could identify two distinct streams of thought within the developing environmental security literature that differed with respect to the potential for violent conflict: the first camp viewing environmental scarcity as a potential underlying cause for traditional inter-state and inter-ethnic violence; the second view shifting emphasis away from inter-group violence to include a diverse range of potential threats to states, the health of their populations and environs. Each will be addressed in turn.

2.1. *Environmental sources of violence*

The “traditional,” militaristic position on environmental security developed amongst both environmentalists and security scholars. Beginning in 1986, Norman Myers made explicit links between environmental degradation and violent conflict through issues such as food shortages, water scarcity, deforestation and climate change. In brief: “If a nation’s environmental foundations are depleted, its economy will steadily decline, its social fabric deteriorates, and its political structure become destabilized. The outcome is all too likely to be conflict, whether conflict in the form of disorder and insurrection within the nation, or tensions and hostilities with other nations” (Myers, 1986, p. 251). These sentiments were echoed in the Brudtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development to the UN General Assembly in *Our Common Future*, which brought to the fore the links between environmental stress, poverty and insecurity

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