



Resilience at the periphery: Insurgency, agency and social-ecological change under armed conflict



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ABSTRACT

Armed conflict has played an increasingly important role in the transformation of key social and environmental systems at multiple spatial and temporal scales. Accelerated resource flows and environmental change dynamics intersect with conflict processes in ways that are substantial and yet inadequately understood. Drawing on research along the Pakistani border in eastern Afghanistan's embattled province of Nangarhar, we employ a coupled systems approach for understanding the ways in which social-ecological processes shape and are shaped by armed conflict. Based on field surveys, geospatial analysis of land and forest change, and participatory research among local communities, government agencies and military actors, we identify several causal processes linking conflict and dynamics of social-ecological change in the context of multiscale geopolitical processes. We focus attention on four inter-related elements: (1) transitional modes of resource governance relating to armed militia groups and state intervention, (2) forest changes related to illegal logging and trade networks, (3) the erosion of upper-montane rangelands through encroachment and changing pastoral responses to conflict, and (4) significant land use changes in the agricultural sector toward the cultivation of opium poppy. Our research highlights the importance of center-periphery relations, the problematic nature of local agency, and the ways in which local social-ecological elements—here, particularly, timber and opium—become political objects within competing narratives of (in)security and ongoing state formation.

1. Introduction

Armed conflict has played an increasingly important role in the transformation of key social and environmental systems at multiple spatial and temporal scales. While comprehensive analyses of the social and political impacts of armed conflict are well-articulated, the ecological impacts of conflict as well as the interrelationship between these and social dimensions have been an area of emerging research in recent years (Machlis et al., 2011). Conflict figures prominently both as a major underlying cause of forest-loss globally (Geist and Lambin, 2002) and a key structural driver relating to land use, food production, insecurity and resource scarcity (Humphreys, 2005). Deforestation may also be caused, variously, by forest resource extraction and the occupation of forest areas by armed groups (Hatton et al., 2001; Hecht and Saatchi, 2007) or in some cases the intentional use of chemical defoliants by state militaries as a strategy to combat insurgency as seen, for example, in Vietnam (Westing, 1983), Colombia (Messina and Delamater, 2006) and Turkey (Van Etten et al., 2008). Agriculture and land use changes may be brought about through the abandonment of

agricultural land in conflict areas (e.g. Suthakar and Bui, 2008) with, in some cases, a concomitant expansion of agricultural land use in areas receiving conflict refugees (Witmer, 2008) or those that support insurgent forces (Sánchez-Cuervo and Aide, 2013). Other research has focused on the impacts of conflict on specific elements of biodiversity. Douglas and Alie (2014) explore the significant impacts of war on key species and the role that wildlife trade plays in supporting violence while Gaynor et al. (2016) in a comprehensive study covering 144 cases globally, focus on the enabling conditions created by conflict and violence that produce negative outcomes of wildlife and biodiversity, emphasizing the erosion of social institutions and economic incentive structures as key causal pathways. Natural resource- and environment-change are also more generally implicated in the emergence and persistence of conflict in complex ways (Percival and Homer-Dixon, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Rustad et al., 2008; Brunnschweiler and Bulte, 2009; Klare, 2011; Le Billon, 2015).

Scholarship circulating around these questions has begun to build toward a more systematic treatment of social and ecological change in conflict environments. Amid these advances, there remains a critical

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need for building a conceptual and analytic framework that brings together research on the relations between social and environmental change under conditions of armed conflict to enhance our understanding of causal impact pathways and, perhaps especially, yield insights relevant for understanding elements and processes foundational for post-conflict futures. Social-ecological resilience scholarship advances a particularly promising analytic framework for addressing this need in that it conjoins social and ecological elements in a larger, complex system structure and focuses attention specifically on the ways in which these complex social-ecological systems negotiate change processes and respond to disturbance. While resilience research comprises of a broad range of conceptual elements we will selectively highlight four aspects. First, the ability of a system to adapt to disturbance relates in part to the degree to which the system is able to self-organize by creating, sustaining and actively modifying the diverse dynamic processes that impact on the system (Carpenter et al., 2001). Second, the spatial organization and mobility of various elements—for example, communities, resources, and boundaries—play an important role in enabling or constraining adaptive response to change (Cumming, 2011; Ingalls and Dwyer, 2016). Third, power and conditions of governance—including decentralized decision-making, accountability, transparency, and legitimacy—play an important role in building or eroding resilience (Fabinyi et al., 2014; Ingalls and Stedman, 2016). Finally, all systems are impacted by processes below and above them along both spatial and temporal dimensions. Local-level events may aggregate upward to affect large-scale processes, while higher-scale influences such as regional and global market dynamics, political networks or climate regimes, act downward to either support system resilience or to undermine it as they map onto the particular conditions of the system itself (Cash et al., 2006).

While the resilience framework provides a potentially useful guide for analysis, it has had limited application within the context of active armed conflict (Tidball and Krasny, 2014; Ratner et al., 2013). A resilience-based approach for understanding social-ecological dynamics in violent environments is yet to be fully elaborated and may be particularly important not only for understanding social-ecological change during conflict but also conditions shaping post-conflict recovery.

In this paper we interrogate social-ecological change within the context of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan through the analytic lens of the resilience framework focusing on causal pathways of social-ecological change under armed conflict and conditions that foster resilience during conflict and may indicate potentials for a post-conflict future. Since the onset of the most recent conflict in 2001 more than 117,000 deaths have occurred as a direct result of the fighting (Crawford, 2015; UNAMA, 2016; GPI, 2016). In 2016, military spending constituted nearly 16% of GDP while the economic impacts of war more generally totaled 45% of GDP (GPI, 2016). Through this prolonged period of conflict several dynamics predominate. Endemic poverty within has worsened while environmental conditions across a range of indicators, from forest conditions to the quality of rangelands and water, have steadily—and sometimes rapidly and catastrophically—eroded. The Taliban and other anti-government elements (AGEs) have mounted an increasingly lethal insurgency that has grown in strength, now dominating large areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan concomitant with a substantial conversion of agricultural areas to opium poppy and the emergence of a robust, if problematic, narcotics trade (Mansfield, 2014a). The erosion of the security situation and the dramatic social and environmental changes begs a number of questions relating society-nature dynamics during armed conflict. Further, while the conflict in Afghanistan was ostensibly prompted by geopolitical triggers and transnational terrorism, it has increasingly become entwined with environmental resources—timber, poppy, and land—prompting questions of antecedency and causality, whether environmental decline has prompted or exacerbated conflict, or is primarily an outcome of it. It also raises important questions about the long-term social and environmental legacies and the prospects for post-conflict

futures.

We situate our analysis specifically within a region critically-affected by the current conflict, the area surrounding Tora Bora in the Chaprahar Watershed located in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province—a portion of the Spin Ghar Mountains that lies along the western end of the Himalaya Forest Complex—a region that plays a central role both in the provision of important environmental values (Delattre and Rahmani, 2008) as well as a key strategic role in conflict dynamics along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Our analysis focuses on four key social-ecological elements: (1) local transitional modes of governance and resource management, (2) upper-montane forest complexes, (3) upper- and mid-elevation communal rangelands and (4) mid- and lower-elevation agricultural ecosystems. Each of these social-ecological variables is interwoven with the conflict complex of Afghanistan's eastern region, intersecting problematically with geopolitical processes and political-discursive narratives of security and state formation. We will first scan across recent periods of conflict—reaching back somewhat to conflicts antecedent to 2001. Subsequently, we will tentatively trace out several local causal pathways of change and situate these within regional and historical processes, focusing on the politicization of social-ecological processes relating to forest management and timber trade, rangeland use and governance, and the opium trade.

2. Conflict, insurgency and state formation in Eastern Afghanistan: 1979 to the present

Contemporary political and military struggles and associated dynamics of environmental and social change in the Chaprahar Watershed trace their origins from events in the 1970s and 80s.¹ In a bid to advance geopolitical interests in Central Asia, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to prop up a pro-Soviet government on the pretense of stabilizing a nation that had fallen into civil war and to succor the largely unpopular pro-communist government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (Kakar, 1995). In what has since been called the “great miscalculation”, Soviet military strategy focused on control of urban centers, ostensibly on the assumption that this would suffice to control the rural peripheries (Dibb, 2010). Soviet forces were, however, quickly bogged down in a prolonged conflict with an entrenched rural insurgency. A key base of this insurgency was the Mujahideen, operating throughout Afghanistan's eastern region but especially in Nangarhar Province along the Pakistani border. Alongside ethnic Khoqyanis, Shinwaris, and other local Pashtun-speaking tribes, the Mujahideen also comprised of a number of non-Afghans ideologically opposed to the incursion of Soviet forces, including the young Osama bin Laden (who would later found Al Qaeda) and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (whose efforts would inspire the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS). In this conflict, the interests of the United States government and those of Pakistan found common purpose. While the U. S. wanted to block the territorial expansion of the Soviet advance toward the Middle East—and perhaps also to open a corridor from Pakistan through Afghanistan to Soviet Central Asia (Grare, 2006)—Pakistan sought to disrupt the long-standing alliance between Kabul and New Delhi (ICG, 2014). The U. S. Central Intelligence Agency and Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) capitalized on transboundary tribal networks and the porous national border to provide the Mujahideen with arms and financial assistance, a large proportion of which accrued to Nangarhar Province (Dupree, 1988; Jackson, 2014). Due in large part to these alliances and the success of the Mujahideen resistance, the Soviet Army was ultimately unable to subdue the tribal areas and withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, arguably triggering the cataclysmic disintegration of the Soviet Union the following year (Dibb, 2010). The

¹ The geopolitical struggles between the Russia and Great Britain during the so-called “Great Game” of the 19th Century that also focused on these same areas and the Khyber Pass to the east are also relevant here.

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