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Review: Dubious nexus between natural resources and conflict

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ABSTRACT

What has been identified as, according to the relevant literature, the relationship between natural resources and conflict? In what ways are natural resources used to trigger conflict and instability? Who are the main players and actors in resource conflicts? To address these questions, this article critically reviews the main theoretical and empirical works on conflict, natural resources, abundance and scarcity. In doing so, the article aims to update the existing discussion with the latest literatures, which is more skeptical about the relationship between natural resources and conflict. Constructively, the main objective of this review is to explain that in spite the diverse arguments on show; there is a systematic shortcoming in the existing literature. In doing so the article illustrates persistent research shortcomings and difficulties in the theoretical and empirical arguments that have been put forward so far.

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1. Introduction

The theoretical literature on natural resources can be divided into two main groups, resource abundance and resource scarcity. Literatures falling in the first group argue that abundance of natural resources (non-renewable) leads to violence, inequality and conflict, while those of the second group claims that scarcity (both renewable and non-renewable) of natural resources can in fact alternatively contribute to conflict and instability. In laying out their cases, each side utilizes different methods and theoretical frameworks to support their presented arguments. By reviewing the main theoretical and empirical literature on conflict, natural resources and security studies this paper seeks to answer the following questions. What has been identified, according to the relevant literature, the relationship between

natural resources and conflict? In what ways are natural resources used to trigger conflict and instability? Who are the main players and actors in resource conflicts?

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part traces the evolution of the natural resources and conflict debate. The objective of this section is to give an overview of the origins and development of the natural resources discussion, something that is missing from previous literature reviews.¹ The first reason for putting forward this contribution is the practical importance of the subject matter at hand. The existing literature fields, ranging from environmental studies and international relations to the economy are all affected by the resource conflict nexus. The second

¹ Several literature reviews have already been written by other scholars, such as [Koubi et al. \(2013\)](#), [Mildner and Lauster \(2011\)](#) and [Samset \(2009\)](#). Despite their rich discussion, these scholars neglect herein however the origins and development of the term resource wars. Furthermore, while they critically describe the intrastate terms and literature findings, they have paid less attention to the interstate conflicts.

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reason for this offering is that it may help us to better trace how the argument about an assumed resource conflict relationship first developed, and how it subsequently evolved. In outlining these developments, I illustrate how some of the terminology regarding resource conflicts being affected by the events of the 1970s, such as the Arab Oil Embargo whereas, some expression over time have ultimately emerged from the intuition and overestimation of scholars.

The second and third parts will analyze the main theoretical and empirical findings. In doing so, the main purpose is to gain insight from prior works. These sections will theoretically discuss two grand concepts, namely abundance and scarcity. First, this paper finds that it is scarcity, itself, rather than natural resources that may lead to conflict. In other words, some countries have scarcity of non-resource factors, namely technical, knowledge and human capacity rather than natural resources, which can lead to scarcity within abundance of resources. Secondly, this paper illustrates that although these approaches do provide some explanations, they fail to portray the correlation between natural resources and conflict in a way that does justice to its full complexity. In concluding the paper, I combine my findings and highlight the gaps within existing arguments, namely political and economic costs of conflict, involvement of multiple actors and non-resource dimensions of conflict and conflict financing.

2. Classification and history of resource wars

The natural resource-conflict nexus is one of the most popular debates among international relations scholars. The classification and explanation of the concept of natural resources depends on the context in which the term is used. In this regard, it is important then to first define what is even meant by natural resources. According to the annual report of the World Trade Organization (WTO), natural resources are “stocks of materials that exist in the natural environment that are both scarce and economically useful in production or consumption, either in their raw states or after a minimal amount of processing” (Bacchetta et al., 2010, p. 5).²

Another point of note is the specific type of resource being referred to. Natural resources can be divided into two main groups: renewable and non-renewable ones. Renewable resources include land, forests and water; non-renewable ones include diamonds, fossil fuels and minerals. To measure the effect of non-renewable resources on violence scholars have classified the former according to particular measures and characteristics, such as non-fuel and fuel, lootable and non-lootable resources, and point and diffuse resources.³

² See: World Trade Report 2010 for an executive summary, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/anrep_e/wtr10-2b_e.pdf.

³ If a resource requires less investment, and unskilled labor to extract and transport it while also having a high market value then, it is a lootable resource (Samset, 2009). Diffuse resources meanwhile are spread over vast areas and can be extracted by a large number of groups while point resources are located in a small sized area and controlled by a limited group of producers.

There are several important active debates among scholars with regard to the relationship between natural resources and conflict. The literature on conflict be divided into three groups: those that argue that natural resources lead to ‘intra-state conflicts’ (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon, 2005; Ross, 2006), literature which claim that natural resources lead to ‘inter-state conflicts’ (Borgerson, 2009; Kleveman, 2004; Klare, 2001a, 2001b; Moyo, 2012), and finally, those that emphasize both intrastate and interstate conflicts (Colgan, 2014; De Soysa, 2007). The second of these groups is also called that of the ‘Great Powers’ or ‘Blood Oil’ adherents (De Soysa et al., 2009; Fettweis, 2011).

2.1. The development of the term resource war

After the debate and concern about the resource-conflict nexus had emerged among scholars how did it then evolve over time? The term ‘resource war’ first appeared in the United States in the early 1980’s (Le Billon, 2004, p. 1). It referred to the Soviet movements in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa, which were perceived as threats to US access to important natural resources (Klare, 2001a, 2001b, p. 236). Ironically, despite the alarmist assumptions, the idea of a resource war turned out to be misguided. Stern (2016) explains that the reason for this was the misperception of scholars at the time, who exaggerated the threats arising from these resources and particularly oil. Considering the conditions of the Cold War, one may claim that any attempt at a resource grab by one of the Great Powers would be subsumed under the propaganda of war.

While the term resource war was used in the 1980s, scholars had in fact already started a debate about the resource-conflict nexus in the early 1970s due to the Arab Oil Embargo, and the nationalization of key natural resource industries.⁴ The Oil Embargo was followed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which affected the global oil supply. In the year after the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war then began, this decreased the oil production of both countries. These events increased the alarmist concerns of scholars, who started to believe that the nature of conflict was changing (Dannreuther & Ostrowski, 2013). In light of this, several theoretical concepts emerged in the 1980s, such as ‘oil-weapon’, ‘energy-nationalization’ and ‘oil wars’.

Since the end of the 1980s, as a result of several political and economic developments such as the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and in turn the invasion of Iraq by the U.S., the term resource war has been changed and reframed a number of times. New phrases have also been added to the literature, ranging from general to concrete terms, such as the Great Game, resource curse, resource conflicts, conflict resources, blood oil, strategic oil and environmental confrontation.

In the mid-1990s, for example, some scholars proposed that the so-called Great Game re-emerged for a second time in the resource rich geographic areas such as the Caspian Sea and the Arctic Sea regions. The first reason for this was that the Caspian Sea region’s natural resources were

⁴ See Connelly and Perlman (1975); Arad (1979), *Sharing Global Resources*.

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