The Concept of Environmental Security

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Concerns about climate change are increasing as the world witnesses increasing environmental catastrophes. There have also been different efforts to frame climate change as a security issue. Environmental security refers to the relationship between the environment and the security of individuals, communities, states, or the international system. It emphasizes that environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and ecological change can contribute to social unrest, conflict, or threaten human well-being. To better understand the merits and pitfalls of treating climate change as a security issue, two concepts are discussed:

The Copenhagen School's Theory of Securitization

Represented by the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, the Copenhagen School of International Relations sees securitization as the process of labelling an issue as a security issue and transforming the way the issue is dealt with. This turns topics like global warming into existential threats that require emergency measures that may break rules or erode democratic processes. The Copenhagen School suggests avoiding the transformation of issues into security issues, as this would allow for unregulated extraordinary measures that might, in turn, go beyond normal political procedures. Climate change does pose an existential threat to humans, and despite acknowledging it would raise awareness of the urgency of the issue, the Copenhagen School argues securitisation doesn't guarantee effective action as it may heighten fear without solving the root problems.

Thomas Homer-Dixon's Environmental Conflict Theory

Environmental conflict can be broadly understood as social conflict emerging due to environmental issues. There can be conflict over access and control of environmental resources. Through the environmental conflict theory, Thomas Homer-Dixon revealed an existential causal relationship between population growth, environmental scarcity, and violent conflict. Dixon argues that the increase in population initiates scarcity of renewable resources, leading to the depletion of and scramble for natural resources and violent conflicts. He shows that these scarcities can lead to greater poverty, large-scale migrations, deeper social cleavages, and weakened institutions. He describes the kinds of violence that can result from these social effects, arguing that conflicts in several developing countries, like those in Africa, are already partly a consequence of scarcity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, environmental security is a vital framework for understanding how ecological degradation intersects with global and local stability. By examining the Copenhagen School's securitization theory and Homer-Dixon's environmental conflict theory, this paper has shown how environmental issues can both shape and be shaped by security dynamics. While securitizing climate change may bring urgency, it also risks undemocratic responses. Conversely, recognizing the link between environmental scarcity and conflict highlights the need for sustainable development and equitable resource management. Addressing environmental security requires nuanced approaches that balance urgency with long-term, cooperative solutions grounded in justice, stability, and environmental stewardship.

Literature recommendation

Jones, N., & Sullivan, J. P. (2020). Climate change and global security. Journal of Strategic Security, 13(4), 1-4. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.4.1899