

Environmental Security In North America Academic Debate or State Policy?

Mario Duarte Villarelo*

To Gabriela Borjón Vital and Julia Duarte Borjón

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the way national and international security is conceived has undergone change in many countries, and with particular justification in the United States. These changes were nothing new, but rather a kind of *déjà vu* of the dominant security agenda during the Cold War.¹ Nevertheless, they were substantial and led to a distancing, or, we might say, a step backward, with regard to the achievements made by other agendas—such as the social agenda—during the 1990s.²

It is equally true that the devastating consequences of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, together with the atypical, yet increasingly frequent snowfalls that in recent years have struck much of the U.S. have forced the government into public acceptance of “other” threats to national and international security besides terrorism. It is here that the notion of environmental security has found a foothold by which it may win legitimacy beyond that of academic discussion.

Notwithstanding this advance, to what degree has the purely academic debate around the formulation of environmental security policies in North America in general and the United States in particular gained ground?

North America, conventionally seen as comprising Canada, the United States and Mexico—though also taking in the territories of Greenland, Bermuda, Saint Pierre and Miquelon and even the tiny atoll of Clipperton—is a vast area in which all the world’s climate zones are represented, including some found nowhere else.³ In signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Canada, the U.S., and Mexico also subscribed to the North American Agree-



Another legacy of 9/11.

ment on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC), which includes the following aims:

1. Foster the protection and improvement of the environment in the territories of the Parties for the well-being of present and future generations;
2. Promote sustainable development based on cooperation and mutually supportive environmental and economic policies;
3. Increase cooperation between the Parties to better conserve, protect, and enhance the environment, including wild flora and fauna;

* Doctoral candidate in international relations, specializing in international environmental policy, mduv@inbox.com.

4. Support the environmental goals and objectives of the NAFTA;
5. Avoid creating trade distortions or new trade barriers.⁴

These objectives are in accordance with the nature of the NAAEC, an environmental cooperation agreement signed on the back of a commercial treaty, and as such make no direct reference to the security of the parties (or of the whole), let alone to environmental security. To achieve this would require at least two conditions: first, to negotiate a tri-lateral security agreement that incorporated environmental security, which is very unlikely for several reasons relating to the policies of each country; second, to modify the scope of the NAAEC to take into account environmental security considerations, which is doubtless also unrealistic, given that the agreement was not designed for such a purpose.

In any case, the debates around environmental security in North America remain restricted to academia and do not impinge upon the forums where decision-making actually takes place. Part Three of the NAAEC, in articles 8 to 19, establishes the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) as its executive arm,⁵ charged, among other things, with undertaking cooperation projects drawn up by the parties to help them achieve the agreement's general objectives. Since it was created in 1994, projects have been negotiated at the CEC according to an annual or biannual operational plan,⁶ on issues including, generally speaking, application and compliance in environmental law (regional initiatives on questions of applying environmental law); environmental information; the environment, business, and sustainability (projects favoring environmentally sustainable production, consumption and trade); pollutants and health (joint initiatives to improve the handling of chemical substances); and biodiversity conservation (actions to protect some of the most important species in North America and the habitats that support them).

As may be noted, no reference is made to remedying the impact of environmental phenomena on the security of the parties, whether due to natural or anthropogenic causes. The nearest thing to it involves the appropriate handling of chemical substances that could represent a health risk to the general population, though the notion of risk here is limited to health and does not cover the possibility of it comprising an environmental risk because it lacks the "potential scope"; this, in notable contrast to the assumption that a chemical terrorist attack would be seen as a security concern, though this returns us to the post-9/11 worldview, in which terrorism is the active subject.

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Furthermore, in the specific case of the bilateral Mexico-U.S. relationship, the CEC is not the main instrument for regulating risks associated with chemical substances along the shared border and those derived from trade between the two nations. These are covered by the 1984 "Peace Agreement" which, despite its name,⁷ does not refer to security in general either—much less to environmental security—between the two countries.

Apart from the CEC, Canada, the United States, and Mexico have significant differences with regard to important issues that can be more easily connected to environmental security, such as climate change. While Canada and Mexico both ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the only two states not to have signed it nor to show any intention of doing so are the United States of America and Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, continuing about the significant differences, the three countries have indicated their most important environmental vulnerabilities: Canada has one of the largest reserves of drinking water in the world, a fact considered a national security issue, meaning the advance and retreat of the ice covering its most northerly territories are considered a limitation on its economic growth. The United States has recognized that hurricanes, tornadoes, forest fires (caused by increasing drought), and floods are potentially harmful factors for its national security. Mexico, meanwhile, is the most environmentally-vulnerable territory in North America: along the Pacific, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean coasts hurricanes wreak havoc across considerable areas, together with other phenomena such as droughts, floods, and forest fires. Furthermore, due to the rise of its average level, the sea is making incursions into certain areas, threatening to submerge them, as is happening in the state of Tabasco.

While certain problems are shared by all three countries, however, the manner in which they deal with them is different. While Canada seeks to protect its freshwater supply, even by military means in an extreme scenario, the United States has accepted that environmental threats are to be taken

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into account, but does not place them in the “priority category” (where terrorism stands), but rather defines them as “isolated and atypical events.” In the case of Mexico, given the country’s experience, attention has focused on disaster prevention, meaning that it has been categorized above all as a civil protection concern, and to a lesser, though increasing, degree, as a national security issue.⁸

In none of these cases is there a national government policy anywhere in North America oriented toward responding to threats and risks to environmental security. This is simply because there is no agreed definition of what the term refers to, on the basis of which environmental insecurity could therefore be defined, and in turn would allow relevant indicators to be more easily catalogued, just as society in general and decision-makers in particular perceive other kinds of insecurity (economic, public, human). The absence of a national policy contrasts with the extensive academic debate around the issue, and it is precisely the lack of consensus that has not allowed an *ad hoc* policy to be drawn up.⁹

Elsewhere I have proposed the following definition of environmental security: “the state in which a directly-proportional relationship prevails among environmental equilibrium, development, and social welfare, which can influence national, regional, and international security. This relationship may vary on the basis of threats and risks to the environment, of both natural and anthropogenic origin.”¹⁰ For reasons of space, I will not seek to explain here how I arrived at this definition, but I can say that it offers the benefit of presenting environmental equilibrium as an essential element in national and/or international security, and also implies, axiomatically, that the better the balance, the better will be development and human wellbeing. In this sense it can, perhaps, contribute to generating the foundations for a national policy in countries in North America or elsewhere on the basis of the manner in which they are related to their component parts.

After the initial effects of 9/11 on how national and international security were conceived, which entailed placing terrorism at the top of the list of general security considerations, it is most likely that drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and

people trafficking are what made it clear that terrorism is not the only security threat, while the recent famines in southern Somalia indicate the persistence of a food security crisis, and a human crisis in general, in certain parts of the planet.

Empirical studies are contributing to the debate with evidence that it is the serious and increasingly frequent droughts affecting North America, long attributed to climate change, as are floods and hurricanes such as Katrina and Rita, which have exacerbated the collapse of agriculture and livestock production. However, climate change is just one of several problems of global scope that threaten environmental security. All indications are that, beyond academic debates, everything is in place to begin generating national policies on environmental security in North America, which will moreover serve as an example to other parts of the world. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. **MM**

NOTES

¹ In this regard, see María Cristina Rosas González, comp., *Terrorismo, democracia y seguridad. 11 de septiembre: cinco años después* (Mexico City: UNAM/National University of Australia, 2006), pp. 47-48.

² In the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, calls were made for the resources used in the arms race to be reassigned to the struggle against poverty, to education, health, and development in general. After September 11, however, these calls fell on deaf ears in the face of the supposed “urgency” of the war on terror.

³ This definition of North America is found in *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

⁴ NAAEC, Article 1, Objectives, at <http://www.cec.org>.

⁵ Op. cit., NAAEC, Part Three, Articles 8 through 19, “On the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Structure and Procedures.”

⁶ Until 2010, CEC operational plans were annual; from 2011 on, they have been biannual.

⁷ The official name of the instrument known as the “Peace Agreement” is the “Agreement between the United Mexican States and the United States of America on Cooperation for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment in the Border Area,” [http://app2.semarnat.gob.mx/tramites/Doctos/DGGIMAR/Sirrep/AcuerdoPaz\(1983\).pdf](http://app2.semarnat.gob.mx/tramites/Doctos/DGGIMAR/Sirrep/AcuerdoPaz(1983).pdf).

⁸ The following reading is recommended for the case of Mexico: Úrsula Oswald Spring, “Calentamiento global, conflictos hídricos y mecanismos de resolución,” *Coyuntura* (Mexico City), November-December 2005; and Blanca Elena Gómez García, “Seguridad ambiental en México: hacia el fortalecimiento de un sistema nacional de prevención de desastres,” in María Cristina Rosas González, comp., *La seguridad por otros medios. Evolución de la agenda de seguridad internacional en el siglo XXI: lecciones para México* (Mexico City: UNAM/Centro de Análisis e Investigación sobre Paz, Seguridad y Desarrollo Olof Palme, A. C., 2011).

⁹ For a good introduction to the debate, recommended authors include Simon Dalby, Felix Dodds, and Jon Barnett, as well as work by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver.

¹⁰ I have put forward this definition in my doctoral thesis, currently underway, as well as in lectures, papers, and articles.