RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS AS CAUSES OF CONFLICT

■ NAZLI CHOUCRI

THE WORLD MUST RECOGNIZE THE CRUCIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS AND VIOLENT CONFLICT. IT MUST ADOPT PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONAL CONDUCT TO REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF CONFLICT OR, IF VIOLENCE OCCURS, TO MITIGATE ITS IMPACT.

There is a crucial connection between resource constraints and conflict among nations. As yet, however, the international community has paid little attention to that link. It is thereby missing the opportunity to develop preventive measures as well as effective responses should a conflict occur. Such acute myopia ill serves global needs, nor does it help efforts to design a better world for the 21st century.

A vicious cycle

At the heart of the resource-conflict connection is a vicious cycle, represented in Figure 1 in simplified form.

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The starting point is industrialization and population growth, which together lead to increased demand for resources. Strengthening that demand are robust rates of growth, nationally and internationally, supported and sustained by development programs worldwide.

On occasion, the resources in demand may be unavailable internally, or too costly to extract; or else there may be barriers to acquiring them from foreign sources. If so, concern is aroused lest national security be compromised.

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That concern determines national policy, and mobilizes instruments of state. It may go so far as to prompt military action, unleashing violent conflict — even though the outcome could well be painful for victor and vanquished alike.

The vicious cycle goes on unchecked: the greater the potential for conflict — and the higher the level of violence — the greater the waste of resources of all kinds. Conflict always damages natural environments. Degradation leads to more degradation, and invariably to greater resource demands — and the vicious cycle can go on and on.

National security: three views

This cycle is largely dependent on one factor: concern for national security. But there are various ways in which we can conceive of a country's security.

The first is the conventional view that defines national security solely in strategic terms — that is, as a military matter having to do with defence. From this perspective, a "security dilemma" arises inadvertently when actions taken by one nation to promote its security are construed as hostile by others, who react accordingly. Insecurity ensues, and the original security objective is undermined. This is what an arms race is all about. By extension, global security is seen solely in terms of averting a large-scale nuclear confrontation.

The second view of national security is broader, incorporating environmental and ecological factors. This is an improvement on the narrow strategic perspective, since it widens the frame of reference. But this second view remains too vague to be used as a guideline for national policy, nor is it much help in defining an acceptable security position.

Both views ignore the imperatives of governance, and the priorities that nations everywhere place on maintaining a stable regime and form of government.

In the third view, true national security is inherently multifaceted, satisfying strategic, environmental and also political conditions — three critical elements.

The *political conditions* for security have to do with internal regime stability.

This is the capacity of the government to protect itself from domestic disorder or revolt, and also to meet the needs and demands of the population.

The *strategic* dimension of security is a country's ability to defend itself from external coercion, attack or invasion.

The *environmental* dimension is the ability to achieve a viable balance or ratio between the size of a state's population and demands relative to its economic performance, resource endowments, and level of technology.

In this view, a country can be truly secure only if it is strong in all three dimensions. Conversely, a state is insecure to the extent that it is weak in one or more of those dimensions. The security of a state can therefore be threatened from outside, from above or from below.

Governments everywhere face the challenge of forging some degree of public consensus in managing the contending pressures and strains of society. A regime is bound to be undermined if it cannot reduce the insecurity, whatever its source may be — inside, outside, or below.

Global security

To complicate matters further, we live in an interdependent world. No country can fully, or even partially, exert control over its destiny. That loss of autonomy is a salient feature of the contemporary international system. For this reason, defining security solely in national terms is at best insufficient. It could be quite misleading, if not downright dangerous.

It is necessary, therefore, to view the true security of nations in a broader global context.

Prevailing views of global security are roughly parallel to views of national security. First is the conventional, strategic view of security. Second is an environmental view of global security — a sort of "revisionist" perspective. Third is a more integrative perspective, addressing the challenges of international governance and of institution-building for global well-being.

The security paradox

In the pursuit of national security, states often create global insecurity. In strategic terms this usually means increased arms expenditures, nuclear proliferation, and expanded investment in advanced military technologies.

This security paradox also has an environmental aspect: in the pursuit of growth and development, states always generate pollutants. Such pollutants may threaten the national as well as the global environment.

And the same may be said of other efforts — for example, measures to improve the standard of living or enhance life expectancy. Ironically, legitimate action to promote the national interest often causes global harm.

The challenge policy makers face is to identify, at least in principle, some way of resolving this paradox.

We must devise a coherent approach that addresses requirements of national and global security, as well as the need for consistency between these two. Indeed, consistency is crucial to any solution.

VICIOUS CYCLE

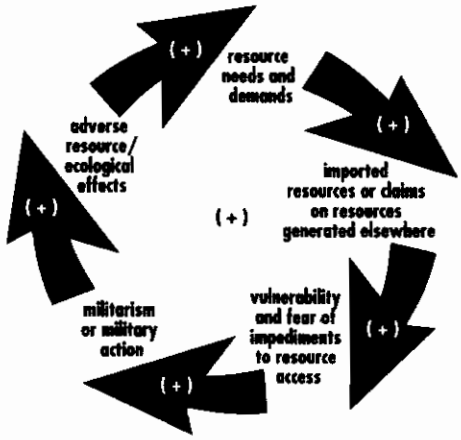


Figure 1

Both behavioral and institutional adjustments are necessary. This is not a theoretical issue; it is a matter of policy and practice. The greater the divergence between conditions and conceptions of security — at all levels — the greater will be the potential for stress in relations among nations.

Security balance

This means that security balance deserves a place at the centre of the national security agenda. Policy makers should give it that place to correct imbalances caused by uneven rates of population growth, technological advancement, and improved resource access — developments that can trigger uneven and, to a considerable extent, unpredictable changes in human activities, interests, and organizations.

Difficulties in acquiring resources may arouse fears for national security.

We are faced by what Robert North, of Stanford University, calls a "triple catch-22." First, every technological innovation, when implemented, results in some form of resource degradation and waste generation. Second, applications of technology inevitably require resources — energy and materials. Third, the more advanced the technology, the greater is the quantity and variety of resources that people *believe* they need. The result is that overall degradation increases with population growth and is further accelerated by technological advancement.

The triple catch-22 connects national security with resource access and availability, and both these factors with conflict.

Assessing security risks

It is possible to improve security risk assessments, and enhance the effectiveness of national policy and decisions, through:

- better data;
- better accounting;
- better analysis; and
- better responses.

Important steps have been taken in each of these four areas.

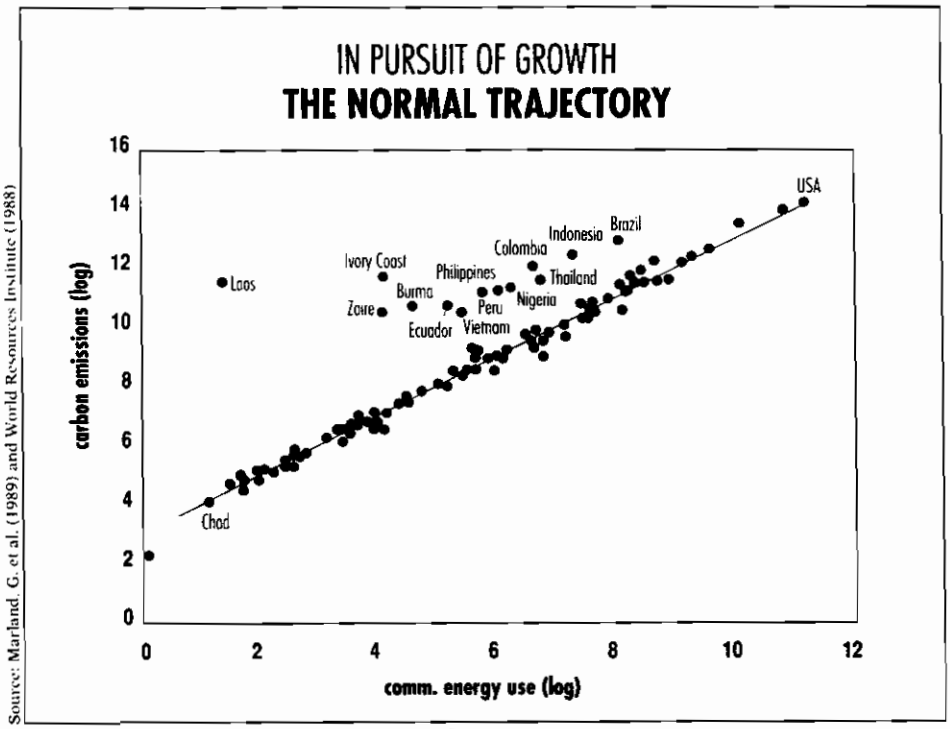
Already, both national agencies and international institutions are beginning to consider the need for better *data* on resources, and on their availability and access to them. The World Resources Institute and similar groups are developing guidelines for improving the collection of information.

Providing better *accounting* is undoubtedly difficult. This involves changes in three sets of accounts. First, the valuation must be improved of natural assets and resources in national accounts. Second, better valuation is needed of the true resource and environmental costs

incurred in preparations for conflict — for example, military expenditures, investments, alterations, and production and storage of war-related materials such as nuclear devices or conventional ordnance. Third, better accounting is required of both the resource and the environmental consequences of war — that is, the damage it causes to human beings, to ecological assets, to raw material bases, and to natural resources.

example, according to the Worldwatch Institute, the military is the single largest producer of hazardous wastes in the United States, generating some 500,000 tonnes of toxic substances annually.

Further, U.S. military institutions overseas are exempt from the *National Environmental Policy Act* of 1970, which requires federal agencies to prepare environmental impact statements. As a consequence, the United States tends to export its military waste production elsewhere. The Gulf War of 1991 led the White House to exempt the military from environmental responsibility — in essence, to give it *carte blanche*.



Source: Marland, G. et al. (1989) and World Resources Institute (1988)

Figure 2

Facts and figures, however, are not enough; good interpretation and *analysis* are needed. And these require interdisciplinary and international modes of investigation.

Finally, to improve *response*, individual countries must make an effort to foster resource-security analysis within the normal channels of governance. This is how they can ensure consideration of the crucial connections identified in this article, and of the elements of the vicious cycle. Those factors must be taken into account in security assessments, deliberations on national priorities, and projections of the consequences of pursuing those priorities.

Resource constraints and security concerns

Aside from issues of valuation, accounting and actual warfare, it is common to underestimate grossly the resources used in providing routine strategic and military security. For

This is only one instance of the link between natural resources and conflict. No malign intent underlies such action. It is simply sound military procedure.

Military spending

Military spending is a significant drain on worldwide investment resources. In the name of national security, many countries allocate more than 25 per cent of their GNP to military matters. None of this spending is necessarily unreasonable, as countries everywhere must always give highest priority to the dual imperatives of security and survival. The problem is that when national security is defined too narrowly — that is, in terms of its military dimension alone — other and sometimes more compelling security threats may go unattended.

One such threat is that related to resources. This is of crucial concern to all countries. Nevertheless, it is seldom given enough attention in the international community at large nor in international, or even regional, forums designed to manage conflict and reduce hostilities. Following are some instances of this blindness.

Natural resources and international conflict

Some resource-related conflicts occur over critical resources that are located in areas beyond a country's national jurisdiction. Disputes among riparian states are usually of this nature. For example, in the Middle East, Egypt's foreign policy priorities have historically been dictated by its need to assure unrestricted access to the waters of the Nile. Any unilateral action by upstream states that might interfere with that access has always been considered just grounds for a political, or even military, response. Successive Egyptian governments have traditionally reiterated this position. Periodic efforts to unite with the Sudan have been motivated in part by Egypt's perception of its vulnerability in this respect.

Also in the Middle East — an area which seems to lead the world in resource-related conflicts — other rivers are the subject of similar contention. Jordan and Israel have long clashed over the waters of the Jordan River. The Tigris and the Euphrates have historically caused quarrels among Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Conflicts and war also occur over oil resources. In fact, strategic exchanges and the firing of oil wells in the Gulf War have been dubbed "environmental terrorism."

A second look at the vicious cycle

Driving the vicious cycle described earlier are three causes of resource depletion and environmental degradation. Unfortunately, all three are accepted as routine, and occur widely.

First, resource and environmental degradation are incurred in the pursuit of *growth and development*. We all applaud development and regard it as essential if

we are to meet the needs of humanity. But development is also inherently depleting. Considerable ingenuity, innovation, and technological advances will be needed to reduce the extent and rate of development-caused degradation. And adding urgency to the problem is the fact that heavily populated Third World countries are only beginning extensive development.

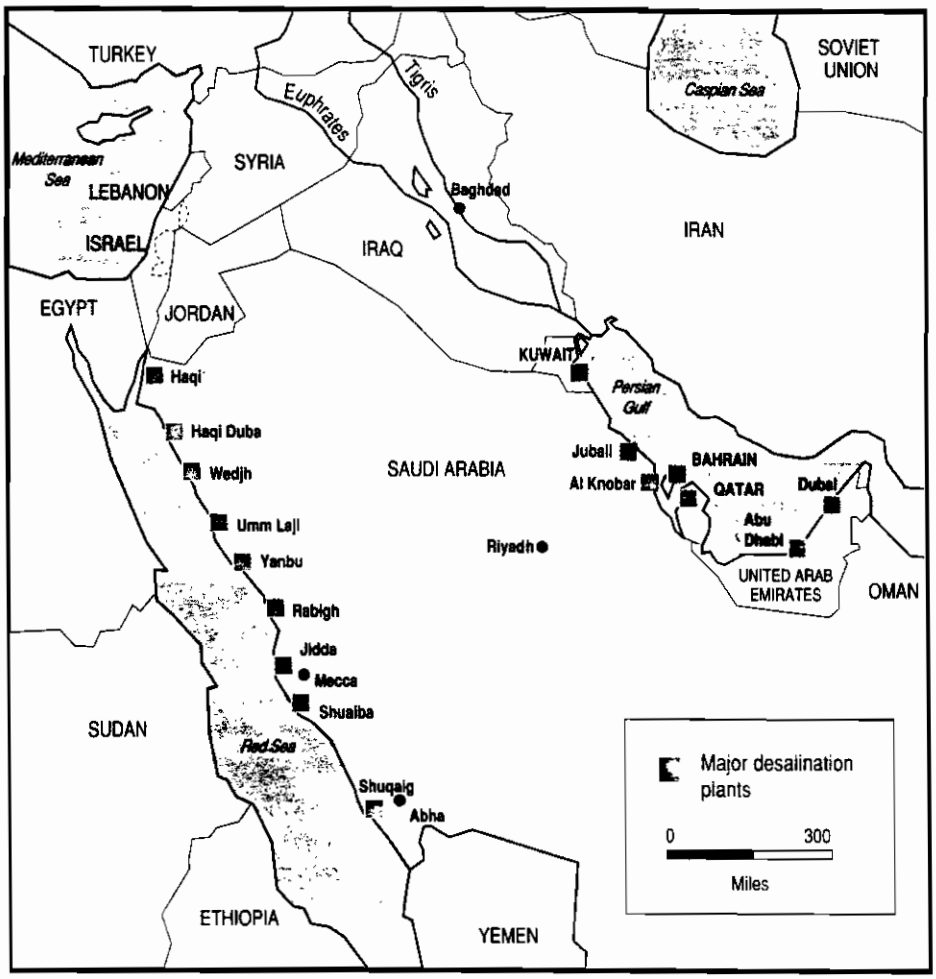
As Figure 2 shows, more development means more effluents and emissions. Given our present technology and current institutional arrangements, both national and international, the way to break this crucial connection is certainly not obvious.

A second cause of depletion and degradation is the use of resources to enhance *national security*. Aside from the routine military expenditures and investments referred to earlier, there are the added ecological and resource costs of positioning troops, arming the combatants, storing munitions and managing ordnance — all before the first shot is fired or the first bomb explodes.

Thirdly, depletion and degradation are incurred by the *impact of war* on resources and the environment. War causes depletion and damage, and these in turn cause further damage long after the war ends.

The Gulf War of 1991 provides a classical illustration of these three factors at work.

DESALINATION PLANTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Source: *Middle East Economic Digest*

Principles of international conduct

Regrettably, conflict and violence are facts of international life. So are resource conflicts and environmental degradation.

If we are to achieve a better world, the international community must consider three principles to guide conduct in the 21st century. These could help us control the factors that give rise to the vicious cycle. The principles are:

- managing resource insecurities;
- establishing mechanisms for early warning; and
- institutionalizing post-war codes of conduct.

Under principle 1, an international forum would be established to discuss and deliberate on policies and methods for managing national insecurities caused by resource constraints.

Under principle 2, early warning mechanisms would be created to alert national authorities as well as the international community to the potential for conflict in cases of resource constraint, whether because of depletion or impeded access.

Under principle 3, a post-war code of conduct would be framed, dealing with ecological reconstitution and resource rebuilding. Regardless of the immediate issues in any violent conflict, the international community must protect the global environment. Adoption of such a code would be a step toward meeting this responsibility.

We must look beyond next year's United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and plan for the next century. Our task is to provide to coming generations some basic principles of conduct. As future conditions unfold, they will have to elaborate on these principles.

Earlier generations gave us the principles we now uphold in national and international governance. Among these are constitutionality, participation, representation, equity, individual freedom, basic human rights, and due process of law. We in turn must bequeath to future generations our own understanding of the crucial connection between resource constraints and conflict. To do so is only fair and just. ▼

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