Social-Ecological Security and International Law in the Anthropocene

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The notion of security has changed significantly in international contexts since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm 1972, so as to include social-ecological concerns even at the global scale. This change is paralleled by the increasing attention to mankind’s position, impact and responsibility in a global environmental context, even to suggest that we are entering into a new geological epoch where mankind is ‘a major environmental force’: The Anthropocene.

In this essay I explore international law and policy for social-ecological security in light of the notion of the Anthropocene and the planetary boundaries.1

1 Environmental and Developmental Dimensions of Security

Several serious concerns for the human environment were raised at the 1972 Stockholm Conference: future exhaustion of non-renewable resources, exceeded capacity of the environment, serious or irreversible damage on ecosystems, hazards to human health, human malnutrition, pre-disaster planning, pest and diseases, water resources, energy, pollution of broad international significance, including climate risks (!), toxic and dangerous substances, and food contamination.2 Yet, none of them was addressed or defined as a security issue. Moreover, little attention, if any, was given to environmental circumstances, such as shortage of freshwater or other resources, as potential triggers of conflicts. Traditional security concerns, as segregation, oppression and apartheid, colonialist and racist domination, nuclear weapons and all

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other means of mass destruction, were indeed highlighted, but not even these matters were characterised in terms of security.\(^3\) There is actually not a single reference to ‘security’ in the outcome of the Conference, and the link between environmental destruction and warfare was only superficially considered.

Yet, in the midst of the Cold war security concerns and security discourse were essential, although mainly of an inter-state character, focusing on national defence and security, and without references to environmental or ecological concerns. At the Stockholm Conference, the impact of war on the environment was kept off the agenda since the USA did not want to deal with accusations that its modes of warfare in Vietnam at the time were environmentally destructive, and influential states did not want to deal with environmental objections to their testing of nuclear weapons.\(^4\) Thus, broader environmental issues were generally kept aside from the security discourse and vice-versa.\(^5\)

This would soon change. The 1980 report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (ICID1), ‘North–south: A Programme for Survival’,\(^6\) considered numerous security aspects and proposed a ‘new concept of security’. In what was still the Cold war, the Commission argued that

> In the global context true security cannot be achieved by a mounting build-up of weapons – defence in the narrow sense – but only by providing basic conditions for peaceful relations between nations, and solving not only the military but also the non-military problems which threatens them.

And it continued:

> Our survival depends not only on military balance, but on global cooperation to ensure a sustainable biological environment, and sustainable prosperity based on equitably shared resources.\(^7\)

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\(^3\) Stockholm Declaration, principles 1, 15 and 26.


\(^5\) One of the exceptions was Richard Falk, This Endangered Planet (Random House 1971), who accentuated global management and environmental degradation in the proposal for human survival.


\(^7\) Ibid 124.