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The European Union's approach to environmental security

(#Security #Climatechange #Europe)

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The European Union (EU) has been committed to addressing environmental challenges within its foreign and security policy since 2008. Following the adoption of the *Climate Change and International Security* report (Commission européenne et Conseil de l'Union européenne, 2008), it has developed a series of working documents over the years, thereby establishing the theoretical framework guiding part of its external actions on environmental issues. It has incorporated environmental concerns into its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), aligning with the concept of environmental security. This concept focuses on understanding “how environmental degradation and climate change interact with peace and security dynamics” (UN environment, 2023). This case study addresses the strategic implications of integrating environmental security within the CSDP.

As the EU does not have an army, the European External Action Service (EEAS) incorporates the concept of environmental security in its doctrine, thereby fostering a more coherent framework for the EU's external actions since its creation in 2008. Unlike organisations like the UN or NATO, which possess military resources, the EU complements capacity-building and military training missions with heavily financed development aid instruments as part of security sector reform practices (Lopez Lucia, 2019), i.e., it helps countries consolidate their police and army. In practice, this unique blend of civil and military instruments will set the EU apart from other international organisations when integrating environmental security into its foreign policy.

The CSDP and environmental security

The EU has adopted a “threat multiplier” paradigm, which frames environmental degradation and climate change as catalysts for conflict. Resource scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, is seen as a factor intensifying existing tensions or generating new ones, potentially leading to violent conflicts. This framework supports the story of an impending environmental “crisis,” wherein the undeniable catastrophic nature of climate change influences the perceived relationship between environmental decline and conflict (Rétel, 2024).

Historically, the EU has relied on diplomatic tools to address climate-related issues. In recent years however, it has increasingly emphasised the military dimension of managing environmental

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challenges abroad. For instance, in its *New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus* published in 2023, the EEAS stated that military stabilisation actions undertaken abroad “will incorporate climate and environmental considerations in their response options” (Joint communication to the European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2023, p. 10). This marks a major advancement in the EEAS’s strategic framework, as prior to this publication, the impacts of environmental degradation were only theoretically addressed in EU working documents.

However, the critical question of the appropriateness of military interventions in conflicts implying environmental degradation can be raised. Indeed, an inherent bias exists within the defence sector forward-looking exercise to justify using military capabilities to address future scenarios. Furthermore, no research has so far confirmed a direct causal relationship between climate change and conflict, supporting instead a correlation-based approach (Buhaug & Von Uexkull, 2021). The EU seems to bypass such critical question with regards to migration control and intervention in the Global South.

Environmental security to support border externalisation

A new migration “crisis” – as the 2015 one – is the main feared consequence of climate change of the EU in its neighbouring environment. Hence, the EU perceives the repercussions of climate change as a direct challenge to its own security and thus frames its foreign policy through a lens of strategic interests regarding environmental security. When it comes to regulating migration flows coming to Europe, the fear of the migration “crisis” has already justified the implementation of (extra-legal) practices. For instance, Frontex, the EU’s border agency, uses aerial surveillance in the Mediterranean to intercept and return migrants to Libya (Amnesty International, 2003). Additionally, in 2022, the EU signed a cooperation agreement with Niger, enabling Frontex agents to join the EU capacity-building mission in Niger to assist in combating irregular migration (European Commission, 2022). Migratory flows already have the precedent of being described as a “hybrid attack” by certain European states, as seen in the case of Middle Eastern refugees passing through Belarus to reach Europe (Bachmann, 2021). Overall, the EU sees its external stability as crucial to internal security. In this context, border externalisation is depicted as a necessity for safeguarding the EU's internal order. As a result, the narrative of “environmental degradation as a threat multiplier” could exacerbate the perceived necessity of those practices and even legitimise them. This argumentation already paves the way for a shift towards interventionist rhetoric regarding environmental security.

Toward a shift to interventionism in the Global South?

Lene Hansen argued that “the construction of something as so threatening as to warrant decisive action is followed by a responsibility for answering those threats ” (Hansen, 2006, p. 31). In this context, the “threat multiplier” narrative grants EU countries not only the legitimate authority to act but also the moral duty to resolve a coming environmental “crisis”. This rationale lays the groundwork for legitimising interventionism in the Global South. Should states in the Global South prove unable to meet the security demands created by climate change, the responsibility of European states to address this environmental “crisis” to come in these regions becomes indisputable.

In addition, the “threat multiplier” narrative feeds the dynamic of othering, portraying the EU as a sacred space to be shielded from external threats. Josep Borrell – the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – notably declared in 2022: “Europe is a garden [...] Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden. [...] The gardeners have to go to the jungle. [...] Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means” (European External Action Service, 2022). This process of othering provides a moral justification for what Duffield described as “a will to govern” the Global South (Duffield, 2002, p. 1053). His analysis of development discourses demonstrated how certain societies are redefined as “other”, i. e. as subjects to be managed and reformed through developmental policies. Consequently, it reinforces the EU’s self-image as a necessary and benevolent actor, justifying interventions abroad under the guise of managing a shared global threat i.e. climate change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of environmental security within the CSDP reflects the EU’s evolving strategic priorities in response to global environmental challenges. However, this shift raises questions about the appropriateness of militarising environmental issues and the potential implications for interventionist practices in the Global South. In the context of the UN, although most Global South countries endorse the link between environment and security, there is a concern that environmental security will be used as a constraint on their economic and industrial development and as a potential justification for external interference (Mohan, 2025). Considering this, the EU will need a balanced approach between development aid and military instruments regarding environmental security if it is to keep a close relationship with its partners abroad.

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