



## **ECOPOLITICS AND GLOBAL SECURITY: FROM DISCOURSE TO POLICIES**

### **ECOPOLÍTICA E SEGURANÇA GLOBAL: DO DISCURSO ÀS PRÁTICAS POLÍTICAS**

Cláudia Toriz Ramos\*  
cramos@ufp.edu.pt

**Abstract.** *Ecopolitics entered political discourse firstly as an alternative debate to mainstream politics and ideological refutation of the established political order, and that way gained public expression in social movements of contestation. Subsequently, it emerged intertwined in the discourse of party politics and finally came to reach the core of contemporary political systems and their political agendas. The construction and the spreading of the ecopolitical discourse are addressed in the first part of the article. The way it entered the field of public policies is the core concern of the second part, with a focus on international and global security policies. Ecopolitical thinking has contributed to a shift in international security paradigms, from the conventional, realist and state-centred national security paradigm to approaches that privilege human security and global sustainability. To the end, the article reviews extant policy areas connecting environment with security.*

**Keywords:** *Ecopolitics; human security; sustainability; anthropocentrism.*

**Sumário.** *O discurso ecopolítico entrou no campo teórico-ideológico da política contemporânea, primeiramente como refutação da ordem estabelecida e discurso à margem dessa ordem, tendo a sua expressão pública chegado posteriormente até aos movimentos sociais de contestação. Progressivamente, constituiu-se como força política com expressão partidária e acabou por chegar ao coração dos sistemas políticos e da agenda política contemporânea. O artigo foca, num primeiro passo, a construção do discurso ecopolítico e sua divulgação; num segundo, a sua expressão no campo das políticas públicas, com particular ênfase na dimensão securitária internacional e global. A ecopolítica contribuiu para a alteração do paradigma da segurança internacional, do seu modelo tradicional, de pendor realista e centrado na segurança nacional, para um modelo novo, centrado na segurança humana e na sustentabilidade global. O artigo encerra com uma revisão de cruzamentos entre o securitário e o ambiental, nas práticas políticas de segurança internacional.*

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\* Universidade Fernando Pessoa, Porto, Portugal.

**Palavras-chave:** *Ecopolítica; segurança humana; sustentabilidade; antropocentrismo.*

## **o. Introduction**

But aren't we forgetting the world of things themselves, the sand, the water, the mud, the reeds of the marsh? In what quicksands are we, active adversaries and sick voyeurs, floundering side by side? And I who write this, in the solitary peace of dawn? (Serres, 1995: 2)"

The aim of this text is to explore the connections between ecopolitics and security, in the framework of political science and international relations.

Ecopolitics as a strand of political thought has evolved throughout the twentieth century as a reaction to industrialisation and the major changes thus introduced to the human-nature relationship. Roughly from the sixties of that century onwards it also became a major mobiliser for political movements, to finally enter the realm of political mainstream debates and of political practices.

Approximately by the same time, the concept of 'security' itself had gained centre stage in international politics, in a shift from a focus on war to a major concern with security, and sometime after with securitisation. In this process the concept of threats to security also evolved from material to non-material and from conventional to non-conventional threats.

Environmental politics first started as a policy area connected with others but focused on environment protection, and thus introducing limits to some of the human actions dictated for instance by economic activities. At present the mainstreaming of environmental concerns has broadened the scope of these policies, of which the best example is probably the concept of 'sustainable development', standing at the crossroads of development and environmental theories.

A similar albeit more specific encounter has happened with security issues: first, because environmental hazards are said to foster conflicts, an idea further discussed below; second, because environmental threats started being addressed as threats to human security. The whole process carries a series of conceptual

shifts in the field of security, but has steadily entered the discourse and, moreover, the practices of international security. The convergence of ecopolitics and security is therefore the focus of this article.

### **1. Ecopolitics: what is it?**

Simply put, ecopolitics is about ecologic politics, that is, the encounter between politics and ecologism. However, ecologism is a contested term, not least because there are several strands of thought and subsequent political options stemming from environmental concerns. Alternative labels are the terms ‘environmentalism’, or, to avoid profounder theoretical affiliations, ‘green politics’ (Barry, 2014; Dobson, 2007; Goodin, 1992).

Environmentalism is said to be focused on nature conservation but in an anthropocentric manner, i.e. subsuming nature to the interest of its ‘central’ species – the humans. Unlike this, ecologism is nature centered, thus placing human beings back to their peer relation with other species in nature. Regarding the environment, this paves the way for a much more radical approach to policy changes. The label ‘green politics’ is often preferred for its encompassing characteristics, but risks being too associated with party-politics, given the use of the term for labelling political parties that stand for the ‘green’ ideology. In turn, ‘dark green politics’ also tags more radical approaches to environmental issues (Barry, 2014; Dobson, 2007; Goodin, 1992).

As a whole, ecopolitics brought forward, in public debates but also within epistemic communities and in policy decision-making, a new vision of the relations between humans and nature that implies at its minimum the non-dissociation of humans from nature, eventually even their non-hierarchisation, and in the extreme versions the discussion of nature rights and their centrality. After the ‘social contract’ the ‘natural contract’<sup>1</sup> has thus emerged.

The model evolved steadily, from initial contestation of the industrial world order within literary and philosophical attempts to preserve nature and

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<sup>1</sup> In Serres terms: “Exclusively social, our contract is becoming poisonous for the perpetuation of the species, its global and objective immortality (...) Back to nature, then! That means we must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect; where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery, nor would property and mastery imply their excremental results and origins” (Serres, 1995: 32, 38).

wilderness (Clark, 2015; Leonard, 2010), to the core concern with ‘the great acceleration’ (McNeill and Engelke, 2016) and all the imbalances associated with it. Unlike the old ideology of “progress, ecopolitics stems from the concern with nature as the true locus of humankind, a place where it belongs and whose rules it should abide by (Barry, 2014; Leonard and Clark, 2010).

To sum up, it could be stated that after industrial and technological euphoria a new paradigm emerged, one that ascertains the profound vulnerability of man and nature altogether (Beck, 2017).

Barry (2014) emphasises the fact that, despite the connection of environmentalism with post-materialist discussions, it has actually reintroduced some major material issues into the political debate. The ways industrial production disposes of natural resources and its side-effects, notably pollution, are said to inflict severe degradation upon nature. It is therefore a new or renewed debate on natural resources, on their use and their social distribution and also a critical assessment of the notion of ‘basic necessities’ which consumerism has allegedly distorted. It is a debate about natural resources, territories and populations and their mutual relations. Such debate is coterminous with the debate on the origins of the western state and has also been central to geopolitics (Desfarges, 2003).

Another issue stems from this one: the discussion on the long term preservation of natural resources, which is, from the anthropocentric point of view, often expressed in terms of ‘intergenerational solidarity’, as recently incorporated under the label of ‘sustainability’ (Barry, 2012; WCED, 1987).

At the level of political action there was a progressive assimilation of the environmental axioms. As a consequence, several political solutions emerged at the national, regional and global levels. The institutionalisation of environmental policies implied the openness of political structures to the new agenda; yet, this mainstreaming also brought about a certain amount of mitigation of the more radical underpinnings of ecologism. Gradual reforms, rather than major turnovers of established practices were thus introduced by means of policies. The process is slow, not least because the established policy making procedures often rely on negotiations that require the convergence of a vast array of actors (Barry, 2012; Leonard and Clark, 2010).

Radical ecologism, however, advocates more profound changes as a consequence of its critique of market economy, capitalism and the inherent and pervasive concept of 'economic growth'. This is convergent with the idea conveyed by Moore in debating the concept of 'capitalocene' (Moore, 2016). Furthermore, the state stands in this critique as an insufficient framework for political action, given its traditional territorial boundaries. A good example of this is trade in gas emissions between states, which counters the original ecological meaning of gas emissions control. The alternative is the inscription of environmental issues in a broader, international framework of governance. At the same time, ecologism calls for a more communitarian approach to the human-nature relationship, based on proximity. Family agriculture, or social economy, are often given as examples of this type of solutions, because they are said to provide a more balanced pattern for humans-nature relations (Barry, 2014; Dobson, 2007; Luke, 1997).

Since this article revolves around how a strand of ideology becomes a policy area, it is also relevant to take a closer, even if brief, look into some policy-making processes involved. They are different, depending on time, level of decision (local, national, regional-supranational or global) issue area and circumstances, but there are some commonalities that are worthy of mention, when the policy issue area is environment.

First of all, there has been a global agenda, led by the United Nations and connected agencies and spreading to other international organisations of a regional level and the states themselves. In that framework, governance by conferences on environmental issues started in 1972 with the Stockholm conference, followed by the Earth summits in 1992, 2002 and 2012. The creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), back in 1972, also gave the process an institutional underpinning that became fundamental for the follow up (UNEP, n.d.). This agency presents itself on-line as: "the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda (...)" (UNEP, n.d.: n.p.).

The role of civil society stakeholders is also often important in the negotiations and the implementation of environmental policies, not least for the fundamental role they had in fostering the topic into the international agenda. At

present, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often enter partnerships for the promotion of environmental policies programmes, thus stepping forward, beyond their original ‘watch dog’ role and their awareness raising function, as for example at the time of famous tree-sittings or the many spectacular campaigns of the Greenpeace (Weiss and Gordenker, 1996).

The specific role of epistemic communities, in this issue area, cannot be forgotten, given the knowledge-based decisions often required. However, it remains a controversial question, because there has been both some exaggeration and some denial of the environmental impacts of industrialisation, in the scientific debate brought forward in political auditions (Leonard and Clark, 2010; Toke, 1999). Furthermore, the resistance of some corporate stakeholders, whenever legal restrictions to productive processes may apply on grounds of environmental protection, has also been a recurrent reality, which in turn often exerts pressure at the national level of political power (DesJardins, 1998).

Last, but not least, the role of ‘green’ political parties has also to be appraised. Some of them even moved from the periphery of the political system to centre stage governmental functions, notably via governmental coalitions and as a direct result of their electoral impact (Dobson, 2007; Gahrton, 2015).

The claim that ‘policy makes politics’ is perhaps overemphasised in some policy-making research, but there is indeed a case to argue on the double arrows linking both policies and politics; or, in other words, on how ideas travel into practice and then backwards into theory and discourse. This is indeed how the ‘greening’ of (some) politics has gradually happened.

## **2. Ecopolitics and security**

This article centrally addresses the relation between ecopolitics and international and global security. From the perspective of politics and international relations studies, the question can be debated from two main points of view: the classic paradigm of national security; and the human security paradigm. In the first case, such relation can be summarised into some major issues as detailed below.

The more immediate argument is the claim that environmental risks constitute threats to national security, notably that resource scarcity may lead to resource wars. There is a series of conflicts that deflagrated in connection with water paucity, for instance. This thesis has often been made general, thus considering scarcity and environmental hazards as causes for rising conflictuality. Kaplan's *Coming Anarchy* is a good example of this idea (cit. in Dalby, 2008). However, empirical research on conflicts has not proven this causal nexus to be universal and even provides examples of increased cooperation under harsh conditions of environmental threat (Dalby, 2008, 2009; Hough, 2013, 2015).

International reports and other studies do point out that a phenomenon labelled 'low intensity wars' has become quite common in scenarios of state's internal disaggregation, both for reasons of man-made crises and because of natural disasters. Kaldor (2007) crafted the concept of 'endemic' wars for the new wars that have, in recent years, outnumbered the 'conventional' inter-state wars. They may stem from local or national internal causes, but tend to spread over the borders and to create regional instability. This process is strongly connected with what is commonly known as 'fragile states' (FFP, 2018) and therefore tends to overlap with the global maps of state fragility and state collapse.

Conversely, it is often the case that environmental destruction is the result of wars and a hindrance to post war reconstruction, which calls for specific measures from the international community (UNEP and UNDP, 2013). Security literature tends to consider environmental problems as 'risk multipliers' for security, and thus to advocate preventive approaches as much as possible (Hough, 2013). There is also no doubt that those risks are increased in developing and least developed countries, where both the skills and the material means for prevention are scarcer than in the developed world. The connection between environment, development and security is therefore a relevant focus, one that also touches issues of the national interest and national security, since development programmes often occur within the boundaries of conventional sovereignty, despite the strong international input in the process (World Bank, 2018).

Still within the framework of classic state security, perspectives such as the Carter doctrine (Hough, 2015) also raise a number of issues. It was argued that in the context of the oil crisis of the time and in the event of internal resource scarcity, external intervention for resources would be a legitimate means to stand for national interest, and thus it justified a belligerent view of the international system. The argument itself is not new in the history of the state. The 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘scramble for Africa’ and the many imperial wars for territory and resources, account for that perspective. In common with present-day ecological debate, it also departed from the acknowledgment of the scarcity of resources (and therefore potential competition for); but quite differently from ecology, it did not consider the finite condition of natural resources, focusing instead on competition, domination and national advantage. From the point of view of international relations theoretical paradigms this perspective is inscribed in the realist, competitive view of the international system.

Human security, the second paradigm aforementioned, has developed in recent years, with a focus on the security of each and every individual, regardless of their country of origin, hence the one that should first provide for shelter (Malik, 2015; UNHSU, n.d.). This new perspective brings two main changes, into the consideration of international security concerns.

First, it challenges a statecentric view of security and paves the way for the debate on the boundaries of national sovereignty and external ‘non-intervention’, as expressed in the co-terminous ‘responsibility to protect’ concept (Pilbeam, 2015). Human security is therefore an anthropocentric, not a statecentric concept (neither is it a nature-centred concept). As a consequence, it brings into the debate on security a wider array of stakeholders than under a more traditional view, namely non-governmental and intergovernmental international organisations.

Second, and central to this article’s theme, it broadens the scope of security threats: it is not just about hard military threats, but also about the many threats to security stemming from environmental degradation, poverty, migration and displacement, among others. Human security has been defined as ‘freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity’ (UNDP, 1994; UNGA,



2012) which, combined, set a fairly high threshold for the protection of human life and dignity (Malik, 2015).

Securitisation (Hough, 2013) thus becomes not only an immediate military endeavour but also a structural process, hence also a civilian one. It is not only about reacting to military threats, it is also about adopting a preventive posture able to foresee crises and defuse their trigger. The outcome of this merger has been a reinterpretation of security missions which encompass side by side civilian and military components and which involve substantial structural work – both for preventing and for reconstructing (Koops et al., 2017).

Environmental threats are clearly better tackled as structural threats, especially if the imbalance introduced by human action is considered. This was already the debate in *Top Guns and Toxic Whales: The Environment & Global Security* (Prins and Stamp, 1991), where conventional and non-conventional threats were compared. However, the military can also be involved in those broad scope missions (as they currently are, in missions tackling natural and manmade catastrophes). Furthermore, because environmental threats, even if originating at local or national level, are ‘insensitive’ to national borders, international cooperation is a better approach to tackle them than narrow national security views.

Nevertheless, exaggeration in the appraisal of environmental risks also needs to be avoided. Catastrophic or even apocalyptic views can in turn become ‘discursive security threats’ and thus also induce crisis and chaos (Dalby, 2008). The argument is also valid for calling for serious background expertise and qualified public debates, in assessing environmental security threats.

From the perspective of security, the connections between ecopolitics and demopolitics are also evident. Issues such as food and water scarcity, or more generally poverty have major impacts upon populations and migration. The ‘geography of hunger’ as Josué de Castro (Castro, 1946) taught us a long-time ago, and the geography of war are major propellers both of mass international migration and of internal displacement (MSC, 2018; Scheffran et al. 2012).

Furthermore, in recent decades, ‘sustainability’, became a guiding concept in association with development, and development has been specified as ‘human

development'.<sup>2</sup> Altogether they constitute medium-long term answers to security problems. Development programmes now often look for local empowerment and balanced humans-nature relations. North-south transfers, but also south-south cooperation, are increasingly involved in the fostering of development, which is ever more seen as structural work for the benefit of the global *oikos*. There is of course a vast array of darker stories in the history of international cooperation, namely the World Bank's L. Summers memo in 1991, on the advantages of transferring 'dirty industries' to developing countries (Barry, 2012; O'Brien and William, 2016). Yet, the scope of (global) sustainability has entered political discourses and practices, as becomes evident from the recent 'Sustainable Development Goals' (UN, n.d.).

The global geography of environmental risks is also noteworthy for the debate on security. It is true that the risks are higher in less developed and in developing countries, because of both their capacity to prevent and react and the negative impacts of some asymmetric transferences (as waste, pesticide, or medicine). Nevertheless, the risk is truly global. If threats such as global warming and climate change are considered, it is quite obvious that there is risk both for the low lands of the Pacific islands and for the neighbouring countries of the Arctic, in the north (Barry, 2012). Population movements are just another example of how environmental risks, even if originating at a very local level, can then impact upon many other parts of an ever more integrated world. Transnational threats hence call for transnational solutions and these do not fit the conventional national security framework. They require it to be transcended, instead.

### **3. Global eco-security politics and practices**

The international security structure as designed after World War II relies on the key role of the United Nations, notably its Security Council. However, environmental issues, since their inception in the institutional framework of the United Nations (the aforementioned UNEP), have been placed under the socio-

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<sup>2</sup> The first step was the Brundtland report, in 1987, under the title *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), which defined 'sustainability' and associated it with development. 'Human development' is a concept the United Nations Human Development Programme has used in its annual reports ever since 1990 (UNDP, n.d.).

economic and development issue areas. Their connection with security issues is therefore a recent evolution that goes hand in hand with the way in which concepts of international security also evolved in recent years. Official acknowledgment of this evolution is present in recent statements by the President of the Security Council, notably in 2011:

The Security Council expresses its concern that possible adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security. (...) The Security Council expresses its concern that possible security implications of loss of territory of some States caused by sea-level-rise may arise, in particular in small low-lying island States. The Security Council notes that in matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security under its consideration, conflict analysis and contextual information on, inter alia, possible security implications of climate change is important, when such issues are drivers of conflict, represent a challenge to the implementation of Council mandates or endanger the process of consolidation of peace. In this regard, the Council requests the Secretary-General to ensure that his reporting to the Council contains such contextual information. (UN-SC, 2011:1-2)

The formulation adopted specifically addresses climate change and focuses on its contextual implications for security. An even more recent statement by the President of the Security Council, in 2018, echoes the same type of concern, with reference to the instability in West Africa and the Sahel region:

The Security Council recognises the adverse effects of climate change and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of West Africa and the Sahel region, including through drought, desertification, land degradation and food insecurity, and emphasises the need for adequate risk assessments and risk management strategies by governments and the United Nations relating to these factors. (UN-SC, 2018: 4)

Peacekeeping, one of the core areas of UN security action, has also incorporated this concern with the environment, as the following examples illustrate. On November 5, 2001, the UN General Assembly declared 6 November of each year as the 'International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict' (UN-GA, 2001). The environment is therefore considered a hidden victim of wars and its protection a necessity in paving the way for peace.

Recent peacekeeping missions integrated this concern in the definition of their aims, as is the case of the MONUSCO mission, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where mine action operation activities have been undertaken, as part of territory clearance (MONUSCO, 2018). It is also the case of the MINUSCA mission, in Central African Republic, which also incorporated an environmental concern in its mandate, this time the control of 'Illicit exploitation and trafficking

of natural resources' (MINUSCA, 2018). Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) activities have also been addressed in the UN framework from the point of view of environmental risks and opportunities, as recently expressed in the report entitled *The Role of Natural Resources in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration. Addressing Risks and Seizing Opportunities* (UNEP/UNDP, 2013).

Peacebuilding, the structural approach to the creation and maintenance of peace, inspired in Galtung's theorisation, has also incorporated some environmental concerns. As a whole, it means that environmental balance is addressed as a condition for long lasting peace. This is also the idea expressed by the non-governmental organisation Environmental Peacebuilding Association, which defines within its scope: "Environmental peacebuilding integrates natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in communities affected by conflict" (EPA, 2018). Another example is the platform 'Environmental Peace-Building' (Environmental Law Institute and UNEP, 2018) backed by UNEP, among other partners, which offers on-line courses on environment and peacebuilding, as both academic and policy area, relying on both theorisation and a collection of case studies.

These examples, however, cannot hide the fact that many shortcomings still exist at the global, but also at the regional, national and local levels in promoting environmental security. They do, nevertheless, provide evidence on how a policy area starts being mainstreamed.

## **Conclusion**

The article reviewed the connection between ecopolitics and security in present days' political discourses and practices. The connection is fairly visible. It has entered the traditional framework of national security in that environmental hazards put at risk the territory, the population, and hence the sovereignty of states. However, its gradual insertion in international security concerns goes beyond the traditional framework of state security and permeates the work of international organisations, notably of the United Nations and related agencies. The topic entered the 'soft power' agenda of non-binding international agencies,

but has also reached the core of UN's security action, by being considered by the Security Council and by being incorporated in the missions it authorises. Furthermore, the idea that long term peace must also come to terms with environment is a growing consensus, in international relations, with a focus on 'human security'. It is therefore perhaps at the national level that the main shortcomings exist, and not only in developing but also in developed countries, given the pervasiveness of 'national' and 'short-term' approaches to environment. The outstanding questions that remain are therefore on the resilience of environmental issues as mainstream of the political discourse, and consequently on the policy effectiveness of measures so far adopted.

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