Eco-Conflicts and ‘Green Spies’

Ecological dilemmas are moving beyond the realm of local environmental, health and human population studies to a more dangerous transnational aspect of globalization – intelligence operations. It is in opening up an interaction between environmental studies’ liberal domain and intelligence studies’ realist domain, projecting on geopolitics, that ‘green security’ morphs into ‘ECOINT.’ While issues of water, energy, climate change, pollution, and deforestation will remain central focus of human security, 21st century reality is also making these aspects bleed more prominently into many states’ national security priorities. Consequently, these facets are not just catalysts for scholarly analysis but drivers of empirical policy: the environment is not just for NGOs, IOs, and other aspiring transformative transnational actors, but also for various intelligence communities and their nationalist agendas. This new approach to green issues reveals how intelligence communities really can no longer remain passive in an area that many academics still consider ‘intelligence policy irrelevant.’

Transitional Water Boundaries. While China has sought to improve the quality of its water by deterring polluters and investing in water-related technologies, China has also focused on ambitious water redirection programs to meet its growing demand for water supplies. In the north, China faces severe water scarcity that has been further exacerbated by rampant pollution. Supplies have dwindled, and the desert is quickly encroaching on major cities. To counter this, China has sought to engage in ambitious water redirection plans that would see major waterways redirected to the increasingly dry northern region of the country. While China has considered using some of its own waterways to address the issue, it has also widened its scope to include transboundary waterways -- particularly, the Brahmaputra River which runs through Tibet and into India. Chellany comments on the situation, writing, “Having extensively contaminated its own major rivers through unbridled industrialization, China now threatens the ecological viability of river systems tied to South and Southeast Asia in its bid to meet its thirst for water and
energy.” If China does seek to meet its water demand through the use of transboundary waterways, the country will have to deal with discontented neighbors that rely on these waterways for their own livelihoods. This may very well spark the beginnings of water wars in the region and is a prime example of where intelligence communities at the regional level will begin to reorient their local priorities.

**Nile River Basin.** Over the last quarter century, many civil conflicts were fought within and among the riparians along the Nile River Basin (NRB); most notably in Burundi, Chad, the Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Sudan. Ethnic and religious differences were two of the primary causal factors behind these conflicts, but the potential of a new conflict stimulus is rapidly emerging: the contest over rights to the region’s main fresh water resource, the Nile River. While some scholars are skeptical about the relevance of resource wars in this region, to completely rule it out is to ignore the fact that all efforts to date to reach a comprehensive and unanimously approved new water sharing agreement that includes all NRB riparians have failed. Actually, the NRB states’ inability to forge a unanimous agreement on this issue has arguably increased the threat of conflict over NRB water resources, at both the state and local level, and conflict is becoming more and more of a possibility every day. It is just such structural parameters that indicate where local intelligence communities will find ample room for operational capacity and quite vivid national intelligence agendas. A potential conflict based on water shortages could quickly spread to pastoral or agricultural regions of other countries depending on the severity and length of the drought. These potential examples further suggest that water will continue to be a significant factor in any potential conflict involving the people of the NRB in the coming century and consequently will come to bear on the formation of intelligence priorities in all of the above-mentioned countries.

**Rare Earth Metals.** From hardware for the latest military technologies to the permanent magnets used in hybrid motors and wind turbines, US companies require a stable supply of rare earth metals for many vital applications. China controls 97% of the global supply of rare earth elements, and their recent export cuts and increased taxes pose a threat to US energy security and military technology dominance. This is evident when considering China’s strategic academic centers for rare earth research, their anti-competitive subsidies to their wind turbine companies and the projected ten-to-fifteen year gap expected for the US to develop alternate supplies for rare earths. The WTO officially ruled in July of 2011 that China violated trade law by reducing exports of eight raw materials. This ruling could bolster efforts to force China to increase its exports of rare earths. Employing legal tactics to combat protectionist trade actions by is a long and arduous process that appears to be slowly paying off as a US strategy. But as China inevitably seeks opportunities to counter that progress, intelligence communities from the affected countries will only invest more operational capacity into achieving the same objectives that the slow and arduous international legal process is not achieving. The cost of failing to manage supplies of rare earths is the loss of US energy security and a negative impact to military weapons fabrication. In the global scramble for alternative sources, the US could get left behind in the contest for mineral rights outside of China. Failure to satisfy its rare earth metal needs legally will only heighten and intensify the need for US intelligence community involvement to satisfy them through other more covert means.

Failure to evolve ‘green security’ into ‘ecological intelligence’ likely means crucial key factors, red flags, and anticipatory warning signs of future conflict will be missed by scholars, analysts, and policy-makers alike. ECOINT asks all states to consider emerging conflict in a way that most environmentally-oriented research has yet to tackle – from the intelligence angle of green issues. How that angle could play a dominant role not just in governance but in foreign policy, diplomacy, and conflict resolution decision-making, cutting across political, religious, ethnic, and economic divides, will open up an entire new arena for scholarly research that is both intellectually rigorous and empirically relevant.

*Dr. Matthew Crosston is Professor of Political Science and Director of the International Security and Intelligence Studies program at Bellevue University, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*