ZOMBIE CONCEPTS AND BOOMERANG EFFECTS

Uncertainty, Risk, and Security Intersection through the Lens of Environmental Change

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Abstract: Focusing on the challenges of environmental change and human impact, the authors consider how different mindsets or mental maps lead to alternative risk responses and, consequently, alternative prioritizations of different kinds of security. The uncertainties associated with environmental change are difficult to quantify, yet the impacts may be severe. We argue that we cannot so reduce the uncertainty of the science that can definitively end debate about appropriate policy. Instead, we must learn to integrate uncertainty into decision making processes and consider how our near-term actions enable or constrain future options. Presenting a critical approach to defining human and environmental security, we also distinguish between threats and vulnerabilities and their impact. To examine the relationships between security and risk, we draw on two central metaphors. First, the tenets of traditional security are critiqued vis-à-vis Ulrich Beck’s “zombie concepts” of modernism, which emphasize the state and thereby fail to engage the multiple and interdependent processes of change we now face. In this context, we discuss broadly how new solutions beget increased risk and how new knowledge yields greater uncertainty. Second, using P. H. Liotta’s “boomerang effect,” we look more narrowly at how policies intended to address some specific dimension of security can undermine other dimensions. When these metaphors are considered as a set of related

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P.H. Liotta et al. (eds.), Environmental Change and Human Security, 9–33.
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ideas, it becomes apparent that the world is confronted with socially produced and human-centered vulnerabilities. Further, the potential for local and localized risk has mutated into systemic risk that affects both the “developing” and “developed” parts of the world. Responses to climate change, in particular, must therefore accommodate thinking in terms of multiple facets of security.

Keywords: Risk; uncertainty; environmental change; policy; human security; environmental security

1. Introduction: Setting the Template

The issue of environmental change and its impact on humankind—and the security that affects humankind—requires, we argue in this chapter like the authors throughout this volume, a focused, nuanced, and strategic approach. Fundamentally, we must begin with a sense, if not total understanding, of how the security landscape before us has shifted in the twenty-first century. While addressing how the security architecture has changed, we must also consider how the mindsets—or “mental maps”—of decision makers drive the willingness (or, more appropriately, the unwillingness) to take on policies that attempt to respond to changing conditions.

In thinking about the difficulties decision- and policy-makers have in addressing best choices for security within a changing environment we recognize the paradox of “manufactured uncertainties,” which follows from the work of Anthony Giddens and others (Giddens, 1990, 1998). A significant element of Modernism has been the continuing effort to minimize the uncertainties that stem from natural processes and social dynamics. The phrase manufactured uncertainties can be understood to capture two aspects of this (largely but not exclusively Western) societal development. The first might be considered a matter of our attentiveness. The creation of new knowledge makes us aware of what we were previously unaware. That is, to use a common truism, “the more we know, the less we know.” More precisely, as we scientifically and technologically advance, our attitude toward risk can be seen to escalate as we become more and more aware of new uncertainties. In this way, risk management (for lack of a better term) becomes increasingly prevalent in our collective thinking about the world.

The second aspect of manufactured uncertainties concerns how our interconnected social world operates. The work of civilization to manage