The Debate on Ecological Security in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine

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61.1 Introduction

Ecological security was nearly a taboo in the Soviet era. Only during the Gorbachev period environmental issues reached the national agenda when Gorbachev (1987) introduced the idea of ecological security in his book on perestroika and New Political Thinking. However, on the practical level the debate was mostly devoted to the implications of the Chernobyl catastrophe (1986). The broader debate on numerous environmental problems was at an embryonic phase, public attention was preoccupied with the political cataclysms of the early 1990’s. Only in the 1990’s the environmental security debate emerged.

This chapter explores how environmental problems have affected the CIS security discourse, including threat perceptions and national security doctrines and it examines how different national schools (Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian) identify their approaches to the solution of the ecological problems.

61.2 CIS Security Thinking in the Post-Cold War Period: Changing Perceptions

The political and academic communities in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were surprised by the post-Cold War dynamics that did not come overnight. But it took almost a decade to redefine the national security concepts of Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus and to produce thorough academic analyses. Several fundamental changes in the CIS security thinking were caused by the post-Cold War environment.

First, in contrast with the traditional security thinking that emphasized ‘narrow’ (military) security, the CIS countries accepted a broader security concept. According to the Russian Law on Security (1992), not only military but also economic, social, information, and ecological aspects of security are important. According to this law, “security is a freedom from internal and external threats to vital interests of the individual, society and state” (Yeltsin 1992: 5). The same principles were developed in the Russian Ecological Doctrine (2002).

Second, in addition to a new definition of security, there is a growing understanding among CIS strategic planners that in the age of globalization the focus of national and world politics is gradually shifting from the ‘hard’ (military) to the ‘soft’ (non-military) security domain. This was unusual for the Soviet security policy. The Soviet Union had always emphasized the development of full-fledged armed forces (both nuclear and conventional) and the military had a major saying in the decision-making. In the post-Cold War period ‘hard’ security lost its former importance, a new agenda was de-securitized, ‘normal’, non-security issues became objects of global co-operation. ‘Grand’ policy retreated to the shadow and ‘low politics’ (economy, societal issues, ecology, migration, etc.) dominated the scene.

Third, there was a dramatic change of threat perceptions. For instance, Russian and Ukrainian national security doctrines asserted that these two countries faced no immediate danger of large-scale aggression, and that, because the countries were beset with a myriad of debilitating domestic problems, the greatest threat to their security was now an internal...
one. For example, the national security concept of the Russian Federation (1997) stated:

An analysis of the threats to the national security of the Russian Federation shows that the main threats at present and in the foreseeable future will not be military, but predominantly internal in character and will focus in the internal political, economic, social, ecological, information and spiritual spheres (Yeltsin 1997: 4).

This is a distinct departure from previous doctrines. For example, the military doctrine of 1993 were based on the assumption that the main threat to Russia’s security was posed by external factors such as local conflicts, territorial claims or violations of the rights of Russian-speaking minorities in the former Soviet republics (Yeltsin 1994).

Fourth, the predominance of the ‘soft’ security agenda has questioned the role and capabilities of the old actors (NATO, OSCE, etc.) in dealing with a new set of challenges. Several new institutions, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Barents-Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), and the Arctic Council (AC) were set up to better cope with new problems rather than traditional actors. Among the ‘old’ multilateral institutions, especially the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, the Nordic Council (NC), the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and international financial institutions (IFIs) were more responsive to the ‘soft’ security problematique. It took the CIS foreign and security policies some time to adjust to this new reality.

Fifth, the post-Cold War period brought a new pattern of the globalization and regionalization relationship. It became a commonplace to ascertain that globalization and regionalization are the two sides of the same coin and different words (e.g., glocalization) are used to denote this complex phenomenon. The world faces the erosion of the nation state and of national sovereignty, the shift of power from the national level to supranational and sub-national institutions. The CIS is a part of this global dynamics and cannot ignore the rules dictated by it (although the...