

***Facing Global Environmental Change: Environmental, Human, Energy, Food, Health and Water Security Concepts.* Edited by Hans Guenter Brauch, Ursula Oswald Spring et. al. (and Six Others). Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer, 2009. Softcover: 1,586pp.**

Roundtable Discussion 2010

Facing Global Environmental Change: Security in the 21st Century

Venue : Council Room, Chancellory Building, UKM

Monday, 28 June 2010: 10.00am-12.00noon

BOOK REVIEW

The focus on the ecological dimensions of security has most certainly gained momentum in the past two decades—a momentum and concern not disassociated from developments in the global political and strategic environment. Indeed, the Cold War (1947-1991) produced the tremendous effect of suppressing issues connected with environmental and human security, but instead according much heavier weightage to political security, i.e. the survival of the Nation-State. Does it follow then that the demise of Cold War thinking and bipolarity freed policy-makers, researchers, analysts and resources sponsored either by the State, business, or civil society towards a re-conceptualization of security in the age of expanding Globalization? Prof. Brauch mentions both these factors: Cold War demise and onset of Globalization as triggers for new thinking on Global Security. Does humanity need to be even more imaginative, more concerned, and more focused on its own destiny if for no other reason than survival of the human race under changing conditions? Are existing concepts of security adequate in taking a more holistic approach to human welfare and development, and in ensuring a healthy balance between nature and nurture so that our conception of what constitutes “security in the mind corresponds with what obtains on the ground? Are states, organizations, civil society and individuals representing the various intellectual disciplines collectively capable of restructuring national, regional and world order to cope with global environmental change? In short, this is the focus and mission of this massive edited volume of 1,586 pages containing 100 chapters – a research project that addresses key aspects of this

critical subject: environment, human, energy, food, health and water security. We are indeed privileged to have with us, two principal editors out of eight, i.e. Prof. Hans Guenter Brauch of the Free University of Berlin, and Prof. Ursula Oswald Spring of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

In reviewing this monumental work, although the contributions cover major continents and regions such as Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eurasia, and Latin America, given the time constraints, I can only focus on some of the more salient aspects of the research that also have direct relevance and application to our own region of Southeast Asia. However, before I comment on the chapter by Zarina Othman on Southeast Asia, let me make a few remarks about the conceptual framework and geographic coverage of this project. Chapter 4 by Hans Guenter Brauch in a very important sense, contextualizes the entire discourse on global environmental change. The critical question raised is “what” or “who” decides that environment has a security component and that it should be addressed politically? Evidently, the role of the State in “securitization” is crucial to the kind of attention and support that researchers can marshal in pursuit of what they consider to be empirical research. Pointedly, Brauch cites Ole Waever’s article, “The Changing Agenda of Societal Security” (2008), where Waever claims that what constitutes security is an open, empirical, political and historical question: who manages to securitize what under what conditions and how? And not least, what are the effects of this? How does the politics of a given issue change from being a normal political issue to becoming ascribed the urgency, priority and drama of ‘a matter of security’? (Brauch: 70). Indeed, Waever’s claim raises the relevance of the realist theory of international relations which privileges state actors in defining and promoting ‘national security’, and by extension, ‘regional and international security’.

Looking at the multitude of issues that can be so “securitized”, the edited volume brings within the purview of global environmental change (a) the relevance of knowledge systems to ecological security (Ch. 63 by P.S. Ramakrishnan, (b) the relationship between conflict and environment as in the Caucasus, discussed by Vicken Cheterian (Ch. 71), global health security and the role of international organization by Rodier and Kinhauser (Ch. 37), the politics of energy security in Central Asia by Gareth M. Winrow (Ch. 30), and the growing importance of water to the security discourse – a total of 18 chapters discussed under Part VII of this volume. On this score, the issue of water security definitely rings a bell – not only in the Middle East where Israel’s dire need for water security underscores its reluctance to return the occupied Golan Heights to Syria -- but also closer to home with respect to the Malaysia-Singapore relationship. In the latter case, the island republic’s search for security has hinged on the stability of water supply provided by Malaysia under two Water Agreements up until 2061. Of late, Singapore and Malaysia have tried to “desecuritize” water to smoothen often bumpy bilateral relations by focusing instead on political and economic cooperation, if need be, within the framework of ASEAN. This leads me to a brief discussion of Zarina Othaman’s chapter (Ch. 79) on “Human Security Concepts, Approaches and Debates in Southeast Asia”.

In Southeast Asia, the lead role taken by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on various issues pertaining to regional order, security and development, is highly indicative of the persisting primary role of the state as the referent point of security. Given the character of the international system which still privileges the Nation-State as the primary actor, it is difficult to conceive how any other group, organization or institution can effectively displace the State in providing this commodity called “security”. As Zarina rightly observes, ASEAN states still accord high priority to the internal dimensions of security, i.e. political, economic, and social security stemming from an agenda largely set by

the State. Thus, notions of comprehensive security, cooperative security and multilateral security disclose more a political flavour and approach to security. ‘Societal security’ is a relatively new recognition, let alone human or even gender security. Indeed, arguably there is even confusion over whether ‘comprehensive security’ sufficiently imports the notion of ‘human security’. Zarina pursues this point by quoting Acharya who distinguishes between comprehensive security as focusing on human needs, while human security focuses on human rights (p. 1044). In this scenario where do the people, i.e. society/individuals fit in: as a means to an end (comprehensive security) or as an end in itself (human security)? The record in Southeast Asia thus far clearly has evidenced a strong desire by the State to provide the meaning and content to security. Regionally, the preference is still for the “ASEAN Way”, or what we would call investment in ‘process regionalism’ to manage regional order, cooperation and integration. I would argue that because the structures of governance are still relatively weak especially in some members of ASEAN, and perhaps to a smaller or greater extent less open, the tendency of the State to be both introspective and paternalistic in its approach to security has hindered the development of the full potential of human security in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, as the chapter points out, some important beginnings have been made via regional and multilateral fora such as ASEAN and ARF to provide more space for government-civil society linkages to develop in furtherance of human security, i.e. finding the right balance between traditional and non-traditional security.

In conclusion, it needs to be said that this edited volume has undoubtedly raised many pertinent questions and critical issues that will shape the concept and practice of security in the decades ahead. The volume concludes with the realistic observation by Brauch and Oswald Spring that a sound knowledge-based approach to global environmental change, drawing from the numerous disciplines and specializations at our command, is the only viable option that humanity can pursue to avoid the calamities that have befallen us due to poor

preparation and collaboration. Globalization cuts both ways—it empowers some and disempowers others, as argued in the Indian case by Vandana Shiva in the Preface. It increases security for some and can increase insecurity for the many due to the varying and often disastrous impact it has on the human and natural environments. In short, we need to invest in preventive capacity building to cope with the multiple demands of environmental change including climate change which is now very much on cooperative agendas at the regional and global levels.

The message issuing from this research project which can trace its beginnings way back in 2004, is that we need to be constructive and anticipatory rather than reactionary in devising appropriate systems of survival, sustainable development and security to ensure that our global commons are managed on the basis of justice, equity and respect for both human and environmental security. In closing, I wish to commend the editors for this timely publication, and for their pioneering efforts in addressing the impact of global environmental change on international security in the 21st century.

Reviewed by:

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28 June 2010