

General Assembly 1 – International Security and Disarmament

The weaponization of natural
resources



Forum:	GA1 – International Security and Disarmament
Issue:	The weaponization of natural resources
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Introduction

When discussing the maintenance of global peace and security in the 21st, century, it is imperative that the immense role played by the weaponization of natural resources is taken into account. As global trends such as population growth, increasing consumption, and climate change persist, vital natural resources such as water, land, and ecosystems are increasingly placed under threat. Alarmingly, the valuable and all the more vulnerable status of such natural resources is what has allowed often their mere presence to be a source of conflict, causing exploitation to spike. The weaponization of natural resources comes in many different forms, ranging from the withholding of water from one state by another to civic conflict over abundant minerals. However, it must be noted that no matter which form the weaponization of natural resources may come in, its effects are always disastrous. Those who suffer at the hands of this type of weaponization often face political power-plays, increased violence, forced labour, economic hardship, and poor health. In addition, the importance of preserving the natural environment must not be forgotten, the weaponization of resources often resulting in devastating damage. Complex solutions must be created in order to ensure the safe and ethical uses of natural resources that will work to prevent future conflict.

Definition of Key Terms

Natural resource

Materials or substances such as minerals, forests, water, and fertile land that can occur in nature and can be used for economic gain

Weaponization

The act of converting a material into a weapon; adapting its use so that it may act as a weapon



Exploitation

The action of making use of resources to gain an unfair advantage for oneself

Ecosystem

A biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment

Weapon

A means of inflicting bodily harm, physical damage, and gaining an advantage or defending oneself in a conflict

General Overview

The weaponization of natural resources is one of the most pertinent issues in combatting threats to global peace and security in the 21st century. As we look around at the state of our planet today, it is becoming increasingly clear that modern warfare takes just as much of a toll on its ecosystems as its human populations. This is especially the case in situations where natural resources are deliberately used to move further in a conflict. According to former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, “since 1990, at least 18 violent conflicts have been fuelled by the exploitation of natural resources such as timber, minerals, oil and gas”, such as those in the DRC along with many other African nations. Conflicts perpetuated by the weaponization of natural resources come in several different forms, either characterized by a scarcity of the resource being weaponized or an abundance.

The scarcity of natural resources has contributed to the weaponization of natural resources on several occasions and can be expected to continue to do so as population growth, increasing consumption, and climate change continue to threaten the abundance of certain resources. In cases of scarcity, the resource acts as a weapon that both benefits its user and directly harms those on the other side of the conflict. For example, militant groups such as ISIL in Iraq have consistently responded to severe drought by limiting water access for the state’s capital city and other large cities. Seeing as water is a vital natural resource without which society cannot function, these militant groups who act as threats to global security are able to gain control over populations and governments. The water problem is only expected to grow considering that its scarcity is only expected to increase. This is concerning, considering that water, flowing in rivers across many separate countries, is becoming more and more of an effective weapon in war. However, with concrete multilateral agreements, such as several that have been noted to work in the Middle East, the water problem in terms of weaponization is



compatible. One example of such an agreement is that between Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories to build a Red Sea-Dead Sea water project in 2013.

Natural resource conflict may also arise in response to an abundance of natural resources. Oftentimes, countries with large reserves of resources face constant conflict, weakening what are oftentimes already poor administrative frameworks within their governments. In theory, an abundance of natural resources should provide a country with economic opportunity and thus its political stability. However, competing countries almost always envy their fortunate competitors, resulting in frequent accounts of armed territorial struggle, forced labor, and sexual violence. In addition, countries who possess large amounts of resources such as diamonds and other highly valuable materials often experience exploitation by members of their own government, elitists using resources to become richer and fund personal armies that cement their control. Many African countries have become credited with facing this problem and are in the midst of horrific civil wars as a result. Not all nations that are abundant in a natural resource, however, face great instability, and thus it is important that each nation is analysed individually in order to combat internal weaponization of natural resources.

The effects of the weaponization of natural resources on not only humankind but our planet's ecosystems are far-reaching. When natural resources become a source of conflict between conflicting states or groups, senseless acts of environmental destruction may take place, only increasing the chances of further conflict. Increasingly, we see deliberate environmental destruction take place which are designed to harm enemy populations and armies.

Major Parties Involved

Iraq

In Iraq, militant groups such as ISIL have been known to exploit the country's already problematic water scarcity issues by limiting water flow to the state's capital city of Baghdad. As water is a vital resource for human survival, these actions have been a means through which dangerous militant groups have come to control city populations and entire governments through the construction of large dams blocking water flow. It is also in Iraq that ISIL threatens citizen usage of electricity with their attempts to take over major dams. As the Iraqi droughts only increase, conditions are only expected to worsen and stability will most likely continue to decline.



The Democratic Republic of Congo

In the DRC, more than 800,000 people have been displaced as a result of ongoing conflict surrounding minerals used in the manufacturing of technology products such as mobile phones, tablets, and gaming consoles. Unfortunately, this abundance of bountiful minerals does not benefit regular citizens of the country, but rather results in the denial of the expected peace, stability, and prosperity thanks to illegal mining which depends on armed violence. Armed militias have been known to seize control of diamond mines, and force workers into what is essentially slavery. Enslaved miners are often overworked and their conditions can be fatal. Similar but smaller-scale conflicts, concerning materials such as oil, diamonds, and other strategically important minerals have erupted in other African nations, such as Sierra Leone, Congo, and Liberia. Ethnic divisions within a country have been thought to largely contribute to such conflicts, conflicting groups inciting conflict between each other by gaining control of natural resources. It must also be noted that the resulting boycott on minerals from the DRC has resulted in the country becoming one of the poorest countries in the world, and is thus perhaps not the right way of dealing with this complex issue.

China

The ongoing conflict over territory in the South China Sea between China and other states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Brunei has resulted in large increases of military activity in the region, keeping tension levels high for extended periods of time. The tension between these countries can be greatly attributed to the fact that with territory, comes resources. Regarding the South China Sea specifically, 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas are estimated to lie within its waters. The fight to control these natural resources has not only resulted in illegal activity in which these resources are then used. Weaponization has more concerningly come in the form of China's addition of sand onto already existing reefs to increase the size of islands as well as create new islands. This has allowed them to gain the upper hand in the conflict by far, constructing ports, military installations, and airstrips especially in the Paracel and Spratly islands. The conflict in the South China Sea profoundly illustrates the most prominent concerning aspects of the weaponization of natural resources, including the destruction of ecosystems, military violence, and the failure of governments to resolve conflicts taking diplomatic measures.

Timeline of Key Events

Timeline of events in reverse chronological order leading up to present day.



Date	Description of Event
2018	South Sudan's ongoing struggle to achieve peace and stability is worsened by competition between pastoralists and farmers for pasture, water, fuel, wood, and farmland.
2016	Famine breaks out in Yemen, after Saudi Arabia, backed by the United States, enforces a blockade on Yemen to defeat a Shia rebel group known as the Houthis, causing what has become one of the largest man-made famines in the last 100 years.
2015	China begins to pump sand onto disputed reefs in the South China Sea in order to enlarge existing islands as well as create new islands.
2012	The illegal mining of materials, particularly gold in the DRC increases after corrupt army generals seize control of mines and cause trends of enslavement and sexual violence to grow.
21 January 1991	Large quantities of oil began to spill into the Persian Gulf after Iraqi forces opened oil valves of what is known as the Sea Islands pipeline, releasing oil from several tankers during the Persian Gulf Wars. This is known to be one of the largest man-made oil spills in history.
8 September 1941-27 January 1944	The siege of Leningrad takes place. German and Finnish armed forces carry out a 900-day siege on the city of Leningrad during WWII. The blockade these forces placed on the cities population resulted in the death of 650,000 Leningraders due to starvation, disease, and shelling. A primary cause for these issues was the weaponization of natural resources, such as fuel.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

It was in November of 2012 that natural resources were finally recognized as a hinderance to global peace and stability, resulting in the launching of the UN stabilization mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

One way in which the issue of the weaponization of natural resources has been attempted to be solved was through the 2008 partnership created between the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) which aimed to build capacities for land, natural resources, and conflict prevention. The means through which the partnership planned to do so was to



enable a project that focused heavily on national stakeholders as well as the EU and UN in ensuring land and natural resources were not causes of violent conflict. This partnership also aimed to develop clear guidelines that can be followed by countries who face an abundance of natural resources and consequent economic success. These guidelines focused specifically on land and conflict, extractives and conflict, renewable resources and conflict, and capacity building for natural resource management and conflict prevention. A final important aspect of this project is the involvement of the United Nations Interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action, which acts as its manager, bringing together several UN agencies and departments to better natural resource management specifically for conflict prevention.

Multilateral agreements have also been used to solve conflicts that have arisen due to the weaponization of natural resources. Although regional cooperation is not often encountered in the middle east, there have been instances in which water projects have been created. One such example is that created by Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian authority in 2013 designed to benefit all three parties. This project addressed multiple aspects of the problems these countries were facing with one another, such as the shortage of fresh and clean water suitable for drinking in the bodies of water flowing across borders and the contraction of the Dead Sea. In order to put an end to the weaponization of natural resources in which countries will hoard scarce resources such as clean water for themselves, the countries arranged for the construction of a desalination plant in Aqaba, Jordan, which would convert salt water from the Red Sea into fresh water for the use of all three nations involved. In addition, Israel will then supply Jordan with an equal amount of water (8 billion to 13 billion gallons) per year from the Sea of Galilee.

Another way in which progress has been made in combatting the weaponization of natural resource was through the development of online interactive modules, to allow for the transfer of knowledge between field staff in the UN and EU and relevant HQ personnel in involved countries. The online programme initially aims to create understanding of the link between natural resources and conflict. The second module centres specifically around land conflict, whereas the third and fourth programmes then focus on the involvement extractives and renewable resources in conflict respectively. Thus, it is evident that not enough has been done in terms of concrete actions within countries to stop the weaponization of natural resources, but that the initial necessary steps have been taken to ensure raised awareness about the issue so that the necessary steps can be taken.

Possible Solutions

The role of mediation as a crucial means through which natural resource conflict can be prevented has become increasingly recognized by the United Nations. It is absolutely vital that



conflicting states or groups whose conflicts concern the weaponization of natural resources are not left to solve these issues themselves, especially considering that countries suffering from this issue often lack stable governmental structures. Measures must be taken to establish mediation professionals with sound practices and concrete strategies for using mediation in resolving conflicts surrounding land and natural resources.

Diplomacy is going to be extremely crucial in combatting each unique instance of the weaponization of natural resources. For example, in Yemen, putting an end to conflict is perhaps the only thing that will stop their weaponization of natural resources, considering that the weaponization in such a situation cannot be halted in isolation. In addition, in such a conflict, it is the man-made famine that is causing the most human suffering and is a prominent weapon used by those in conflict. Military operations in conflicts such as that in Yemen must be paused, and measures must be taken to ensure negotiations to end the conflict. The groundwork for peace talks must be laid including concrete details on location, etc. Aside from this, the terms of ceasefire must be decided as well as how the country and natural resources will be rebuilt and replenished once the conflict has been resolved.

An aspect of many conflicts revolving around the weaponization of natural resources is the lack of legislation in developing countries concerning how natural resources must be extracted and used. Clear and concrete measures must be taken to promote law-making in these countries that specifies who resources belong to, those who are allowed to handle them, and strict regulations for how they must be handled. It would also potentially be of great benefit to focus on means through which corporations can be established to provide people in developing countries with steady jobs handling natural resources, pushing illegal activity in especially the mining of valuable minerals in nations such as the DRC to the side. Finally, in line with these other actions, improvements of infrastructure could allow for the safe handling of natural resources, and make it increasingly difficult for control to be easily diverted into the hands of those wishing to weaponize natural resources for their own personal gain. A crucial aspect of legislation regarding the use of natural resources in any country would be the monitoring of a resource's supply chain, ensuring all stages of its use are ethical both in terms of human treatment and that of the environment.

Another way in which we can combat the issue of the weaponization of natural resources is to increase the process of moving away from using unrenowable resources such as oil to fuel our ways of life. Thus, care must be taken to ensure the development of new energy technologies is getting the resources and the funds that it needs to be successful. Currently, no countries are willing to sacrifice the economic necessities needed to do so, but if measures can



be taken to ensure partnerships and deals to make this happen, the results will contribute to the end of a lot of human suffering and environmental destruction.

It stands to reason that measures must also be taken to ensure the weaponization of natural resources as well as the effects it can have on human populations and the environment must have direct consequences. The issue of countries who limit civilian access in other states to natural resources should not be left unaddressed on the global stage. In addition, such actions as well as any forms of weaponization of natural resources should be criminalized within all states, perhaps involving prison sentences, large fines, and any other measures deemed viable and useful in solving the issue. In order for those who violently exploit natural resources and cause harm to both humans and the environment to be successfully stopped however, measures must also be taken to improve law enforcement in developing countries.

There is no doubt that oftentimes the weaponization of natural resources especially within a country is the result of economic disparity and the desperate situations in which those suffering find themselves. Thus, to indirectly combat the issue, it is imperative that measures are taken to increase economic opportunities that cause minimal harm to the environment. In addition, considering that environmental preservation is of higher importance than ever, perhaps jobs could be created that focus on conserving natural resources, these opportunities acting as rehabilitation for those who previously were forced to count on their exploitation.

Finally, although it can be argued such measures would be of little importance to those who wish to exploit natural resources for personal gain, education is never an incorrect response to a complex problem such as the weaponization of natural resources.

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