COMMENTARY

Using Trusted Intermediaries to Communicate Environmental Issues Across Security Forces

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ABSTRACT

Militaries generate globally significant climate and biocapacity damage in both peacetime and wartime. This scenario is historically underpinned by organisational and socio-psychological barriers, resulting in military strategies that cancel out the gains borne of ongoing investments in energy efficient technologies. Yet, there are promising signs of a shift across various armed forces, with military personnel seeking greater knowledge and action on today’s converging environmental crises. Targeted education represents a potentially significant pathway for supporting security personnel to drive evidence-based mitigation and adaptation initiatives leading to significant environmental gains. As this commentary highlights, the ability for experts across different disciplines and sectors to contribute to this process is becoming easier, due to a growing number of trusted intermediaries working to drive greater environmental awareness across the security sector.

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Introduction

The contemporary role of the environmental scholar can be unforgiving. On the one hand, academics face organisational pressures in an increasingly competitive Higher Education landscape to publish and provide evidence to support policymaking. On the other, they face socio-cultural and psychological pressures to engage in active environmental advocacy in the combative sphere of public discourse (Rapley & De Meyer, 2014). For environmental scholars and scientists seeking to catalyse significant reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and bio-diversity loss, however, there exists a less well-trodden path than running the gauntlet of public debate: specifically, helping to inform and drive security sector reform.

The military environmental challenge

Put simply, militaries generate significant damage to the climate and biocapacity in peacetime and wartime (Gould, 2007). Studies have demonstrated that there exists a bi-directional causal link between military expenditure and GHG emissions (Bildirici, 2018). The US Department of Defense alone constitutes the largest institutional producer – of any kind, sector or domain – of GHGs worldwide (Crawford, 2019). Supporting decarbonisation of the US DoD would have the same impact as decarbonising an entire country akin to Peru or Portugal.

Increasing institutional awareness of the threats posed by global heating and biocapacity loss has led to a growth in research, investment and policy across Western militaries to reduce their
environmental impact, particularly through the development of energy efficient technologies (Light, 2014). The environmental gains borne of this shift, however, are being negated by operational path-dependencies on fossil fuels and the use of climate change as a rationale for expanding military activities and international military deployments, over more far-reaching “green” or “lean” policies and strategies (Belcher et al., 2019; Brzoska, 2015). Maintaining this approach generates manifold risks, including increased ecological degradation, securitisation and competition for natural resources, and economic inequity between developed and less-developed nations (Jorgenson & Clark, 2009).

This paradoxical approach has historically been underpinned by a policy and mindset of “environmental exceptionalism” across senior politico-military officials (Light, 2014). Specifically, this is the perception that the socio-political importance of security and the traditionally kinetic nature of conflict exempts the military from being beholden to environmental goals. Alongside this historical predisposition, there exist other barriers to achieving rapid or far-reaching organisational change, such as flawed policy development processes (Meiser, 2017), a tendency towards budgetary protectionism, over-optimistic, short-termist and incremental approaches to change (Cornish & Dorman, 2011), and significant variations in beliefs and threat perceptions surrounding climate change (Motta et al., 2021).

An emerging environmentalist paradigm?

Nevertheless, there are signs of a potential change or tipping point in military policy, culture and psychology. Net-zero targets are being progressively integrated into policies across various military forces. Such targets do not, of course, guarantee that these militaries are implementing sustainability initiatives at a sufficient scale or pace. What is promising, however, is that, beyond the external messaging and conceptual targets, there appears to be an internal shift in the perspectives of military personnel. This includes a perceivable groundswell of intermediate- and junior-level officers and soldiers with a personal desire to contribute in more positive and significant ways to mitigating the climate crisis rather than simply responding to its repercussions.

One place in which this shift is most visible is in the educational institutions of military forces. Over the last half decade, formal and informal discussions, presentations and essay submissions from officers attending various military colleges appear to include a more significant emphasis on prospects for military sustainability, and on climate change and biocapacity loss as key security and international relations challenges. Informal discussions can also lead to criticisms regarding what military personnel see as a deficit of institutional commitment, leadership, transparency and policy, as well as a lack of suitable organisational support and incentives for those seeking to drive environmental or sustainability initiatives within their respective departments and services. This cultural shift is likely influenced by growing coverage of environmental issues in public discourse and broadcast media, heightening the existing level of concern felt by military personnel regarding the threats posed by climate change (Motta et al., 2021).

Military education for environmental communications

Using military educational institutions as conduits to communicate a progressive and evidence-based understanding of climate and biocapacity issues represents a promising pathway to help drive environmental initiatives across a wide range of security forces. Military education has been shown to significantly influence the values and attitudes of security officials and to create social networks that help shape major policy and strategic decisions (Atkinson, 2014; Cope, 1995). This prospect is not without risks or limitations. Military officials tend to be more politically conservative than the wider public (Motta et al., 2021). Some may also feel a sense of conflict or dichotomy between the collective goal of achieving climate security and a perceived professional imperative to maintain the status quo and organisational culture to which they belong (Kahan et al., 2012).
Indeed, gaining greater scientific insight could enable highly sceptical military personnel to more effectively use “motivated political reasoning” to challenge or securitize mitigation and adaptation initiatives and policies (Kraft et al., 2015). Given the benefits of reform, however, it can be strongly argued that such risks are less costly than the price of inaction.

Implementing effective educational programs, however, requires a notable shift in environmental communications methods within such institutions. Across a significant proportion of military colleges and academies there exists a deficit of educational programs on climate and biocapacity issues (Hill, 2021), with more progressive institutions still broadly delivering content through isolated and sporadic lectures or case study assignments, elective modules and dissertation topics, or the teaching of theories that include an environmental perspective as one of multiple lenses through which security threats may be evaluated. This stands in contrast to the relatively high level of focus placed on threats that present lower levels of risk in terms of scale, proximity and/or likelihood (whether in terms of international, national or human security).

Unsurprisingly, these existing educational methods do not generally provide sufficient depth or breadth of perspective to shift the beliefs of personnel with sceptical or identity-protective responses to environmental and climate issues. Nor do they provide sympathetic personnel with the information needed to propose and implement holistic solutions to issues relating to climate and resource conflict, military sustainability and environmental ethics. Indeed, even in discussions with sympathetic personnel there can arise ambiguously securitised or one-dimensional perspectives on the prospective role of the military in enhancing environmental gains and engaging with non-traditional security challenges such as migration, weather extremes, local resilience building, illegal deforestation or the protection of endangered species and habitats.

Given these contexts, the provision of persuasive and nuanced insights to inform and influence these different systems of thought requires more than the simple creation of additional curricular content on the security implications of climate change and biocapacity loss. Instead, it necessitates the collation and delivery of different forms of evidence, narratives, discussions and lived experiences, as well as iterative evaluations of the impact of different educational interventions. This process should not be solely left to those in the sphere of security studies but must be built around genuine diversity of perspective, bringing to bear insights from scholars across different disciplines as well as officials and stakeholders with alternative or unique viewpoints and lived experiences (e.g. due to varying gender, age, cultural or socio-economic contexts, and differing exposure to climate threats).

Such diversity is not only important in ensuring a balanced and holistic perspective but also speaks directly to the educational preferences of military personnel. Indeed, recent research by the author of the present article demonstrates that students of military colleges show a clear predilection for diversity of perspective, particularly when this is delivered by experts with practical experience in their subject, who are esteemed within their respective communities and are capable of providing relevant and timely information that can inform useable outputs (Jalili, 2020). The process of increasing access to these perspectives could take multiple forms, from the delivery of guest lectures and participation in seminar discussions, student incubators, red teaming or “wargaming” activities, and interviews for research projects, through to the provision of advice on curricular development or physical tours of key infrastructural, environmental or conflict sites for field trips and exchanges. The broad variety of potential educational inputs provides opportunities for a wide range of stakeholders – from environmental scholars through to experts from NGOs, charities, advocacy and community groups – to inform the perspectives and policy priorities of security leaders on an ad hoc or flexible basis.

**New opportunities and trusted intermediaries**

To a degree, the ability for external experts to inform such processes has existed for quite some time. The integration of academia within military education has been steadily increasing over the course of the last century, ranging from recruitment of civilian scholars as in-house faculty through to
contracts with universities to deliver curricular development, teaching, assessment and accreditation. This means that there exist a wide number of scholars working as trusted educational providers in various military institutions worldwide, who are receptive to acting as conduits for new insights and research from across the wider academic community. Only relatively recently, however, have such communities started to develop greater outreach and pathways for external experts to influence the ways in which climate and biocapacity issues are communicated to security personnel.

Two examples of this are the Environmental Security Research Group (ESRG) at King’s College London and the Hacking for Sustainability programme of the Common Mission Project. These groups provide a forum for officials from multiple fields and organisations to collaborate with security studies experts engaged in the design, implementation and delivery of educational courses for the UK Ministry of Defence (UK MoD). This enables environmental scholars and practitioners to inform and influence the knowledge and perspectives of UK and international officers across the intermediate, advanced and executive-levels of various military hierarchies, as well as directly helping to validate and solve UK MoD sustainability problems. The opportunities that such collaboration enables are manifest. Most obviously, it can help to shape the nuance and breadth of educational content and create new prospects for subject-specific collaboration and mentoring. Furthermore, it can provide pathways that could enable new research findings to generate real-time organisational impact outside of cyclical policy review processes. Such pathways can also help with the development of trust-based relationships between military officials and environmental stakeholders outside of the security sector.

In addition to engaging with trusted intermediaries within military colleges, there are increasing opportunities to communicate environmental research and insights across the security sector more broadly, via the rapidly growing community of retired military and civilian security officials who are seeking to use their influence, knowledge and status to catalyse greater focus and action on climate change across the sector. Most prominent amongst these are the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change (GMACCC), the International Military Council on Climate and Security (IMCCS) and the Center for Climate & Security (CCS). Underpinning the impact of these organisations is the capacity for senior retired officials to use their privileged status and networks within their respective armed forces and wider intergovernmental organisations to create or access targeted, high-level public-private policy development processes, to identify and redress gaps in organisational knowledge and generate policy debate through new research, reports and think-pieces, and to serve as a trusted source for collating and distributing wider studies or documentation from governmental, non-governmental and academic organisations. Such organisations are complemented by wider consultancy and research organisations with strong historical links and access across the security community and significant environmental security research, policy and project-based initiatives, such as the Wilson Center, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Adelphi group.

Access to military forces is further bolstered by the growth of collaborative networks and research groups internal to or funded by defence organisations themselves, such as the Defence Green Network in the UK Ministry of Defence, the Observatoire Défense et Climat of the Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS) financed by the French Ministry of Defence, or the Military Green program within the European Defence Agency. Such groups can help to enhance the level of insight that defence organisations have on important new perspectives, knowledge and capabilities, by bringing together technical experts alongside senior security representatives with unique organisational access and influence. This can generate opportunities for external experts to understand and support solutions to key activities, programs or dilemmas facing military organisations. Engaging with these institutions could also feed into a multiplier effect for global mitigation and adaptation, as military officials express increasing interest in using climate and biocapacity security as unifying goals through which to enhance military-to-military diplomacy, collaboration and crisis management. Most importantly, these types of collaborative groups are increasing in size.
and number. Existing research departments across various military forces, for example, are showing heightened interest in collaborating with experts on environmental issues, and various plans are emerging for new organisations that could potentially aid with inter-service or inter-agency research and collaboration, such as the emergent proposal for a NATO Centre of Excellence on Climate Security (ISMS, 2021).

Epilogue

There are, of course, important arguments to be made regarding the potential for greenwashing across different security forces. There are also cogent concerns that legitimating security forces as key climate actors could lead to increased securitisation of the climate agenda. In turn, this could heighten the potential for divisive political rhetoric on issues such as migration, as well as problematic environmental strategies such as the hyper-militarisation of conservation activities, or the de-prioritisation of natural solutions and deep reductions in GHG emissions in favor of less stable and scalable geoengineering approaches (including carbon dioxide removal technologies and stratospheric aerosol injection). On the other hand, by positively contributing to public debate, military officials can significantly encourage the wider public – particularly climate sceptics – to embrace efforts to combat climate change (Motta et al., 2021).

Indeed, whilst it is fair to say that militaries can be monolithic and traditionalist institutions with a historical mindset of environmental exceptionalism, what is also true is that, like so many organisations, they contain significant numbers of hard-working individuals who wish to contribute to limiting the effects of converging environmental crises, but who do not feel that they possess the time or knowledge to achieve this. In better communicating the scale and nuances of climate change and biocapacity loss and their repercussions, as well as the potential opportunities and limitations for security forces to help manage, mitigate and adapt to these repercussions, environmental scholars, scientists and practitioners can influence organisational reforms that could make significant, positive contributions to the converging crises we face.

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I am the sole author of this piece and am personally accountable for all of its content.

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