

THE IMPLICATIONS OF GLOBAL CLIMATIC CHANGES FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

PETER H. GLEICK

Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, 1681 Shattuck Avenue, Suite H, Berkeley CA 94709, U.S.A.

Abstract. Global climatic changes caused by growing concentrations of atmospheric trace gases have the potential to alter international relationships, economies, behavior, and security. While there is debate about the extent to which environmental problems alone can lead to conflict, it is widely acknowledged that resource constraints can act as roots leading to economic pressures and tensions, or as triggers to conflict when other pressures and tensions exist between states. Recent widespread attention to the issue of global environmental problems, particularly climatic change, is leading to a re-examination and expansion of the traditional narrow definition of "international security". This paper discusses likely paths to international frictions and tensions and the responses that might be most appropriate to minimize the adverse consequences of climatic change for international security.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been growing concern over the international implications of large-scale environmental problems. Recently, this attention has focused on the possibility of major climatic changes caused by growing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and other trace gases. Given the extent and severity of the possible climatic changes, we must begin to ask how such changes will affect international relationships, economics, behavior, and security.** There is debate about the extent to which resource constraints or environmental problems *alone* can lead to conflict, but it is widely acknowledged that resources can act as roots leading to economic pressures and tensions or as triggers to conflict when other pressures and tensions exist between states. This paper discusses the most likely paths for such effects and what responses might be appropriate to minimize the adverse consequences for international stability and tensions.

* This work was supported by a fellowship in International Peace and Security Studies from the Social Science Research Council/MacArthur Foundation Fellows Program. The author is presently the director of the Environment Program at the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security in Berkeley, California.

** Threats to security can be defined to include actions that (1) threaten to drastically and quickly degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state, or (2) threaten to significantly narrow the range of policy choices available to governments or non-governmental entities (Ullman, 1983). Climatic changes that lead to the deterioration of environmental quality or limit access to resources fall into both categories.

