



ARMENIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL DIPLOMACY: UTILIZING INSTITUTIONAL PRECONDITIONS

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Abstract

Environmental security does not recognize political borders. Despite the will of the neighboring countries, common environmental threats exist and require careful assessment and joint efforts to reduce and eliminate them. During many natural and techno gene disasters, as well as pandemics and other trends, as indicated in the works of many international experts, countries face similar challenges. As can be noticed from recent developments, common environmental threats often compel us to deal even with parties involved in armed conflicts. The significance of discussing risks and ways of unofficially reducing them is emphasized, along with the need to invite impartial professionals in environmental security with a calm demeanor on both sides. It is also significant to count on issues of common interest in which technical cooperation is possible with the help of international structures and flexible approaches, as well as a technically well-structured agenda for the environment followed by monitoring political events to shape dialogue in a relevant and developmental context. In addition, financing cross-border cooperation needs external support.

Keywords: *Cross-border cooperation. Environmental diplomacy. Common threats. International organizations. Political interests.*

1 INTRODUCTION

From the point of view of security and sustainable development in the region, there is perhaps no more natural contributing factor than the "forced" cooperation between neighboring states aimed at reducing and neutralizing common environmental threats. This factor itself cannot contribute to any positive process if there is no awareness of it. Neighboring states often deliberately ignore the

general nature of environmental threats until the damage they suffer dominates conflicts motivated by economic and political interests (Libecap, 2014). Therefore, diplomacy, particularly environmental diplomacy, has a significant role in this issue. The pollution of the air basin, the violation of the ecological balance formed around rivers and them, the turbidity of drinking water sources, the fires of forests and mines, and other phenomena are not exceptions in the case of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and neighboring countries. It is not a secret that the drinking water is causing irreparable brain damage. Those threats continue

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even today when the necessary steps are not taken to ensure environmental security in the region in a bilateral and multilateral format.

2 METHODOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Although the practice of environmental diplomacy has existed for a long time, its place in the international arena has only recently been recognized. COVID-19 was another lesson for the nations to deal with each other to reduce common threats (Halabowski & Rzymiski, 2021). Already in the 14th century, European powers demonstrated international efforts to protect the environment when they agreed to conclude agreements on the fishing resources regulation. In the following centuries, environmental diplomacy acquired a multilateral dimension, culminating in the first multilateral Stockholm Summit organization in 1972 to address environmental issues (Ali & Vladich, 2016) (Orsini, 2020). As a result, the United Nations created the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Besides this, the summit defined the issue of the environment as an international issue. During this period, the term “environmental diplomacy” and its content were formalized and popularized (Ali & Vladich, 2016). In 1992, two decades after its establishment, the UNEP Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This summit included broader themes, issues, and actors in the further development of environmental diplomacy (Ali & Vladich, 2016). The Earth Summit also popularized multilateral agreements to address and manage regional and global environmental issues (Dorsey, 2014).

As for the concept of environmental diplomacy, it has changed over time.

Subject-wise, environmental diplomacy is theoretically exclusively concerned with environmental issues (O'Neill, 2017), but in practice, it addresses cross-cutting issues related to topics such as intellectual property, health, security, trade, and energy, among others (Orsini, 2020).

Environmental diplomacy usually leads to the signing of agreements at different levels (bilateral, multilateral, and global) to ensure the fulfillment of agreed obligations (Li, Zakari, & Tawiah, 2020). Considering UNEP data, Susskind and Ali (2014) and Li, Zakari, and Tawiah (2020) noted that there

are more than five hundred internationally recognized agreements related to the environment.

3 ANALYSIS

In the post-pandemic world, environmental diplomacy gained vital importance at the international level. In September 2020, world leaders identified environmental protection as a central theme for post-pandemic recovery (Gopinath, 2020). Moreover, environmental diplomacy has created opportunities to connect environmental protection and peacebuilding. In this regard, it should be Armenia's goal that UNEP uses its relatively apolitical and neutral position and scientific foundations to promote discussion and/or cooperation on environmental issues among conflicting or former conflicting groups in our region. That applies not only to Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also to Georgia, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Environmental diplomacy can apply the concept of using natural resources and environmental issues as a platform for cooperation, dialogue, and trust building. On the other hand, Armenia's environmental diplomacy should aim to transform the conflict over resources into a basis for sustainable cooperation, with the goal that sustainable governance can create the basis for long-term stability and peace. At the same time, we must consider international learning experiences and lessons and encounter obstacles. The David Jensen and Denis Hamro-Drotz studies (2012) provide the basis for helpful conclusions that we can localize with examples from our region. In particular, lessons learned from environmental diplomacy between Israel and Palestine before the 2023 armed conflict may include the following:

- Common environmental threats can be a source of cooperation even between hostile parties.
- Diplomacy should be quiet, without advertising successes, to achieve success.
- Such negotiations require devoted, experienced individuals with strong environmental and political skills and diplomatic tact. Former parliamentarians and former ministers of the environment are the best, provided that their candidacies are seen as neutral and credible factors on both sides.

- Finding practical solutions requires ingenuity to find issues of common interest where technical cooperation is possible and where there is an understanding of the importance and implications of any minor problem.
- High-level politics can always prevent moving forward. New attempts are unavoidable when discussions fail due to other political factors. It takes a lot of time.
- There is a need and utility for UNDP to provide high-quality technical information that allows both sides to understand the nature of the problem.

Equally helpful has been environmental diplomacy between Iran and Afghanistan, the lessons of which may include the following:

- Environmental diplomacy is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and resource-intensive. It is a long-term investment that must be well planned and financed from the outset while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to demand-driven needs and changes in the negotiation trajectory.
- A strong technical understanding of the environmental problem and its history is vital; UNEP's independent expert report served as an excellent source of objective information that helped eliminate political arguments and could not be disputed on technical grounds, "level the playing field" and reduce information asymmetries.
- Monitoring political developments is necessary to shape the dialogue in a relevant and developing context. Identifying policy opportunities and correctly timing interventions is crucial.
- The availability of potential funding for a cross-border management project is a powerful incentive to maintain the interests of both parties.

Examples of environmental diplomacy of Armenia's neighboring country are not limited to this. The settlement of problems between Iran and Iraq is also instructive. Lessons learned from this example include:

- In our region, where tensions over resources are high, it is important to support dialogue and basic communication before touching on sensitive political issues. In the beginning stage, the objectives should be limited, and

the potential political outcomes kept open. It is not necessary to raise the expectations of political agreement. At the beginning of the Iraq-Iran dialogue, although the parties were not prepared to discuss specific issues in the marshes, they could discuss general water management principles. After an initial exchange of views on best practices, the process led to the exchange of technical information on wetlands. Both sides agreed on the importance of the meeting and requested additional assistance from UNEP.

- It is significant to ensure, as far as possible, that the parties present the same level of information at the initial stages of the dialogue. In the case of the marshes, the Iranian delegation presented its long-term vision, including plans to build a dam and reservoir.
- Water is a topic of great political interest. Water issues can be linked to agriculture and food security (International Panel, 2017) and other political topics like, i.e., energy. Other ministries may also be interested in technical dialogues. This Marshland's proposal attracted the attention of other ministries, including the Foreign Office. That gave the whole process a higher profile overall, more media coverage, and could lead to political issues that might not have existed had the technical and narrower focus been maintained.

Finally, a significant experience of environmental diplomacy has been gained in the relations between North and South Sudan. This intervention gives us several lessons:

- As in most other cases discussed in this paper, the main purpose of the initial meeting was to bring the two groups together without specifying specific technical goals and objectives. The agenda was essentially open to participants. Most of those involved had never met, and communication between the North and the South Sudan environmental ministries essentially was non-existent. The initial goal was to exchange information and build trust between the parties. At the second meeting, when the environment ministers presented themselves, the aim was to facilitate the process by allowing the participants to suggest the content.

- Using the PCEA as an entry point for initial engagement between the parties is a useful tool. This approach ensures the inclusion of local knowledge, facilitates local involvement and ownership, and helps identify any key political tensions. This can help the peace process to identify threats to peace over natural resources, as well as pave the way for inter-agency cooperation.
- Public ownership is essential to maintain and monitor the momentum of the process. However, when stakeholder consultations are held in the context of the PCEA, it is significant to consider that the final report must be an independent product of UNEP and that UNEP must verify all facts against objective sources of information. The report was disseminated to stakeholders immediately after the launch to ensure fast-tracking.

How important is all this for Armenia? After all, every country and region has its characteristics, and what makes it hard to evaluate these cases and reach general conclusions are their big differences. However, water and air pollution, reduction of forest area, soil salinization and degradation, landscape changes, threats to biodiversity, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change are still present in Armenia and the mentioned countries. Moreover, during the last 44-day war, huge damage was done to the nature, natural resources, and environment of both Artsakh and Armenia. It can be considered a part of the war of resources and natural resources worldwide. That proved the 44-day and other "one-day wars" provoked by neighboring Azerbaijan, which also had the goal of taking natural resources, water resources, hydropower plants, and mineral resources. The neighboring country has captured the very areas that are water catchment basins, mines, and forest areas, and by losing all that, the country loses its vitality. After the 44-day war, Artsakh's capital was water-deprived. The Shikahoghi reserve, with almost all of Stepanakret's water supply, was under the control of Azerbaijan. Even before the war ended, on October 26, 2020, when the Zangelan region was still under Armenia's control, and it was not clear how the war would end, the Ministry of Environment of Azerbaijan signed an agreement and announced a tender, and the winner of that tender was the Anglo-Asian corporation.

Azerbaijan signed an agreement with the same organization with several mines in the territory of Artsakh (including the Kasheni mine). Therefore, environmental diplomacy also aims to preserve and develop the existing natural resources to ensure the country's economic independence and security. As for the possible localization of the learning experience of different countries studied, in general, the following can be considered.

First, environmental diplomacy in our case is almost impossible to imagine without bona fide mediators, an international organization, or a neutral country. In addition, it is significant for such mediation negotiations to consider what already exists. All cultures, societies, or nations have mechanisms for creating dialogue between groups and mediating disputes. Where they have experienced conflict, local and traditional processes and institutions for consensus building and dispute resolution can create many opportunities for environmental diplomacy. At the same time, if these mechanisms lack political legitimacy, it may require a new alternative process. National ownership and acceptance of the process is vital. The level of political commitment among the parties involved in implementing the agreed measures and translating them into concrete results is a critical success factor. Capacity building for environmental diplomacy interventions is particularly necessary in situations where one party is weaker than the other, capacity building should be phased so that initial efforts focus on building the technical and institutional capacity of the weaker party. A neutral third party, whether a local stakeholder, NGO, business interest, international organization, or national government, can pressure or encourage conflicting parties to build peace, and is often necessary to advance the agenda. A third party can have multiple roles and use different strategies to advance the agenda. It can provide a neutral platform for discussion, unbiased information, or technical expertise in the form of environmental challenges cost estimations. Both parties can accept it. At the international level, the financial support promises and sanctions threats can be used to encourage the parties involved to continue cooperation. A third party may also be useful in providing international arbitration mechanisms or monitoring capacity. In

environmental diplomacy, long-term commitment, engagement, and funding are vital. There are few "quick wins" in environmental diplomacy and peacebuilding. Staying engaged over time is a significant challenge. The long-term nature of building trust and cooperation around natural resource management, addressing pollution hotspots, or collaborating to respond to natural disasters makes one- and two-year project timelines unrealistic. For environmental diplomacy to be effective in the long term, resources must also be allocated to support program implementation. Otherwise, lack of funding can be a limiting factor. When engaging in ongoing dialogues, Armenia should aim to hold at least 1-2 meetings per year to at least maintain continuity, especially when government changes are expected in negotiating countries. International experience shows that it is important to strike the right balance between technical and political cooperation. If the issues discussed are too narrow and too technical, they may have little impact on broader peacebuilding efforts. However, if environmental diplomacy is too quickly politicized, the process can stall due to political differences between the parties involved.

In the case of environmental diplomacy between Armenia, Artsakh, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, it is important to set realistic goals. Collaborative programs that may raise expectations but are unrealistic may be ineffective.

Issues of vital interest, on the contrary, can contribute to the achievement of common agreements between the parties (Susskind & Ali, 2014). For example, in recent years, the neighboring countries Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have turned their attention to using the opportunities of Lake Sevan, the only source of drinking water in the region. On the other hand,

the problems of Lake Sevan are increasing rather than decreasing. Due to the lowering of the lake level, the water quality has changed. It was caused by agricultural activities and domestic and industrial waste. The minerality of the inflowing water increased 1.5 times. A large amount of mineral phosphorus is replaced by nitrogen. The average annual water transparency has increased from 12 meters to 4.5 meters, which is a consequence of the development of mining activities in the Sevan basin. Therefore, the measures against the decline of the lake level and the degradation of the ecological system should be considered not in isolation, but in the context of cooperation on regional environmental issues, and security and peace should be made its first condition.

The necessity of traditional diplomacy cannot be underestimated in all of this. These functions also apply to scientists who may prepare documents or be logistical coordinators. Without tact and professionalism, both parties can make mistakes that may disrupt the process.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Common environmental threats can be good starting points. As a rule, the rationale for environmental cooperation and security becomes particularly clear when a common threat exists and requires the cooperation of the parties involved. In the case of a joint environmental crisis, a joint emergency response can be an opportunity for further cooperation and building trust between the parties. Examples of common threats or crises are aspects related to climate change, health problems, or pollution. Developing joint early warning systems before a disaster or joint recovery measures can provide an effective start.

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