

An exchange with David Victor in *The National Interest* on the links between resource and environmental stress and violent conflict.

David Victor's original article:
"What Resource Wars?" (November 12, 2007):
<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=16020>

Thomas Homer-Dixon response:
<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=16524>

STRAW MAN IN THE WIND
by Thomas Homer-Dixon
Friday, January 2, 2009

Pundits, Journalists and Sunday morning news show commentators sometimes say silly things about the links between resources and war. "Iraq is all about oil" or "Global warming caused the Darfur genocide." And, sometimes, NGO leaders and policymakers say similar silly things when they want the media to pay attention to a particular region or issue. It's easy to criticize these statements. But thoughtful commentators, of whom David Victor is normally one, know they contribute little by doing so. Yet, in this case, he's pulled together several oft-heard arguments about why threats from resource wars are overblown. Some of the skeptical positions have merit, but many are deeply misleading. No serious scholar of this issue says that resource stress causes violence *by itself*; almost none asserts that the causal links between resource stress and violence are direct; and very few argue that interstate war is the most likely outcome. Resource stresses are security dangers, though they are one among many. They will not be the only cause of conflict, but they will add to the risk of war.

If you listen to Victor, though, you might just get lulled into a false sense of security. He beats down straw-man arguments, in the end offering nothing but false reassurances about the security risks posed by resource stress. If the author had been willing to take on nuance, he wouldn't have been able to write the kind of simplistic and ideologically charged article that appeared in these pages. That's because serious scholars who have spent years studying the links between resources and mass violence — and I count myself in that group — rarely, if ever, make the kinds of arguments Victor so boldly attacks.

Rather, we argue that resource stress always *interacts* in complex conjunction with a host of other factors — ecological, institutional, economic and political — to cause mass violence. Also, causation is almost always *indirect*. People, groups and countries rarely fight over natural resources directly; instead, resource stress causes various forms of social dislocation — including widening gaps between rich and poor, increased rent-seeking by elites, weakening of states and deeper ethnic cleavages — that, in turn, make violence more likely. And, finally, this violence is almost always *sub-national*; it takes the form of insurgency, rebellion, gangsterism and urban criminality, not overt interstate war.

The claim that resource stress is *sufficient* by itself to cause violence is easily refuted. One simply has to identify cases where resource stress was present but violence didn't occur. Likewise, the claim that resource stress is a *necessary* cause of violence is easily refuted by finding cases of violence not preceded by resource stress. At various points in his article, Victor uses exactly these strategies to debunk the link between resources and war.

If resource stress causes violence in complex interaction with other factors, a much more nuanced refutation than what Victor offers is required. It's all about context. Careful analyses of specific cases are needed. Darfur is just one example. Here, the host of factors contributing to the violence and the tangled relationships among these factors are carefully identified, one by one. A critic who wants to refute this kind of claim needs to take on the facts of the case itself and marshal empirical evidence to challenge the claim's specifics. This exercise is hard, and it takes time.

Victor doesn't engage with this type of voluminous work. My research team and others around the world have undertaken painstaking analyses of cases as diverse as the Philippines, Pakistan, Haiti and South Africa. This research has shown that severe resource stress — including water scarcity, forest loss, land degradation and collapse of coastal fisheries — multiplies the impact of a society's existing vulnerabilities, including its ethnic cleavages and skewed distribution of land, wealth and power. Rural folk who depend directly on the local environment for their day-to-day livelihoods become poorer, while powerful elites manipulate laws to gain control of — and extract exorbitant rents from — increasingly valuable land, forests and

water. As these resources dwindle in the countryside, people sometimes join local insurgencies against landowners and government officials. Other times, they migrate in large numbers to regions where resources seem more plentiful, only to fight with people who already inhabit those regions. They might also migrate to urban slums, where unemployed young men, especially, can be primed to join criminal gangs or radical political groups.

In light of these findings, Victor too quickly dismisses the security dangers of climate change. “Serious thinking about climate change”, he writes, “must recognize that the ‘hard’ security threats that are supposedly lurking are mostly a ruse.” Yet, the recent report of Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies multiple pathways through which global warming will hurt poor people in the Third World and hinder economic development there more generally. Large swaths of land in subtropical latitudes — zones inhabited by billions of people — will experience more drought, more coastal damage from storms, higher mortality from heat waves, worse outbreaks of agricultural pests and an increased burden of infectious disease. The potential impact on food output is a particular concern: In semi-arid regions where water is already scarce and cropland overused, climate change could devastate agriculture. Also, many cereal crops in tropical zones are already near their limits of heat tolerance, and even a couple degrees warming could lead to much lower yields.

By weakening rural economies, boosting unemployment and dislocating people’s lives, global warming will increase the frustrations and anger of hundreds of millions of people in vulnerable poor countries. Especially in Africa, but also in some parts of Asia and Latin America, climate changes will undermine already frail governments — and make challenges from violent groups more likely — by reducing government revenues, increasing the economic clout of rent-seeking elites, overwhelming bureaucracies with problems and revealing how incapable these governments are of helping their citizens. We’ve learned in recent years that this kind of societal failure can have consequences around the world and that great powers can’t always isolate themselves from these consequences. So climate change could readily produce “hard security threats” by any reasonable definition of the phrase.

At one point, Victor does acknowledge the reality of such complex causation: “Resource-related conflicts are multi-causal”, he writes. But then he immediately

draws a misleading conclusion from this fact: Because resource-related conflicts are multi-causal, he goes on, “primal ‘resource wars’ can never exist.” Here he sets up, once again, a straw man. No serious analyst of resource-related conflict would say any conflict is exclusively about resources.

Implicit in Victor’s argument here is the notion that if a conflict has multiple causes, and if resource stress is one of these causes, then resource stress is probably not particularly important. The real cause is probably “deeper” and likely involves governmental or institutional failure. For instance, he writes:

Some analysts have pointed to conflicts over resources, including water and valuable land, as a cause in the Rwandan genocide... Recently, the UN secretary-general suggested that climate change was already exacerbating the conflicts in Sudan. But none of these supposed causal chains stays linked under close scrutiny—the conflicts over resources are usually symptomatic of deeper failures in governance... Climate is just one of many factors that contribute to tension.

Yet Victor provides absolutely no evidence or argument to justify either his substantive claims about Rwanda or Darfur or his sweeping assertion that failures in governance are ultimately the most important cause of these conflicts. How can he speak with such confidence? Is he an expert on these cases? What metric is he using to differentiate between the causal “weight” of different factors — resource, governmental, institutional or otherwise?

On the specifics of Rwanda, he is, in fact, decisively wrong: Several exacting and penetrating studies have now shown conclusively that cropland scarcity in Rwanda strongly affected rural grievances that were exploited by radical Hutus in the lead-up to the 1994 genocide. And regarding Darfur, the case is by no means closed one way or the other. We’re still waiting for a close on-the-ground analysis of causation. But many reputable scholars have argued, on the basis of substantial evidence, that a long-term decline in rainfall in the Darfur region contributed to a breakdown — which the Khartoum government exploited, to be sure — of traditional relations between nomads and pastoralists.

Victor’s unsubstantiated assertions here betray a too-common bias of social scientists: The forces of nature are ultimately subordinate to the forces of society. But the world is now too complex — and too

multifactoral—for such social-science grandstanding. All this can't hide that we'll have war, social dislocation, weakening of rural economies, widening gaps between rich and poor, deepening ethnic cleavages — and that resource stresses play an important role.

David Victor replies with "Smoke and Mirrors":
<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=16530>

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

by David G. Victor
Friday, January 2, 2009

My argument is that classic resource wars — hot conflicts driven by a struggle to grab resources — are increasingly rare. Even where resources play a role, they are rarely the root cause of bloodshed. Rather, the root cause usually lies in various failures of governance. That argument — in both its classic form and in its more nuanced incarnation — is hardly a straw man, as Thomas Homer-Dixon asserts. Setting aside hyperbole, the punditry increasingly points to resources as a cause of war. And so do social scientists and policy analysts, even with their more nuanced views. I've triggered this debate because conventional wisdom puts too much emphasis on resources as a cause of conflict. Getting the story right has big implications for social scientists trying to unravel cause-and-effect and often even larger implications for public policy.

Michael Klare is right to underscore Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the only classic resource conflict in recent memory. That episode highlights two of the reasons why classic resource wars are becoming rare — they're expensive and rarely work. (And even in Kuwait's case, many other forces also spurred the invasion. Notably, Iraq felt insecure with its only access to the sea a narrow strip of land sandwiched between Kuwait on one side and its archenemy Iran on the other.) In the end, Saddam lost resources on the order of \$100 billion (plus his country and then his head) in his quest for Kuwait's 1.5 million barrels per day of combined oil and gas output. By contrast, Exxon paid \$80 billion to get Mobil's 1.7 million barrels per day of oil and gas production — a merger that has held and flourished. As the bulging sovereign wealth funds are discovering, it is easier to get resources through the stock exchange than the gun barrel.

Klare takes me to task for failing to acknowledge the role of "lootable" resources as a motive for war. My point is that looters loot what they can—not just natural resources, but also foreign aid and anything else that

passes within reach. (Paul Collier's research, which Klare cites for support, finds that a sizeable share of African military budgets is, in effect, aid money that is looted and redirected from foreign aid.) I suspect that we don't differ much in our assessment of the effects of lootable resources within weak and failed states, but where we do part company is in the implication for policy. Fixing the problems in the Niger River Delta — the case he uses — requires a stronger and more accountable government. That means making it harder to loot resources, taming official corruption, lending a hand with law enforcement in places where oil is produced and stolen, and engaging reformist forces in the Nigerian government. Resource looting and misallocation are severe, but they are symptoms whose cures require focusing on governance.

The realities of global resource depletion are somewhat different from Klare's story. It is true that primary resources, such as oil in the ground, are now more concentrated in "armpit" countries because more readily available resources are being depleted. That fact, though, only serves to further support my conclusion: That we must redouble our efforts to improve governance because all oil-consuming countries have a stake in the good governance of their oil producers. What really matters is not theoretical oil thousands of feet underground but actual oil produced and delivered to markets. And on that front, the armpit-country story isn't so bad because those countries tend to put themselves out of business. Witness Venezuela, where production is declining even though the country is one of the world's richest in untapped resources. High prices soon follow. And with those higher prices, a spate of "new" resources becomes viable — oil sands in Canada and shale in the western United States, for example. Moreover, many oil-rich countries actually have good governance systems (at least concerning their oil), such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and notably the bright new star among oil-majors, Brazil. Nonetheless, I echo a conclusion from my original article — one that Klare surely shares as well — that current patterns of oil consumption are not sustainable, and urgent efforts to tame demand are also needed.

I find it striking that none of the three have attacked my characterization of China's behavior in Africa, for it is the Chinese resource scramble that most animates fear among the punditry and threat industry of a coming resource war. My original article makes a strong argument for why the conventional wisdom about China is wrong and why all oil consumers (including China and the United States) actually have

strong common interests. If, indeed, that argument is widely shared among experts then some radically different policy strategies would follow.

Nobody can disagree with Paul Kern and Sherri Goodman's maxim that "wars are best avoided by preparing ahead of time for potential threats. . . ." My concern isn't with the principle but, rather, putting this bromide into practice—exactly what they accuse me of ignoring. Just as Eisenhower warned of the industrial threat industry at the end of his administration, so too must we be concerned about the arrival of military planning to the problem of natural resources. These are broader concerns I have flagged, not specifically directed at CNA (Kern and Goodman's organization), and they merit careful attention because the generous instinct of environmentalists is to welcome all who share concern about resource depletion and stress. Yet, the threat industry is notoriously bad at setting priorities for interventions that involve the broader society and economy.

The CNA report they cite (and co-authored) rightly says that climate change is a threat multiplier, but all stresses on governance systems are threat multipliers, and real security policy is about setting priorities and matching responses to threats. I have a feeling that we agree on the implications for policy, although for different reasons. I am not much worried about climate change triggering hot conflict, but I am deeply concerned about the unequal impacts on poor societies and the severe impacts on fragile ecosystems. The solutions include deep cuts in emissions (exactly how that can be done is a subject I have addressed for most of my professional career) and also much better governance systems, so that societies do a better job of coping with the changes in climate that are inevitable. Thinking about climate change as a security problem inspires a logic of hardening, securing and protecting. What's really needed is flexibility, adaptiveness and fair systems of governance — all conclusions that are broadly consistent with the CNA report.

Homer-Dixon's critique is unabashedly misleading and wrong. Like Kern and Goodman he makes much of the "hard security" dangers in climate change — imagining all manner of ways that climate disturbances can ripple into hot conflicts. Such thinking is pernicious. Good imagination can find threat multipliers everywhere. Good policy is about setting priorities where leverage is greatest. Looking only at the disturbances — weakened rural economies, increased unemployment, dislocated people — just perverts policy. The world is already destined to face a lot of climate change that won't be reversed

for a century or more. So now, we must look not only at avoiding disturbances but also at improving governance. (At the same time, we must be modest in realizing that outsiders often have little useful leverage on how countries govern themselves.)

He claims that I have ignored complex causation when, in fact, that's the centerpiece of my argument, and it is precisely the voluminous work in this area that gives me trouble. The problems in Darfur and Rwanda stem from many factors, but what matters for social science, and especially for policy, is getting cause and effect right. Indeed, radical Hutus pointed to resource inequities to mobilize support, but radicals, like looters, make do with whatever irredentism is available. Had someone reallocated the cropland, the problem would not have disappeared. Hutu grievance was rooted in Rwanda's system of governance-by-minority, the inability of that governance system to make decisions that commanded broad respect, and ultimately, the inability of those in power to provide security.

Nearly all of the vast literature that Homer-Dixon applauds suffers from the affliction of severe selection bias and failure to assign proper weights to causal factors. Put a microscope on any big conflict looking for resources, and you're sure to find exactly what you're looking for. Nobody doubts that causation is complex; the dispute is on the central forces. And to Klare's point about methodology, my article focuses narrowly on hot conflict — that is, "war" — because the best way to get causation right usually requires starting narrowly. However, technological change and economic shifts away from resource-intensive industries and the globalization of most resources into commodities implies that a broader version of my hypothesis probably also holds — natural resources matter less and thus are less important for conflict, except where lootable resources coincide with exceptionally poor governance.

Homer-Dixon is particularly upset that I seem to diminish the multitude of causes for conflict. My essay does not portray a *Candide* of peace and endless prosperity. The world is a dangerous place; conflicts are rife; important problems, such as climate change, are mounting for lack of more serious policy attention. Looking at all these problems through conflict-colored lenses is equally dangerous, for it focuses attention on weak symptoms rather than root causes.