

Is environmental degradation a greater threat to the international community than war?

Ans: Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through the depletion of resources such as air, water, and soil; the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of wildlife.<sup>1</sup> It is defined as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived as harmful or undesirable. War is defined as armed fighting between two or more countries or groups.<sup>2</sup> The level of threat these two issues pose to the international community can be evaluated by considering both the short run and long run.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to at least 10 thousand civilians being killed<sup>3</sup>, cities have been reduced to rubble, and millions of people have been displaced. The global impact includes economic and political ramifications, impacting energy supplies and food security.

The Israel-Hamas conflict is another ongoing war that has shaken the world. This never-ending aggression through airstrikes and raids continues to destroy lives. Since October 7, more than 21000 people have been killed and more than 55000 injured in Gaza in Israeli attacks.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, trade and global crude oil supply in the Middle East has been disrupted which may continue in the future as well. Experts predict that this conflict may also encourage a revival of the terrorist threat.

Even though wars and destruction have been prevalent in recent times, nothing has reached the intensity and the global destruction that of the world wars. However, letting these conflicts build up due to this false and overly optimistic thinking is inviting danger. Historically, escalation of international relations has led to terrible wars with an unimaginable scale of disaster. For example, in the early 20th century, conflicts in the Balkans led to World War 1. Even small acts of violence can create misunderstandings or miscommunication that may aggravate the situation further. The dominos effect can also be applied here

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archive.unescwa.org/environmental-degradation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/war>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/over-10-000-civilians-killed-in-ukraine-since-start-of-russian-war-un/3061052>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/12/29/israel-hamas-war-live-israel-kills-at-least-20-in-attak-on-rafah?>

as it may lead to a chain reaction by drawing in allies of both sides which would increase the scope of the war ultimately leading to much more destruction.

The likelihood that the next world war will be the end of humanity is there due to the existence of nuclear weapons. While this situation is devastating for everyone and may seem unlikely because the great powers do understand the danger of using nuclear weapons, it is still entirely possible. Conflicts between the U.S. and North Korea, the U.S., China, and Taiwan, and Russia's potential role in seeking to exploit the situation for its own sake in Europe may lead to the next World War.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side, environmental degradation is terrifying too. Deforestation, pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss have been increasing at alarming rates. These have led to natural disasters, loss of ecosystems important for humans, and health risks. Unsustainable practices have long-term impacts like future generations struggling with resources, and decreasing water and food availability.

Pollution alone is responsible for approximately 9 million deaths a year.<sup>6</sup> What does that mean going on? It is only going to increase. Rather than taking it as a local problem, it has to be focused on by the international community and approached as a global issue that has the potential to destroy our lives just as much as wars.

Before tackling the question of which of these is a bigger threat, their interrelation should be analyzed to get the full picture. In the past, countries have waged wars over land, water, and resources. Society may have decreased these types of wars but they have not stopped. When the next war comes, it may be due to conflicts and competition over resources like fossil fuels. People would be fighting over resources all over again, this time on a scale that is larger than ever. If environmental degradation unleashes war on the world, it will be the last one and no amount of treaties or peace or allies will be able to hold people's need for food and water. To avoid war, we must avoid environmental degradation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://youtu.be/85cVIQPdE2g?feature=shared>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(22\)00090-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(22)00090-0/fulltext)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/greatest-threat-global-security-climate-change-not-merely-environmental-problem>

The same goes for war leading to even more environmental degradation. The use of nuclear weapons in the war would lead to devastating consequences with the impact causing near-total destruction and the radiation ensuring that nature and the environment become hostile until no living being can survive.

When considering the argument that a full-fledged global nuclear war would not take place, environmental damage is still inevitable. For example, creating and sustaining military forces requires a lot of energy and results in pollution. Production and disposal of military equipment and weapons lead to environmental damage as well. The use of these weapons along with other activities like attacks on infrastructure, vehicles, and other tactics all lead to the environment being harmed in some way.<sup>8</sup> While these damages are on a much smaller scale than the damage nuclear weapons can inflict, they are still notable, especially when the world is slowly leading itself to intense environmental degradability even without the occurrence of a major war.

Establishing that war would lead to unrepairable damage to the world as we know it and environmental degradation would most likely lead to war over resources, the question is whether there can be another reason for war. While environmental degradation cannot be ignored, is there an even urgent threat lingering on the horizon that may lead to a war on a global scale?

<sup>9</sup>As mentioned before, regional conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, China and Taiwan, and North Korea and South Korea may spark the next world war if their allies get involved in the defense against each other. These regional conflicts may start a war just due to a misunderstanding leading to a small squirmish between the NATO forces and Russia and a declaration of war.

Moreover, another reason may be cyber warfare. While cyber warfare is certainly a tool that will be used in the next war, it may be the cause as well. Due to a country hacking another country's database, elections being rigged, security breaches, or somehow exploiting them digitally, a global conflict may arise. AI may play a major part as evidenced by the RAND Corporation saying that it will have a large

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<sup>8</sup><https://ceobs.org/how-does-war-damage-the-environment/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://youtu.be/fO97HXc8jL0?feature=shared>

effect on the nuclear security issue in the future. Hackers may take advantage of this by hacking the AI to launch the missiles, leading to confusion and retaliation. Through cyber warfare, a country's major systems could be de-established very quickly, giving rise to traditional warfare like nuclear weapons if the hackers cannot be warded off digitally.

Lastly, the difference in political ideologies could be another reason. Democracy and authoritarianism are opposites and the countries that believe in them want to spread their influence by vanquishing the other. Their contrasting beliefs about the way things should be run may start a conflict, leading to World War 3.

These various potential reasons for conflict come to show that international relations are feeble and humanity may not survive if any of these points of contention go too far. However, the prediction of the time frame and intensity of these geopolitical conflicts is very difficult and no one knows if the next world war will strike in this decade, century, or after a millennium. Our predictions for these conditions could very suddenly turn out to be wrong or perhaps there could be situations where misunderstanding plays a role that is hard to prevent. Things could just be out of someone's control or it could be dependent on just a few major individuals. All this contributes to the uncertainty of peace.

Hence, just maintaining peace and good international relations is not enough. They may just give off an illusion of safety. Even if war does not finish off everyone in the foreseeable future, environmental degradation will slowly chip it away. Droughts due to climate change, food wars, conflicts over fuels and energy, need for precious metals are some factors that may lead to this global crisis. Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is predicted to cause about 250000 additional deaths per year from reasons such as malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea, and heat stress alone.<sup>10</sup>

The less developed and developing countries have already started being impacted. Health issues due to pollution and resource accessibility problems plague these countries. The international community has to worry about this because it will come for the developed countries in the future. Whether or not the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/public-health-and-environment>

## Atiksh Agarwal

countries have developed good relations by then, the environment will keep depreciating. After that, wars over resources will happen. That's a certainty, and when we start fighting for freshwater or other natural resources, there will be no time left to save the world.

War could happen, but environmental damage will. Environmental degradation has foreseeable and clear factors that are leading up to it. Thus, it is a greater threat than war. Its impacts are often wrongly stated to be in the future, leading to ignorance of the issue prevalent in many parts of the world today. Perhaps, focusing on the environment by uniting Earth's forces may lead to solving both these major issues.