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In recent years, the inevitable rise in sea levels and carbon dioxide concentrations have raised paramount concern amongst the international community.¹ Specifically, in regards to its impact on the future of the planet as we know it. However, environmental degradation is no longer merely an environmental problem. Defined as the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife,² globally, it has the capacity to fuel tensions from a political, economic and social lens. This as I shall argue is an inevitable consequence of the growing interlinkages between states under a liberal global governance world order. This essay will aim to justify the claim that environmental degradation is a greater threat to the international community than war in the 21st century and will use examples and theories to substantiate it.

Normatively, the scope of what constitutes a greater threat must first be defined. Long-term considerations for example, constitute a greater threat due to their prolonged impact.³ Aspects such as the likelihood of an event occurring, whether the damage from it can be reversed and how it impacts society as a whole must be considered.⁴ In order for a threat to be greater its impact must affect society as a whole to a significant magnitude. Using this definition, a baseline argument for why environmental degradation is a greater threat can be formed.

From one perspective war is simply a problem of the past and no longer as pertinent a threat as it used to be. Since 1980s, 95% of armed conflicts have been intra-state as opposed to inter-state.

¹ NASA Global Climate Change, "Sea Level | NASA Global Climate Change," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet (NASA, 2022), <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/sea-level/#:~:text=Global%20sea%20levels%20are%20rising>.

² United Nations, "Environmental Degradation," United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, October 6, 2015, <https://archive.unescwa.org/environmental-degradation#:~:text=Environmental%20degradation%20is%20the%20deterioration>.

³ Emyr Jones Parry, "The Greatest Threat to Global Security: Climate Change Is Not Merely an Environmental Problem | United Nations," Un.org (United Nations, 2007), <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/greatest-threat-global-security-climate-change-not-merely-environmental-problem>.

⁴ Ibid 3

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This also significantly affects the degree of the conflicts themselves as they tend to be less brutal.⁵ For example, even from the perspective of war time casualties intra-state conflict tends to be less than half as brutal.⁶ Even the conflicts on average tend to last 50% lesser than interstate ones. The deterrence provided by nuclear weapons under the pretext of mutually assured destruction can also disincentivize major conflict.⁷ From a realist perspective war can be disastrous for a nation, as seen in context of the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁸ Hence, cooperation or not engaging are often the wisest way states balance power.⁹ An example of this would be Indian and Chinese abstention from the Russia-Ukraine conflict.¹⁰ As pointed by scholarly consensus, most modern-day war is for economic reasons such as the China-USA trade war and the South China sea dispute.¹¹ These conflicts do cause an hinderance to the functioning of global governance institutions, but the loss of life is an unlikely consequence of the same. Moreover, relations between previously warring states have significantly improved due to the emergence of complex interdependence.¹² States now depend on each other for trade and economic development. A pertinent example of this is Saudi Arabia and Israel two states in a

⁵ "What Is Interstate Conflict?," World101 from the Council on Foreign Relations, May 16, 2023, <https://world101.cfr.org/understanding-international-system/conflict/what-interstate-conflict>.

⁶ Meredith Reid Sarkees, Frank Whelon Wayman, and J. David Singer, "Inter-State, Intra-State, and Extra-State Wars: A Comprehensive Look at Their Distribution over Time, 1816-1997," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2003): 49–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3096076>.

⁷ Maria Rublee, "Not MAD about Putin," Monash Lens, March 18, 2022, <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2022/03/18/1384528/mutually-assured-destruction-as-a-deterrent-to-nuclear-strikes-has-destabilised>.

⁸ Andrew Latham, "Out of Afghanistan: A Realist View > Air University (AU) > Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs Article Display," www.airuniversity.af.edu, August 25, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2744609/out-of-afghanistan-a-realist-view/>.

⁹ Ibid 8

¹⁰ "A Tale of Two Silences: Why India's Ukraine Vote Abstention in the UN Is Different from that of China," WION, n.d., <https://www.wionews.com/opinions-blogs/a-tale-of-two-silences-why-indias-ukraine-vote-abstention-in-the-un-is-different-from-that-of-china-565387>.

¹¹ United Nations, "A New Era of Conflict and Violence," United Nations, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>.

¹² Han Dorussen, Erik A Gartzke, and Oliver Westerwinter, "Introduction: Networked International Politics: Complex Interdependence and the Diffusion of Conflict and Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 3 (2016): 283–91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43920590>.

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cold-war like state since 1948 now economic allies due to their stance of furthering mutual interests, something a liberal like Keohane would concur with.¹³ War by its historic definition has also been ineffective in the 21st century. The USA in Afghanistan, for example, despite having a clear technological advantage to the Taliban led regime failed to control and counteract the guerrilla tactics of the Taliban.¹⁴

Focusing on environmental degradation in particular, it can be a motivating factor by itself for several types of wars. For example, in the Darfur scarcity of resources and desertification led to diminishing agricultural productivity and served as a key driver for ethnic conflict in the region.¹⁵ In relation to the international community, environmental degradation poses several challenges from the perspective of global governance institutions, evidenced by the fact that close to 7 of the SDGs are based on protecting environmental degradation.¹⁶ A factor further exacerbating the challenge environmental degradation poses in the unwillingness of states to cooperate. For example, Donald Trump withdrew the USA from the Paris Agreement as it went against direct American industrial interests.¹⁷ The disregard for international cooperation on the matter also stems from right-wing skepticism regarding environmental degradation.¹⁸ Although

¹³ "Saudi Arabia and Israel Quietly Prepare 'Deal of the Century,'" [www.ibanet.org](https://www.ibanet.org/article/D2659617-4CAB-4FE9-8B60-A971485EC3D6), n.d., <https://www.ibanet.org/article/D2659617-4CAB-4FE9-8B60-A971485EC3D6>.

¹⁴ Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, "International Conflict and the Tenure of Leaders: Is War Still 'Ex Post' Inefficient?," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (July 2004): 604, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1519919>.

¹⁵ "Environmental Degradation and Conflict in Darfur: Implications for Peace and Recovery," Humanitarian Practice Network, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://odihpn.org/publication/environmental-degradation-and-conflict-in-darfur-implications-for-peace-and-recovery/#:~:text=This%20means%20shorter%20fallow%20periods>.

¹⁶ "Environmental Degradation | Sustainable Development Goals - Resource Centre," [sdgresources.relx.com](https://sdgresources.relx.com/environmental-degradation#:~:text=SDG%2015%2C%20titled%20%22Life%20on), accessed December 29, 2023, <https://sdgresources.relx.com/environmental-degradation#:~:text=SDG%2015%2C%20titled%20%22Life%20on>.

¹⁷ Columbia Law School, "President Trump Announces Withdrawal from Paris Agreement | Sabin Center for Climate Change Law," [Columbia.edu](https://climate.law.columbia.edu/content/president-trump-announces-withdrawal-paris-agreement-0), 2019, <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/content/president-trump-announces-withdrawal-paris-agreement-0>.

¹⁸ "Link between Climate Scepticism and Support for Right-Wing Populists – Study | University of Oxford," [www.ox.ac.uk](https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-01-12-link-between-climate-scepticism-and-support-right-wing-populists-study), n.d., <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-01-12-link-between-climate-scepticism-and-support-right-wing-populists-study>.

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scholarly census overwhelmingly points at climate change being caused by human activity, rhetoric of right-wing politicians has significantly weakened efforts towards recovery.¹⁹ Close to 72% of Republicans did not view climate change as a significant threat.²⁰ In the long-run, this can worsen the extent of environmental degradation making it an even greater threat.

Environmental degradation is expected to worsen in the near future as a result of overpopulation.²¹ The Malthusian theory suggests how population grows more rapidly than food supplies, until a famine or war for the scarce resource reduces the population.²² The theory can be applied to other natural resources as well. Fossil fuels despite expected to deplete by 2060, still command excess demand in developing parts of the world.²³ With the almost exponential population growth rates in such regions the extraction and depletion of fossil fuels is also likely to increase exponentially. Giving the pre-existing conflict of self-interests in the developed world the environmental degradation in the developing world would be enough to offset any progress a pact like the Paris agreement would make. Let's assume such agreements are effective from a political perspective, several scientists would argue it is simply too late to stop climate change to begin with.²⁴

¹⁹ Jens Marquardt and Markus Lederer, "Politicizing Climate Change in Times of Populism: An Introduction," *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 5 (July 19, 2022): 735–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2083478>.

²⁰ "Three-Quarters of Republicans Prioritize the Economy over Climate Change," NPR, August 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/03/1191678009/climate-change-republicans-economy-natural-disasters-biden-trump-poll#:~:text=But%20almost%20three%2Dquarters%20of>.

²¹ United Nations, "Population Growth, Environmental Degradation and Climate Change," United Nations, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/desa/population-growth-environmental-degradation-and-climate-change>.

²² Rohit, "What Is Malthusian Theory of Population?," BYJUS, n.d., <https://byjus.com/biology/malthusian-theory-of-population/#:~:text=The%20Malthusian%20theory%20explained%20that>.

²³ Jackson Howarth, "When Will Fossil Fuels Run Out?," Octopus Energy, December 2, 2019, <https://octopus.energy/blog/when-will-fossil-fuels-run-out/#:~:text=When%20will%20we%20run%20out%20of%20coal%20and%20natural%20gas>.

²⁴ "Too Late to Save the Planet? Why This Climate Crisis Myth Is so Prevalent – and Problematic.," World Economic Forum, June 19, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/06/too-late-climate-crisis-myth/>.

Another significant aspect to look at is how environmental degradation impacts other problems that can be considered threats to humanity.²⁵ We have explored how environmental factors can lead to war but even problems like energy requirements, disease and access to water are affected by degradation.²⁶ The deterioration of the environment as history is evident has exacerbated several of these issues. For instance, pollution caused by environmental degradation like oil extraction can pollute waterbodies which causes a shortage in available drinking water.²⁷ Moreover, the distribution of resources in themselves can perpetrate inequality when exhausted and even lead to acts of terrorism as seen in Syria after the mass immigration.²⁸

Environmental degradation has been a direct consequence of human inhabitation of earth and has rendered the earth's environment insufficient to support life the way preferable to humans.²⁹ This as previously discussed underscores why environmental degradation is the greatest threat to face the international community. Environmental degradation unlike a warlike situation does not always have malicious intent behind it and is often justified by how it helps progress short-term interests.³⁰ The international community constitutes of individuals acting with their own interests in mind, and this can lead to a situation of a moral hazard. The cost of environmental degradation will be paid by humans in the long-term therefore the immediate cost of degrading the

²⁵ Aikaterini Valsamatzi-Panagiotou and Robert Penchovsky, "Environmental Factors Influencing the Transmission of the Coronavirus 2019: A Review," *Environmental Chemistry Letters*, February 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10311-022-01418-9>.

²⁶ Ibid 25

²⁷ Veronika Veřková, Helena Hybská, and Tatiana Bubeníková, "Possible Oil Spills Disposal for Environmental Water-Body Protection," *www.intechopen.com* (IntechOpen, September 22, 2022), <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/83739#:~:text=Its%20extraction%2C%20transport%2C%20and%20use>.

²⁸ "Beyond the Debris – the Environment Is a Major Victim of the Syrian Conflict," *CRISIS & ENVIRONMENT*, October 15, 2019, <https://crisisandenvironment.com/beyond-the-debris-the-environment-is-a-major-victim-of-the-syrian-conflict/>.

²⁹ "When Will the Earth Come to an End?," *Big Think*, March 31, 2022, <https://bigthink.com/starts-with-a-bang/earth-end/#:~:text=The%20sun>.

³⁰ Gernot Wagner and Daniel Zizza, "Green Moral Hazards," *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 25, no. 3 (July 15, 2021): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2021.1940449>.

environment is almost negligible.³¹ Moreover, controlling environmental degradation at the ground-level is not feasible given the various actions that can cause it. For example, certain farming practices are unsustainable; however, farmers would have no way accurately know that. Hence, even if the international community agrees upon a set of laws, which will form a definitive roadmap to reduce environmental degradation, its efficacy will rely on intangibles beyond the immediate control of the states to begin with.³² This prolongs the problem as it makes any solution less likely to be effective.

However, there is an argument to be made for why war is still a greater threat to the international community than environmental degradation. Despite colliding self-interests tangible solutions to the environmental crisis exist and in ways benefit mutual interests, as the need to protect the planet is likely to become evident even from the perspective of self-interests in the near future.³³ However, as experts suggest that point would most definitely be too late.³⁴ War as the Machiavellian school of thought might posit is an inevitable state of the anarchic world and peace is nothing but a fleeting armistice.³⁵ Hence, the threat of war remains perennial even if its methods change. In the near future various technologies such as intelligitized warfare and cyber

³¹ Ibid 30

³² "Efficacy of Environmental Protection Relies on Intangibles - Google Search," www.google.com, accessed December 29, 2023, https://www.google.com/search?q=efficacy+of+environmental+protection+relies+on+intangibles&og=efficacy+of+environmental+protection+relies+on+intangibles&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBCjEwMDA1ajBqMTWoAgCwAgA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

³³ "Solution to Env Crisis - Google Search," www.google.com, accessed December 29, 2023, https://www.google.com/search?q=solution+to+env+crisis&og=solution+to+env+crisis&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBCTM5MDRqMGoxNagCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

³⁴ Eban Goodstein, "Too Late to Stop Global Warming? A Response to Franzen," leadthechange.bard.edu, n.d., <https://leadthechange.bard.edu/blog/too-late-to-stop-global-warming-a-response-to-franzen>.

³⁵ Diana Schaub, "Machiavelli's Realism," ed. Niccolò Machiavelli et al., *The National Interest*, no. 53 (1998): 109–13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42897167>.

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interference are likely to gain traction and are already under development.³⁶ For example, Russian cyber interference in the 2016 American, raised questions about how states can influence domestic power amongst their enemies.³⁷ Yet such form of warfare although effective places little threat to human life. This is partly due to the change in intentions amongst warring state, but also because proxy control is now considered safer than all out of war.³⁸

We have well established environmental degradation poses threats to the long-term subsistence of the international community, and how war in the 21st century no longer has the destructive connotation as it did in history. Environmental degradation, despite having a barrage of its own consequences has the ability to impact other pertinent problems being faced by the international community such as war itself. Environmental degradation despite restoration efforts is likely to worsen, hence the threat posed by the same is only expected to exponentially increase. For this reason, it serves as the greatest threat faced by the international community and one of the only ones beyond the immediate control of the international community.

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³⁶ "The PLA and Intelligentised Warfare | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses," www.idsa.in, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-pla-and-intelligentised-warfare-oranjan-011222>.

³⁷ FBI, "RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE in 2016 U.S. ELECTIONS | Federal Bureau of Investigation," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016, <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/russian-interference-in-2016-u-s-elections>.

³⁸ "Proxy War: The Least Bad Option," National Defense University Press, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2809569/proxy-war-the-least-bad-option/>.

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