A Well-Intentioned Curse? Securitization, Climate Governance and Its Way Forward

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In his opening at the United Nations' Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, UN Secretary-General António Guterres forcefully reminded governments of their failure to keep the promise of limiting global warming to 1.5°C, as enshrined in the 2015 Paris Agreement: "we are in the fight of our lives […] and we are losing." (United Nations, 2022). Speaking of a "collective suicide pact", Guterres lamented the insufficient efforts by the international community to tackle climate change, emphasizing the linkage between today's "climate chaos" and tomorrow's conflicts. At the 2023 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, he again reminded his audience of the "battle that is being lost" against climate change (United Nations, 2023).

Guterres' words reflect the prevalent discursive construction of climate change as a global threat—an 'enemy'—that needs to be vanquished. The use of such war-related metaphors is but one facet of what the Copenhagen School has famously coined 'securitization': the "speech act" or discursive practice of presenting something as an existential threat that requires an "emergency response" (Buzan et al., 1998). Though the securitization of climate change has been a much-contested development, scholars agree that the increased use of security-related narratives at the UN-level since the early 2000s has moved the issue onto the high political agenda, resulting in (though arguably ineffective) collective governance efforts (Peters & Mayhew, 2016).

This present paper aims to engage with the implications of the securitization of climate change for global climate governance. As such, its focus lies not so much on tracing the securitizing moves in global climate discourse itself, since a bulk of scholarship has dedicated much time and effort to this (see, for example, Dupont, 2019; Torres Camprubí, 2016). Instead, this paper examines the *consequences* of securitization for climate governance, and its possible way forward based on "de-securitization", a concept that remains greatly underspecified particularly in the context of climate change (Aradau, 2004; Hansen, 2012). The discursive construction of climate change as a security threat has made the issue one of exclusive state politics centered around national interest, thereby inhibiting more comprehensive and concerted action. It is argued that in order to increase its effectiveness, climate governance must be moved 'back down' to the civil sphere of contestation, where different discourses compete and inform each other. Adding the lens of de-securitization, this paper thus aims to contribute to the overall debate around the securitization of climate change and its effective governance.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: it first briefly reflects on the securitization of climate change at the UN-level and its perceived failure. Part two then critically engages with the reasons for and implications of ineffective global climate governance. Derived from this, part three provides an impulse for the de-securitization of climate change centered around the idea of 'discursive democratization', followed by concluding remarks.

Securitizing Climate Change—Between Partial Success and Ultimate Failure

According to the Copenhagen School, securitization "is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). Above or special politics in this context refers to the 'high politics' realm where states are primarily concerned with their national security and economic interests. In theory, if successful, securitization results in the institutionalization

of a sense of urgency attributed to the particular issue—the "referent object"—and the adoption of emergency responses to it (Wæver, 1995).

The first UN Security Council debate in 2009 arguably constitutes the historic turning-point of securitized climate discourse at the global level, reflecting the cumulation of 'securitizing moves' at the local and regional levels prior to reaching the UN in the early 2000s (Torres Camprubí, 2016). By shifting, and retaining, the issue of climate change on the high international agenda, securitization contributed to the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and subsequent Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the 2009 Copenhagen Accord as well as the 2015 Paris Agreement (Dupont, 2019). The securitization of climate change has thus succeeded in that it has been able to present and preserve the issue as one of high political urgency, particularly since 2009. The general sentiment, however, is that it has ultimately 'failed' in light of the ineffective, insufficient measures that have characterized each of these agreements, most recently evident in declarations of the "death of the 1.5°C goal" (Carrington, 2022) at COP27.

More than twenty years ago, the Copenhagen School already argued that the reason that no sufficient emergency measures have resulted from the securitization of climate change is the lack of cohesive pressure inherent to the nature and scope of the issue: the discrepancy between the global, *moralized* problem of climate change (who bears responsibility?), and its local *actual impacts*, has undermined the building of an effective international regime (Buzan et al., 1998). The adoption of effective policy has thus primarily been limited to the national level where climate disasters actually take place.

It remains puzzling, however, that the past two decades' increasing revelation of climate change as an actual *global* challenge—with direct environmental, political and socioeconomic repercussions for countries regardless of national borders or sovereignty—has not been able to overcome this discrepancy. Why is the issue continuously treated as a symbolic 'who has responsibility'-problem at the international level, deflecting attention away from effective policymaking beyond mere scapegoating? The subsequent sections of this paper suggest that this problematic is tied to the very dynamics of securitization itself.

More than Symbolic Politics? Securitization as a 'Double-Edged Sword'

Research on the implications of securitization for state cooperation has been relatively limited (see also e.g. Christou & Adamides, 2013; Wilson, 2019). In their case study of fisheries governance, Luo & Chi (2022) find that securitization of the maritime environment reduces states' willingness to cooperate since they prioritize their national interests. A similar observation is made by Sahu & Mohan (2022) about the securitization of water governance in China, leading to the "militarization" of its water policy and fierce competition with India over river access. These findings reflect the nature of 'high politics' and the top-down dynamics inherent to securitization: by taking issues out of the realm of political debate ('normal politics'), securitization imposes an antagonistic mentality that is at odds with the concerted, cooperative efforts needed to effectively address these issues (Trombetta, 2014). It deflects attention away from more comprehensive approaches to governance that would incorporate socioeconomic or -political variables beyond purely (national) security- and economically driven concerns (Oramah et al., 2021).

In the realm of climate change, states become self-protective since the securitization of the environment leads to its construction as a threat/defense challenge. However, as Deudney (1990) was among the first to criticize, since the nature and scope of climate change fundamentally differs from traditional security issues, approaching it through the lens of the latter will be ineffective, if not harmful. The alleged failure of the 2009 Copenhagen Accord or 2015 Paris Agreement is not to blame on their non-binding, soft nature and the lack of consensus among the international community as such. Rather, these are *symptoms* of the securitization of climate change in the first place, in that it has raised the stakes of the issue onto states' high political agendas, and at the same time demands action that potentially opposes these agendas; "the variable of national security does not go well with securitization" (Gordeeva, 2022, p. 17).

The fact that effective policies in dealing with climate change have been largely absent at the global level does therefore not so much point to the *failure* of securitization per se; rather, securitization is the continual process of

meaning-production around climate governance that reinforces the zero-sum mentality of national interest, a mentality that proves ineffective and insufficient to deal with climate change. In the absence of a central global authority that would adequately incentivize and hold states accountable, unsurprisingly, the latter have primarily focused on national policies that appear 'doable'—like the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and investments in renewables—and do not threaten their entire security and economic architecture (Trombetta, 2008). Such preoccupations with emissions-reduction and national energy security, however, substantially downplay the complexity of dealing with climate change *globally*. Securitization is thus perhaps best conceived of as a "double-edged sword" (Floyd, 2008, p. 11) that has moved climate change onto the top of the agenda, but simultaneously inhibits cooperation for its effective governance.

Nevertheless, the securitized narrative continues to gain momentum; by August 2022, 18 national governments had officially declared a "climate emergency" (Albert, 2022). In light of this there have been attempts towards a more positive reading of securitization and the symbolic shift it has induced in climate discourse. Albert (2022) points to its potential for more fundamental societal transformation if pushed by activist movements such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) who explicitly capitalize on the climate emergency narrative. Though the idea of a social "revolutionary rupture" (Albert, 2022, p. 8) may have normative merit, interestingly enough, XR too is a vivid demonstration of securitization as a—albeit well-intentioned—'curse': though the movement stands for a more bottom-up approach to climate governance (in line with the general dynamic of social movements), its security-language and explicit demand for declaring a state-led climate emergency inevitably 'brings the state back in' as the main actor when it comes to policymaking (Slaven & Heydon, 2020). As a consequence, XR has so far been unable to develop a more comprehensive strategy that would reach beyond awareness-raising and agenda-setting, since actual problem-solving is viewed to be part and parcel of the state *above* the societal realm.

In sum, though securitization and "apocalyptic discourses" (Warner & Boas, 2019, p. 1483) around climate change may have been effective as a strong form of symbolic politics, they too—at the grassroots level as much as at the UN—have induced competitive zero-sum thinking and consequently fueled public disengagement by preserving the exclusive role of the state and its national interest. In this way, securitization has played a substantial part in overlaying – in many regards even replacing – the possibility for 'sober' factual climate politics with emotionally and morally-charged symbolic politics that capitalize on defensive frames (Dorn, 2023). What, then, is a potential way forward for global climate governance? In essence, it's "less security, more politics" (Wæver, 1995, p. 56). By reconceptualizing de-securitization in this context, the remainder of this paper elaborates on what this might entail.

De-Securitizing Global Climate Governance? A (Theoretical) Impulse

For the Copenhagen School, de-securitization is "the optimal long-range option, since it means […] to move [issues] out of [the] threat-defense sequence and into the ordinary public sphere" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 29). De-securitizing an issue is thus not about de-*politicizing* it; on the contrary, it means "to claim that it is of significance for the society in question and to make it the subject of debate and contestation" (Hansen, 2012, p. 528). The restoration of the public sphere that de-securitization implies requires overcoming the dichotomy between 'normal' and 'emergency' politics, by engaging a wider range of societal actors apart from the state and its "exclusionary logic of security" (Aradau, 2004, p. 400). De-securitization thus serves a useful concept to approach global climate governance not only in terms of its effectiveness, but also its 'democratic deficit'—the lack of broader participation, deliberation and accountability that has resulted from its shift to high politics (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017).

As previously mentioned, global climate governance "fails at the peak centralized level" (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2012, p. 190) because there is no authority that would be able to incentivize states to act beyond their national interests; the reported 'deaths' of various international climate agreements, from Kyoto to Paris, are exemplary. In the absence of any realistic foundation upon which to create such an authority, de-securitizing climate governance thus necessitates enhancing *public* pressure for accountability and scrutiny, since the civil space is not bound by the same (international) realities states are (Stevenson, 2021). The problem-solving capacities of institutions, their ability to reflect and adapt in response to their own performance, fundamentally relies on a diversity of views; incorporating such diverse perspectives requires deliberation and contestation in the public realm where "civil actors can play creative roles precisely *because* they are not states" (Dryzek, 2017, p. 795, *emphasis added*).

De-securitizing climate governance therefore necessarily entails its democratization, in the sense that it broadens the array of available discourses for meaning-production beyond the limited securitized narrative of climate change, which only gives certain (state-level) actors the power to define policy. Meaning-making, and with it policymaking, is always the product of competing discourses (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2012). Creating space for contestations of the climate emergency-frame can therefore give way to alternative narratives that do not center around an existential threat and the limits of humanity, but instead focus on the complexity and plurality of the human-ecological relationship—"the political aesthetics of everydayness" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 588) in adapting to climate change. Such alternative discourses have the potential to overcome the dichotomy between normal and emergency politics, and to set an impulse that reaches beyond national security concerns.

As such, de-securitizing climate governance is also the only way to ultimately de-*moralize* it, to move away from the symbolic politics of emotionally charged finger-pointing, and instead focus on actual problem-solving. Consciously and deliberately distancing climate change from security narratives, perhaps by (re)shifting attention to its more technical and 'ordinary' attributes, can provide greater opportunity for experimentation, choice, and learning (Cole, 2011; Rashidi & Lyons, 2021). De-securitizing climate governance in this way thus holds potential to enhance both its effectiveness *and* legitimacy.

Conclusion

As Scott (2012) observes, "climate change is an interesting case study for theorists of securitization because, despite plenty of climate security rhetoric, the effectiveness of the global policy response continues to lag well behind the alleged seriousness of the issue" (p. 229). This paper has aimed to add a piece to this puzzle by examining the implications of securitization for global governance, and by setting an impulse to theorize about its possible way forward. The discursive construction of climate change as a security threat has made the issue one of exclusive state politics that centers around national, self-protective interest, undermining both the effectiveness and legitimacy of global climate governance. Instead, the latter must be de-securitized by involving the broader public where a diverse set of discourses compete and inform each other. Moving climate change 'back down' to the civil sphere of contestation and deliberation not only opens up a space for more comprehensive information exchange and alternative meaning-production; connecting climate governance back to civil society for scrutiny and accountability can also democratize the global climate regime, which is key to its effectiveness and legitimacy in the long run. Further research should be dedicated to the particular democratic processes and emancipating efforts needed to de-securitize climate change and its governance, an inquiry that—due to limits in time and space—is beyond the scope of this paper.

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