

Climate Change, Environmental Security Studies and the Morality of Climate Security

Written by Rita Floyd

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RITA FLOYD, JAN 20 2012

Climate change: Threat and certainty

In popular and political debate climate change (global warming) is increasingly referred to as a security issue. High ranking individual politicians and influential individuals alike have made the rhetorical connection between climate change and security. The issue has twice already been debated by the United Nations Security Council (2007 and 2011), and it now features as part of many individual states' National Security Strategies.

The main, though not the only reason[1], for the use of the language of security lies in the twin realizations that: a) large scale climatic change would constitute an objective existential threat – which is to say 'a threat that endangers the survival of an actor or an order regardless of whether anyone has realized this' (Floyd, 2011, 430) – to an array of potential referent objects of security; and b) that anthropocentric climate change is actually occurring and to a certain extent already irreversible. The latter realization in particular has been verified by the publication of the fourth assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007.

Although one might take issue with the use of science for securitization as arguably even the natural sciences are not entirely free from political motivations of the scientists themselves (Villumsen-Berling, 2011, 385ff) – and indeed climate change science has been a lucrative field for many researchers – in the case of climate change there is near scientific consensus that climate change is man-made and that it is already occurring. Given further that not all scientists will be motivated by politics and self-interest, I would suggest that we can treat climate change as a fact.

Considering, however, that there is uncertainty as regards the actual extent of climate change[2], there is far less certainty regards the question whether climate change constitutes – at this point in time – an objective existential threat to the West.[3] I would propose that there are thresholds, that when reached transform a problem of this type into an objective existential threat to some referent object. An analysis of whatever these thresholds might be, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

Even though we do not know for certain what the consequences of climate change will be those that have made a verbal connection between climate change and security see only negative consequences (notably, positive consequences are possible too), and without doubt regard climate change as a real threat. The security connection – for the lay person at least – is most easily graspable in the idea that climate change will lead, in Cleo Paskal's (2010) phrase, to 'global warring'. Indeed, ostensibly impending climate wars are (part of) the reason why climate security has gained so much in prominence.

The neglect of environmental security studies

The notion that environmental issues have the potential to lead to overt violent conflict, however, is hardly new. Neither is the idea that non-violent long-term environmental degradation will lead to human insecurity, on such a scale that human suffering will be comparable to that caused by wars.[4] Instead there exists a subfield of security studies (itself a sub-field of International Relations) that might be usefully called environmental security studies. This

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sub-sub field originates in the environmentalists movements of the 1960s and 1970s when prominent environmentalists first drew linkages between the survival of the human race and environmental issues.[5] Environmental security studies came into its own at the end of the Cold War when the practice of security changed (the United States government, for one included environmental security into various National Security Strategies) and when the academic study of security became open to include other referent objects of security and other sectors than simply national and military security (Floyd et al, 2012, chapter 1).

Today environmental security includes at least six distinct approaches, whereby scholars 'approach' the subject with two things in mind: a) the view of security (possibilities are: should security be conceived in narrow terms as the absence of conflict only, or should it be 'wide' and include the absence of other harmful things and issues, or, is securitization the wrong focus altogether and should we be concerned with 'desecuritization' instead). And b) the appropriate role of the environmental security analyst and his/her view of theory (possibilities are: is it the analyst's task to merely explain the world, or should s/he aim to change the world, or is a mixture of both most appropriate).[6] In addition the literature also comprises studies on some of the most significant environmental issues, including the relationship between food and security; development and security, demography and security and many more.

Given the existence of environmental security studies it seems surprising that security studies more generally remains largely unaware of developments within that sub-subfield. A recent and by all other accounts excellent disciplinary history of security studies, for example, virtually ignores this literature (Buzan et al, 2009). What is more – at least in this country- graduate and post-graduate courses on security studies include at best one week's worth on geopolitics and environmental security. For the most part that includes as suggested reading Robert Kaplan's sensationalist, highly polemic 'The Coming Anarchy' (1994) that has been discredited by a many within environmental security studies (see, for example, Dalby 2002, 1996; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Hartman, 2001, Duffield 2001, Barnett, 2001).

Who then is responsible for this neglect of the sub-subfield of environmental security studies? I think both sides are responsible. Environmental security scholars often fail to engage fully and comprehensively with the many conceptual, analytical and normative debates concerning security as such. This is a great shame, because the practice of environmental security itself provides important insights into the nature of security.[7] A case in point is Maria Julia Trombetta's observation that the practice of environmental security constitutes a challenge to the established conception of security as exception. This is so, she argues, because environmental security measures often take the form of 'prevention, risk management and resilience (2011: 143).' In the same vein, Ole Wæver, who is the originator of securitization theory that builds precisely on this logic of exception, has observed that arguments for climate security are made not with the view to introducing extraordinary measures, but with a view to signing an international legally binding environmental regime that are part of normal politics. As such, climate security has the potential to threaten the logic of securitization theory (Wæver, 2009, 5ff).

Although the logic of securitization needs amending to account for security practice that is unexceptional[8], it is too early to write off exceptional measures in connection with climate security. The consequences of climate change are only just being felt and it is fair to say that climate change remains a problem for the future. Politicians in turn are concerned with the here and now and with re-electability. The use of exceptional measures to deal with a problem most of us have yet to see and experience could cost politicians their own political future. In other words, exceptional measures might in time become part of climate security.

The rise of climate security has meant that environmental security issues are increasingly popular with security studies scholars more generally. Yet many of those that have taken to write about climate change as a security issue would do well to engage (more fully) with 30 years of environment-security research. Especially given that large parts of the climate security debate are a re-run of the long ranging environmental security debate (Floyd: 2008: 51ff).

Environmental security studies; insights for climate change

The latter brings me back to my original point, that environmental security studies holds important insights for climate security. Tellingly the link between violent conflict and environmental change is not nearly as clear as it is often

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suggested. In popular debate, for example, it has been argued that the Darfur genocide is the first climate war, while it is also often claimed that water wars will be the wars definitive of this century. Evidence from environmental security studies, however, suggests that qualitative case study analysis may reveal far less than hitherto assumed. In the 1990s environmental conflict research was dominated by case study analysis that has since been heavily criticised on methodological grounds. Nowadays environment conflict research increasingly takes the form of quantitative analysis, where large data sets on conflict are cross-referenced with environmental indicators, such as availability of freshwater or data on soil composition (cf. Deligiannis, forthcoming). While I do not wish to suggest that qualitative environment conflict research is flawed, that research has been unable to conclusively isolate environmental factors as the drivers of conflict. On that basis alone, it is premature to label the Darfur conflict as a climate war.

Moreover, a different set of researchers in environmental security studies has shown that despite popular rhetoric inter-state water wars are actually highly unlikely. By utilising case studies from around the globe they have shown that co-operation between conflicting states over resource shortages or shared water basins is if anything more likely (MacQuarrie et. al, forthcoming).

The morality of climate security

These research findings together with the fact that, as yet, climate change does not constitute an objective existential threat; poses questions about the need for climate security, and also about its value. With a view to the latter it is important to realize that securitization can have positive as well as negative consequences. Not only can securitization be abused by securitizing actors, who might securitize to benefit themselves and not the stated referent object (Floyd, 2010), but also not all possible referent objects are conducive to human well-being, which in accordance with much of moral philosophy is the marker of a thing's claim to moral legitimacy (Crisp, 2008). Plus different referent objects give way to wildly different security responses.

I have argued elsewhere (Floyd, 2011, 428) that a securitization, in any given security sector, is morally right provided that three criteria are fulfilled simultaneously:

1. there must be an objective existential threat, which is to say a threat that endangers the survival of an actor or an order regardless of whether anyone has realized this;
2. the referent object of security must be morally legitimate, which is the case only when the referent object is conducive to human well-being defined as the satisfaction of human needs; and
3. the security response must be appropriate to the threat in question, which is to say that (a) the security response must be measured in accordance with the capabilities of the aggressor and (b) the securitizing actor must be sincere in his or her intentions.

Considering that thus far climate change does not constitute an objective existential threat, a securitization of climate change – at least here in the West – is morally unjustifiable. However, given the slowness of the international community to act on climate change the above mentioned threshold that would render climate change objectively threatening might be crossed in the not to distant future.[9]

The likelihood of this happening means that we need to think critically through the different forms climate security may take while we also need to evaluate their potential consequences for people everywhere. The canon of research that I have here called 'environmental security studies' is invaluable for doing just that, and this sub-sub discipline of International Relations should be given greater attention in the education of students in that subject as well as in the sub-discipline of security studies. Especially considering that both the bulk of the effects of climate change and the reality of climate security (including as I have speculatively suggested above the use of exceptional measures) are (primarily) future concerns, it is vital that future academics, policymakers but also general members of the public – all of who fill today's classrooms of IR undergraduates and graduates programmes – are educated about the latest research on these issues, and not simply left to discuss Kaplan's 'The Coming Anarchy (1994)'.

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[1] Other reasons might include the idea that securitization is a good thing because it will mean that something radical will be done, while securitization might also be favoured for its mobilization power (i.e. something will be done quickly)

[2] Figures for potential sea-level rise, for example, differ wildly depending on the extent of warming; hence much of the IPCC's work is concerned with mapping different scenarios for different temperature rises.

[3] Things are (potentially) quite different elsewhere. Cases in point are low-lying small island states in the Pacific. The Maldives, Tuvalu and those of the Kiribati Atoll are each at risk of seriously shrinking or disappearing altogether, even at the conservative projection of 59cm global sea-level rise by the 2080s and 2090s (Hanson, 2008 112).

[4] Wæver, *Concepts of Security*, p.45

[5] See, for example, Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*; Brown (1978) *The Twenty-Ninth Day*

[6] For more information on this way of ordering approaches within environmental security studies see Floyd et al, *Environmental Security: Approaches and Issues*, chapter 1

[7] See, for example, Dalby, *Security and Environmental Change*; McDonald, *Security, The Environment and Emancipation: Contestation over Environmental Change*

[8] This said, however, different passages of the Copenhagen school's definitive collective work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* can be interpreted differently and already extraordinary measures do not always seem necessary for securitization. For example, at one point, securitized is defined as the state of affairs when 'the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and *justifying* actions outside of the normal bounds of political procedure (Buzan et al, 1998, 23-24 emphasis added).' And notably *justifying* is not the same as *necessitating*.

[9] This risk is exacerbated by a string of positive feedback loops. For example, should Greenland's ice sheet melt,

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the level of the Earth's surface's reflexivity (albedo) would be significantly reduced, this in turn would mean that less sunlight would be reflected back into the atmosphere, leading to further warming. A still warmer Earth could lead to the melting of the Russian permafrost releasing its trapped carbon into the atmosphere. This could lead to the melting/collapsing of the cooler Antarctic ice sheets, resulting in both reduced albedo and sea-level rise of more than 45 meters (Walker et al, 2008, 76-78).