Adaptation, Mitigation and the Securitization of Climate Change

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In early October 2014, the Pentagon released a decisive report, asserting that climate change constituted an immediate and palpable threat, posing "immediate risks to United States national security" (DOD 2014: 1). This sentiment was reiterated by the United States (US) Department of Homeland Security, whose 2014 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review framed climate change as a "major area of homeland security risk" (DHS 2014: 21). However, rather than representing a potent catalyst for galvanizing global cooperation on addressing environmental change, the reports point instead to the fundamentally problematic logics of response that underpin the dominant conceptualization of the climate-security relationship. Despite the growing consensus that mitigation and adaptation should be advanced simultaneously in a complementary framework to address environmental degradation (IPCC 2014), approaches to climate change through the lens of the national security discourse has resulted in the normative privileging of adaptation strategies (McDonald 2013: 45). It is important to illuminate here that, alongside the increasing severity of anthropogenic climate change and its associated impacts, has been an accompanying exploration on whether environmental change in general should be viewed as a security threat, and more specifically, how to understand the relationship between climate change and security. The resulting proliferation and contestation of climate security discourses have encouraged deeply different political responses on climate change; crucially, tracing the securitization of climate change through the constellation of climate-security discourses highlights how particular responses to the environment condition core normative commitments on whose security matters, and the means through which security is constructed and pursued (Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald 2014: 28).

In order to understand how global climate change has been increasingly defined as a security threat, it is important first to examine the evolution of thinking on the relationship between environmental change and security. From here, the securitization of climate change is given meaning by outlining the contours of the central discourses that underpin the climate-security relationship, embedded within the discursive framings of national security and human security. While it is clear that the national security and human security discourses encourage and legitimize different frameworks of policy and practice, it remains to be seen how human security constitutes a significant challenge to the preservation of the current status quo that privileges adaptation rather than international cooperation on mitigation.

Securitization and climate change

The growing appeal of climate security represents a relatively contemporary attempt to disseminate environmental concerns from the realm of international politics into the security agenda (Trombetta 2008: 585). For advocates of the climate-security link, twin claims exist for couching climate change in the language of security. Firstly, climate change represents an objective existential threat – understood here as "a threat that endangers the survival of an actor or an order regardless of whether anyone has realized this" (Floyd 2011: 430) – to a diverse range of conceivable referents and agents of security. Secondly, scientific consensus demonstrates that anthropocentric climate change is occurring, and is now relatively irreversible due to sustained system momentum (Kokic, Crimp and Howden 2014, Medvigy and Beaulieu 2012). However, rather than enumerating the ways in which global warming and its accompanying deleterious effects impact people's abilities to survive, this analysis seeks instead to engage with how attempts to consider environmental problems as security issues transform security practices.

The beginning of the post-Cold War period witnessed both a broadening and deepening of the security agenda, with theoretical literature embracing the shift away from the narrow military focus generated by bipolar competition (Buzan 1997: 5). In the absence of the military and nuclear obsessions of the Cold War that had dominated the traditional security agenda, debates surrounding the inclusion of non-military threats were stimulated by the rise of the global environmental agenda. The initial claims advanced by analysts seeking to elevate climate change to the 'high politics' realm of security sought to illustrate environmental degradation as a threat to long-term survival (Brown 1986). As momentum behind the climate-security relationship grew, the scale and scope of analysis expanded to include representations of climate change as the catalyst for a new era of instability, in which political institutions would face an array of new challenges associated with mass population movements, material deprivation and failed states (Kaplan 1994; Mabey 2007; Podesta and Ogden 2007).

It is important to note at this point that the growing contestation around the progressive widening of the traditional security agenda was accompanied by a concomitant expansion of the intellectual space which called for a deeper understanding of the construction of security itself. The most innovative conceptual framework intended to illuminate the way in which security preferences and practices are constructed in world politics was advanced by the theory of securitization, as elaborated by the Copenhagen School (Trombetta 2008: 587). The theory of securitization, largely associated with the works of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, illuminates the processes through which 'security' and 'security threats' are made corporeal in particular political contexts (McDonald 2008: 563). Through the framework of securitization, it is evident that there are no objective threats; rather, the political community plays a fundamental role in elevating an issue to the 'high politics' realm of security through 'speech acts'. Through his use of 'speech acts', Waever articulates how linguistic representations condition and position particular subjects as security issues, bringing to light the political processes that underpin the selection and prioritization of threats (Waever 1995). When considered alongside Michel Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, and how a "politics of truth" (2002: 133) gives meaning to physical and social realities, securitization demonstrates how security paradigms both enable and constrain different sets of knowledge and practice.

A dominant strategic discourse constitutes not only the security threat itself, but empowers and disqualifies security institutions and actors, defines terms of engagement, and conditions sets of practices through which the threat itself is addressed (Hajer 1995: 44). Ultimately, once an issue has become securitized, the hazardous logics of security necessarily follow- emergency measures are enabled, legitimating the suspension of democratic and transparent 'normal politics' in favor of the 'high politics' of national security (McDonald 2008: 567). Consequently, the securitization of an issue "triggers two debates: one about the underlying risk assessment, one about the strategic answer to it" (de Wilde 2008: 596).

The securitization of climate change can be studied directly by tracing the contours of the different discursive frameworks of meaning that seek to advance competing conceptualizations of the nature of the climate-security threat, the referent object of security, and the responses through which climate change might be addressed (Hansen 2006: 74). These responses are tied to radically different policy prescriptions that range from national adaptation to globally-oriented mitigation, and help to illustrate the ways in which the logics of both the national security and human security discourses prop up the preservation of the status quo, rather than fostering enhanced international cooperation on climate change (McDonald 2013: 49).

The National Climate-Security Discourse

Building on the contemporary rise of global political concern on environmental change broadly (Oels 2012), threats posed by climate change specifically have been increasingly and prominently addressed through national security agendas. Given that traditionalist approaches to security have privileged the preservation of sovereign capacity and territorial integrity from external threat (Walt 1991), it is unsurprising that the analysis through this dominant discourse approaches climate change as a 'threat multiplier' (DOD 2014). Food and water shortages, disputes over refugees and resources, pandemic disease and the destruction wrought by natural disasters are advanced as key challenges that carry with them strategic implications for both international stability and national security (Floyd and Matthews 2013: 46; Homer-Dixon 2007). Thus, climate change is constructed as a threat to national security in terms of the ways in which it might undermine and challenge national strategic considerations. Though some

traditionalists argue that environmental change sits uncomfortably within the security agenda, the adoption of climate change into the national security agenda has enjoyed both political traction and sustained momentum. This has been particularly evident in the developed world, with military establishments and prominent think-tanks developing national security strategies aimed at providing policy responses to the potential ways in which climate change exacerbates instability, precipitates military threats and undermines national economic development and continued growth (Busby 2008; Brzoska 2012; Levy 1995).

Yet the continued dominance of a traditional approach that positions the nation-state as both the referent object and agent of security lends itself to a problematic preservation of the status quo. Despite the obvious limitations of unilateral state action in responding to global environmental change (Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald 2014: 98), the logics underpinning the national security discourse encourages perverse political responses that excludes mitigation strategies and problematic normative implications.

Though the national security discourse recognizes mitigation strategies as playing an important role in ameliorating the negative impacts of climate change, a closer examination of responsive strategies suggest an overwhelming privileging of adaptation responses (Scott 2012: 221). As indicated earlier, the Pentagon's 2014 Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap outlines a responsive strategy to secure and protect US national interests through adapting to changing climate conditions. It is unsurprising, then, that the word 'adaptation' appears thirty-eight times throughout the body of the Roadmap, whereas 'mitigation' occurs only four times (DOD 2014). What is more profound, however, is the framing of adaptation and mitigation in the Department's 'Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan' (DOD 2012). Ostensibly, this document outlines the Department's progress and strategies towards climate change mitigation, yet the focus remains overwhelmingly centered on adaptation strategies; 'adaptation' appears twenty-six times, whereas 'mitigation' is mentioned once. Clearly, national adaptation strategies have been constructed as the primary approach through which to respond to the threat of climate change, and thus constitute a fundamental stumbling block in failing to address climate change itself (Yamaguchi 2012: 7).

One of the perverse logics that follows this approach is that states limited adaptive capacity are wholly exposed to the effects of climate change. At worst, these states and their populations are consequently framed as national security threats in themselves; effective border control strategies to repel displaced 'climate refugees' and the militarization of the environment become legitimate policy responses to address the impacts of climate change (Lister 2014: 620).

Further, the orientation of the national security discourse around the preservation of national economic growth holds concerning implications for attempts to foster global cooperation on mitigation attempts. This is best represented by the ongoing contestation of international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, which call for nation-states to embrace mitigation strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 230). Thus deconstructed, the national climate-security discourse represents a fundamentally problematic conceptualization of the natural world, and what is meant by 'security', by failing to engage with statist military and exceptionalist practices.

Human Security and Climate Change

Adoption of a human security approach as a corrective to the complex problems posed by the preservation of the nation-state as the principle referent and agent of security seems intuitive from the outset. The definition adopted here is the one advanced by the Commission on Human Security, wherein human security constitutes "the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats" (CHS 2003). This reorientation seeks to address an understanding that the nation-state is fundamentally ill equipped to respond to the realities of contemporary global politics and security challenges (McDonald 2013: 46). Within the human security discourse, the emphasis on the preservation of the status quo is attenuated by claims that focus on the rights and needs of individuals whose wellbeing and livelihoods would be fundamentally destabilized by the impacts of climate change. This link between climate change and human security was explicitly endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2009, and reiterated at the United Nations Climate Summit 2014.

This approach emphasizes the range of ways in which climate change intersects with political, social and economic inequality, prompting engagement with preventive and intervention measures that shift the focus from the state to the individual (Duffield and Waddell 2006: 46). By relocating the key referent object of security to the individual legitimates and emphasizes the need for a broader array of agents to cooperate in a holistic framework to achieve human security; states, international institutions, global civil society and sub-state groups are all constituted as key security providers within the human security discourse (Dalby 2013: 21). Thus, a broad range of practices are legitimated as responses to the human security threats posed by climate change- rather than constituted in narrow terms as a threat multiplier, human security focuses on the "multifaceted relationship between climatic conditions and effects, global structures of inequality, and community-based understandings of core values in need of protection" (McDonald 2013: 46).

This signifies a significant shift away from adaptation strategies towards mitigation approaches. Teasing out the link between climate change and human security refocuses attention on finding areas in which human beings are vulnerable, often challenging the ways in which political and economic institutions sustain these vulnerabilities by illuminating the contradictions embedded in the practices of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). The political failure of nation-states in the international system to adequately address the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions has reinvigorated the importance of elevating cosmopolitan approaches to emphasize the universality of human rights and moral obligations in order to meet new security challenges (Barnett and Adger 2007: 642).

Yet while the turn to human security represents an important corrective to redirecting state practices, critics suggest that the approach is weakened through the continued inclusion of the nation-state as a key security agent. The extent to which this allows states to co-opt the language of human security to simply re-label preferred policy practices and conceptions of the national interest represents an important vulnerability in the practical utility of the human security discourse (Owen 2004: 375). This problem is most keenly understood through the failing of the human security discourse to provide clear ideas about agency. While defining agency in broad terms welcomes a more holistic array of agents, it also creates gaps into which it has been persuasively argued that nation-states and militaries can re-insert themselves with relative ease (McDonald 2013: 47). Predictably, then, there are concerns that the human security discourse fails to question fully the specific forms of threat and the selection of security agents in terms of responding to climate change. It has been argued that the threats posed by climate change thus operate at an intersection of competing notions of national security and human security (Smith and Vivekananda 2007: 29), which does little to challenge the preservation of the contemporary status quo. While the securitization of climate change through the human security discourse has necessarily framed policy responses in terms of mitigation, rather than adaptation, it remains difficult to find instances where this has prompted effective action from the political community.

Conclusion

The recognition and constitution of an issue as a security threat encourages certain types of political responses. That "environmental change makes the necessity of rethinking security unavoidable" (Dalby 2009: 172) has largely been accepted as the science behind the damaging implications of climate change solidifies. Accepting this reality, the need for international cooperation on a complementary framework of adaptation and mitigation practices becomes abundantly clear. In the context of climate change, dilemmas in pursuing policies of mitigation necessitate the prioritization of prevention over adaptation, environment over economic interests, and cosmopolitan over communitarian ethics (McDonald 2011). However, this poses a radical threat to the contemporary political status quo, as indicated by the frequent and high profile political stalemates characteristic of international climate negotiations (Madani 2013: 68).

The national security discourse inevitably privileges climate adaptation approaches in order to preserve the current strategic interests of nation-states. Though human security provides a valuable critique in rejecting the statist and exceptionalist practices that underpin national security, its failure to reconcile agency with the provision of the 'vital core' of human life inevitably creates a vacuum that can easily be co-opted by states and militaries. Ultimately, securitization is entirely dependent on the definition of security itself. In the instance of climate change, security discourses that challenge the status quo have no obvious constituency of support in the existing formation of power (Cudworth and Hobden 2013: 643). Thus national climate-security discourses have continued to constrain

international cooperation on mitigation, advancing only a narrow definition of national interest that orients the securitization of climate change around an adaptation framework.

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