

Critical Reflections on the Theories of Security Studies Based on Climate Change Issues

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Abstract: *The climate change issue is increasingly becoming the focus of the world. The discussion around how to solve this worldwide issue has never stopped. This essay will take global climate issues as the theme to discuss the realism of traditional security theories and the concept of "securitization" in critical security studies. The concept of "securitization" is an important concept put forward by the Copenhagen School. It emerged around the end of the Cold War and was a genre of critical security studies. There are great differences between critical security studies and state-centric traditional security studies. Innovation in security studies is accompanied by new flaws. By defending the theories of realism and criticizing the concept of securitization, we could obtain some possible ways to solve these global issues. At present, the theory of realism is still the most appropriate key to solve the climate change issue.*

Keywords: *Climate Change Issue; Security Studies; Realism; Copenhagen School and Securitization*

1. Introduction

Within the context of globalization, non-traditional security issues are increasingly becoming the main focus of the international community. The threat of non-traditional security issues goes far beyond the military realm, such as the energy crisis, terrorism, environmental pollution, or natural disasters. Unlike the war or armed conflict in the traditional security sense, they have a larger scope in time and space. At the same time, military means alone cannot completely solve the fundamental problem.

Climate change, which is one of the non-traditional security issues, has become increasingly prominent in the international community due to its complexity and transnational nature. Since the pre-industrial period, the land surface air temperature has risen nearly twice as much as the global average temperature^[5]. States, NGOs (non-government organizations) and individuals, are all follow the issue very closely.

At the same time, the debate on theories of security studies has been ongoing, the most prominent of which is the debate between traditional security studies and critical security studies. Based on the global climate issue, this paper will defend realism and critique critical security studies. Through the summary of the theories of realism and the interpretation of the concept of "securitization" of the Copenhagen School, it can be found that there are some flaws in the "securitization" studies. At present, the theory of realism is still the most appropriate key to solve the climate change issue.

2. Traditional Security Studies and the Theories of Realism

Traditional security studies were born during the Cold War, and the strategies of different states became the direct research object of the realists. Over the years, realism has become one of the most important theories in international relations studies. However, climate change issue is not the same as traditional security issues. There is no potential hot or cold war, and there is no arms race, but that does not mean the climate change issue is completely outside the realm of traditional security studies.

At the same time, there are many different schools of thought on realism. In order to apply the these theories to non-traditional security issues, like climate change issue, it is necessary to abstract and generalize them.

Wohlforth (2017) argues that it is impossible to understand contemporary security studies without a foundation in realism^[14]. Because realism has had considerable vitality and continuity, many schools of

realism have now arisen. Snyder (2002) provides a more detailed summary of the schools of realism in his review of Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001)^[7]. Theories of realism include classical, defensive, offensive, neoclassical, contingent, specific, and generalist realism. Wohlforth (2017) also developed a discussion of neo-realism. Walt (2017) developed a discussion of the relationship between realism and security while comparing realism with democratic peace theory, economic liberalism, and social constructivism^[13].

The debate between these different schools of thought was intense, but they also had some common points. After reorganizing and summarising, the following common points of the theories of realism can be drawn. First, the international community is now in anarchy, and states have to take the initiative to ensure their security. Second, states are the main actors in the international community, and the great powers are the most influential. Third, states will seek more, such as power or other interests while ensuring their security (traditional security). Finally, it is difficult to achieve a hegemonic position for any state in the international community, so all states tend to maintain a balance of power.

If these ideas are applied to the issue of climate change, they can still be used to analyze the behaviors of certain states.

1) After the Cold War, the security threat posed by war was significantly reduced and the security of states was relatively secure. States thus could spend more on some non-traditional issues, such as terrorism, climate change issues and immigration issues. The rise of international organizations and increasing cooperation between states can also prove this. National security is always one of the priorities of states at all times.

2) On the global climate change issues, states are still the main actors. At the same time, the great powers are still the most influential actors and rule-makers. On 12 December 2015, 195 states reached an agreement on a new climate treaty, *The Paris Agreement*. Faulkner (2016) claimed that "The Paris Climate Summit heralds the start of a new era in international climate politics that offers more lasting opportunities for international cooperation." This is an important juncture in human cooperation on climate change issues, but different states played different roles^[4].

Parker and Christer (2018) empirically demonstrate that the Copenhagen Accord and the Paris Climate Agreement are heavily influenced by the preferences and influence of the United States. Even though the survey shows no more than 50% support for "the US as a leader", it is still the most influential state^[6]. They also point out that the Paris Agreement alone will not really help the world to avoid a climate crisis and it will be vary difficult to accomplish this task without the US lead or involvement. In addition to this, they also successfully predicted that the Biden administration would decide to return to the Paris Agreement in their paper.

3) The fundamental driver of state's behaviors remains self-interest. As just mentioned, the US is the global leader on climate issues, but during his time in office, former US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. His slogan has always been "Make America Great Again", arguing that the \$2 billion cost was not consistent with the US national interest. Just one change of election later, the current US President, Joe Biden, announced that the US would rejoin the Paris Agreement. For reasons of protecting the international prestige and keeping the future international influence power, the US needs to maintain its role as the top leader of the world. At the same time, the US does not want to be subjected to a framework for climate issues in the future that is designated by other states. There is no doubt that the wavering on the issue has made the US act funny and embarrassing. But for the interests of the US, the leader of the White House thought it is worthy.

4) Another powerful force that cannot be ignored in international climate negotiations is the alliance between small island states. They are recognized by the international community as small states that have long been outside the view of the international community.

Apart from a few states such as Cuba and Singapore, the remaining states can be described as without any international influence. So what is it that unites these small island states? Obviously, there is a huge threat to their state's security. These small states are the most direct victims of climate change issues, and at the same time, they do not have enough power to defend themselves against the forces of nature calamities. What makes this group so active in the international debate on climate is essentially "national security".

We can therefore draw a tentative inference that traditional security studies are not out of date and that the theories of realism can still be used to analyze security issues in the international community today. Another can be drawn that, in the real world, the decisions of the states are also guided by realism.

The national interest is the primary driver. Most realists would also emphasize the importance of great powers in finding a solution.

3. The Copenhagen School and Securitization

Traditional security studies are state-centric, with realism, liberalism, and constructivism all taking a perspective of state security. Critical security studies, on the other hand, are different from traditional security studies in that they advocate non-state centric approaches. Critical security studies emerged around the end of the Cold War, the change of the world political pattern and the emergence of new public problems have changed the object of security studies. The best known of critical security studies are the Copenhagen School, the Paris School, and the Welsh School.

Securitization is a core concept of the Copenhagen School, represented by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. Wæver (1995) provides a systematic and in-depth discussion of 'securitization'^[12]. The theory of securitization draws on a linguistic theory called the 'speech act theory'. This is arguably the starting point for the theory of securitization. He argues that securitization is a 'speech act', which becomes a fact as soon as the expression is completed. In other words, it is an act of labeling an issue as a 'threat or problem' and then using various resources to solve the threatening 'problem'.

There are three core elements to the concept of securitization. The first is the object of the securitization act, i.e. what is a threat and what has to be securitized. They argue that in addition to traditional security issues that can directly threaten national security, such as military threats and superpower threats, some non-traditional security issues, such as environmental issues and immigration issues, should also be taken into consideration. For example, Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) present a reflection on security issues that go beyond the national framework^[8]. They argue that threats oriented toward the national, societal, and individual levels are different. The second element is the subject of the security act, i.e. who persuades the audience and who is the speaker. They argue that there should be many actors, the state, government departments, political elites, NGOs, etc. All kinds of actors, above or below the state, can be the speaker. The third element is the process of securitization. Once this threat has been accepted by the audience, the subject of securitization can resort to all means to counter this threat, including those above and beyond the usual.

There are similarities between securitization and constructivism. In simple terms, the process of securitization is that the subject first selects the would-be threat as the object of securitization. The subject of the securitization act then makes a speech, persuades the audience to develop a realization, and ultimately the subject takes steps to address this threat. The speech act plays a key role in the process of securitization. Its key aspect is that the subject of the securitization act constructs or shapes a would-be issue into a security issue through linguistic behavior. The incorporation of linguistics is a huge breakthrough in security research theory, and interdisciplinary research is bound to lead to new results. However, I remain skeptical about the theory and believe that it has obvious flaws.

1) The concept of securitization overemphasizes the role of language and ignores the general principle of the behavior of the main actor (the states). Among the subjects of securitization, although there are multiple subjects, only the state is the most decisive one. In most parts of the world, the state level generally holds the most power, both in economic and political terms. This means that the state dominates the vital part of the media, the internet, and the rest of the communication channels. Therefore, whether an issue can be securitized or not ultimately depends on the state. I am not denying the relevance of NGOs and other actors, but stating the simple fact that the state is always the most powerful. Not to mention that the state dominates violent departments such as the police and the military.

2) Is this theory essentially too idealistic? What kind of issues should be securitized? How deep is the appropriate level of securitization for a certain security issue? Who can decide and answer these questions? Securitization seems very difficult to give a satisfactory answer.

Let's consider the "discussion context" of this issue as global climate change. If the climate change issue is the object of the securitization, it is necessary to determine whether the climate change issue is able to be a security issue at first. There is no doubt that the climate issue is very complex and broad. It is an interdisciplinary issue that involves several fields like environmental science, economics, political science, sociology, and so on. It is also an issue without clear borders, and different states may be all troubled by it, even if they are located in different places, the east or west side of the continent or just an island in the Pacific.

But when it becomes a security issue, the degree of its threat to different states varies. Different states

and regions have different judgments about the degree of threat. Island states are different from land-based states, developed states are different from developing states, and states governed by different ideologies are different neither. The UNFCCC document *Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan* (2022, p.5) showed that “... existing gaps in the global climate observing system, particularly in developing states, and recognizes that one-third of the whole world, including sixty percent of Africa, does not have access to early warning and climate information service at all...”^{[10][11]}.

From the moment the climate issue emerged, it was destined to become the center of attention because of the complex interests involved. How do we persuade all of the states that the global climate change is an important "security issue" in the face of this complexity? For many poor states, the issue of development may be the most important. Most developed states, on the other hand, are more interested in economic issues, territorial disputes, and political struggles. And these states are supposed to be the key subjects of the securitization. And what has led to this result? I think the most plausible explanation is that realism is dominating state decision-making. The fundamental driver of state's behaviors remains national interests.

3) Finally, could securitization become a kind of political tool? For example, by increasing or decreasing the degree of securitization, the securitization actors could achieve certain goals. The answer is yes, it is possible. On December 10, 2010, former US President Barack Obama stated at the Norwegian Nobel Committee, “There is little scientific dispute that if we do nothing, we will face more drought, more famine, more mass displacement, all of which will fuel more conflict for decades.” Some people call this a climate war.

Some scholars argue that the warnings of 'climate wars' may cause more harm than benefit. The climate issue does deserve more attention, as available data show that droughts and other climate shocks have led to more poverty and frustration, which may mean more suffering in the future. But an over-securitization of the climate issue could lead to militarization. This could make an already chaotic region even more unstable and increase fear among the public, leading to potential migration issues^[9].

Campbell (2021) uses the example of Australia to demonstrate that irrationality also exists within developed states. Gas contracts, signed at great expense for political gain, become a burden on the Australian taxpayers in the end^[2].

4. Conclusion

This essay discussed two security studies theories, using the issue of climate change as an object of study. The Copenhagen School's securitization theory differs from traditional security studies in that it extends the discussion of security and threats beyond the state and the military. This is undoubtedly a huge breakthrough in post-Cold War security studies theory. It has brought a new research perspective to security studies, and the incorporation of other disciplines has injected fresh blood into theoretical innovation in security studies.

However, the neglect of state actors and general norms has made it less convincing. The definition of security issues and the overemphasis on subjectivity in the study leave the theory with obvious flaws. Finally, I did not find elements of empiricism in the theory, which confused me and seemed different from what I thought the social sciences should be. As Ryerson Christy (2010) puts it, "It would appear to be a superb tool for addressing narrowly defined issues, but it is fundamentally unable to usher in critical change"^[3]. Theory is divorced from practice and cannot prove its truth.

However, I must admit that the concept of securitization is complex and obscure and that the Copenhagen School's theory is not limited to this. My understanding of it is perhaps incomplete, and the sources I have found so far may not fully cover the real results of the theory. The self-critique of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2009), for example, introduces a new concept, security constellations, which is not mentioned in Part Three of this paper and I still need to learn more about it^[1].

For the solutions to the climate issues, I still hold the view of realism. States, as international actors, will always insist on the priority of their national interests. The great powers are the main actors and rule makers.

The climate issue in today's world has affected the interests of all states, big or small, and therefore all states should take certain measures. Of all the latent measures, I believe that the most practicable among them are the following three.

1) The international community should insist that great powers initiate international climate

negotiations. Great powers restrict each other, and small states are supervised by great powers. In this way, a stable climate governance mechanism can be formed. At the same time, certain accountability or punitive measures should be put in place to avoid or limit the irresponsibility of some states in global issues.

2) Via the forums provided by international institutions, great powers can provide direct economic and technical assistance to states with extreme poverty and low resistance to danger. This not only addresses the security issues of the states being assisted but also enhances the international reputation and influence of the great powers. This virtuous cycle may promote cooperation across humanity.

3) The governance of the climate change issues may require a certain degree of sacrifice for both great powers and weak states. It is difficult to balance equity and efficiency at the same time, but it is possible to negotiate the distribution of responsibilities between different states. A certain amount of inequity is worthwhile. Because global climate governance needs to focus more on sustainability and stability.

A pessimistic view of the real world may be discouraging, but it should not lead us to give up hope for the future of humanity. Similarly, expectations of freedom, democracy, and peace should not blind us to the brutality of real-world politics. So whichever theory is used, the ultimate goal that needs to be achieved should be the same, namely to achieve feasibility and effectiveness in practice. Traditional security studies and critical security studies should not be in complete opposition to each other but should be mutually informed and assimilated to develop better. It is because of openness and tolerance that humanity was able to progress until today. I believe that the climate issue will not become the end of humanity, either now or in the future.

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