



Environmental securitization in International Politics: an analysis of political leadership' discourses in the context of the Paris Agreement

Securitização ambiental na Política Internacional: uma análise de discursos de lideranças políticas no contexto do Acordo de Paris

Securitización Ambiental em la Política Internacional: un análisis de discursos de liderazgos políticos en el contexto del Acuerdo de París

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Abstract

Considering the relationship between environmental problems and international security, this paper questions whether there has been, in recent years, a movement by political leaderships to securitize environmental problems? The methodology applied in this paper was a bibliographical review on securitization and its relationship with environmental discussions. Then, we proceed with a discourse analysis of important political leaderships in the context of the birth of the Paris Agreement. As a result, we observed that, academically, the debate on the environment and security still lacks many studies. And, although it is not possible to affirm that there is a movement of securitization on the part of international political leaderships, in the context of COP-21 there were important speeches associating environmental problems with an urgent threat to the future of humanity.

Key-words: Environment. Climate Change. Securitization. Discourses. Paris Agreement.

Resumo

Considerando a relação entre os problemas ambientais e a segurança internacional, este artigo questiona se houve, nos últimos anos, um movimento das lideranças políticas para securitizar os problemas ambientais? A metodologia aplicada neste artigo foi uma revisão bibliográfica sobre securitização e sua relação com as discussões ambientais. Em seguida, procedemos a uma análise do discurso de importantes lideranças políticas no contexto do nascimento do Acordo de Paris. Como resultado, observamos que, academicamente, o debate sobre meio ambiente e segurança ainda carece de muitos estudos. E, embora não

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seja possível afirmar que exista um movimento de securitização por parte das lideranças políticas internacionais, no contexto da COP-21 houve discursos importantes associando os problemas ambientais a uma ameaça urgente ao futuro da humanidade.

Key-words: Meio Ambiente. Mudança do Clima. Securitização. Discursos. Acordo de Paris

Resumen

Considerando la relación entre los problemas ambientales y la seguridad internacional, este artículo cuestiona si ha habido, en los últimos años, un movimiento por parte de los liderazgos políticos para securitizar los problemas ambientales. La metodología aplicada en este artículo fue una revisión bibliográfica sobre la titulación y su relación con las discusiones ambientales. Luego, procedemos con un análisis del discurso de importantes liderazgos políticos en el contexto del nacimiento del Acuerdo de París. Como resultado, observamos que, académicamente, el debate sobre medio ambiente y seguridad aún carece de muchos estudios. Y, si bien no es posible afirmar que exista un movimiento de securitización por parte de los liderazgos políticos internacionales, en el contexto de la COP-21 hubo importantes discursos asociando los problemas ambientales con una amenaza urgente al futuro de la humanidad.

Palabras-clave: medio ambiente. Cambio Climático. Securitización. Discursos. Acuerdo de París.

Introduction

There is already a consensus that climate change has an expressive anthropogenic component and that its consequences affect the world population in different ways. In recent years, discussions have increased about conflicts generated by scarcity of resources, migrations induced by environmental problems, damage to agriculture due to extreme temperatures and loss of territory due to rising sea levels. Although some of these consequences are still isolated, the fact is that important scientific institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) attest that, in the path that humanity has been following, if no significant reduction in global emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) is made, these consequences will increase (Franchini et al. 2017; IMCCS, 2021).

Aware of these consequences, our paper aims to discuss the relationship between environmental issues and international security. We

question if there has been, in recent years, a movement by political leaderships to securitize environmental problems? To carry out this work, through a bibliography review, we first highlight the contributions of the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School and discusses its arguments for the development of the studies that investigates the relationship between security and environmental problems. Afterwards, we carry out a discourse analysis of important political leaderships for environmental governance in the context of the Paris Agreement, looking for elements that indicate whether or not there is an attempt to securitize the climate issue. As this discussion involves many aspects, it is noteworthy that this work does not intend to verify whether the identified securitization attempts were effective or not. In addition, our work aims to fill a gap in this debate, since, as will be shown later, there is a scarcity of works that make this link that we are proposing.

Securitizing an issue and the environmental agenda

In the field of international security studies, it is common for authors to diverge on the concept of security, depending on their theoretical affiliations. There are those who defend the exclusivity of the sovereign State as the main object of reference, such as realists and neorealists, and others who advocate a broader concept, such as constructivist and critical theorists, who offer an approach that embodies a concern for human beings. It was in the constructivist approach that the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School was established, having as one of its pillars the idea that securitization takes place through a social process (Malik, 2015).

Constructivism considers that international relations are socially constructed through meanings, identities, what certain agents believe and also through the observation of analysts about certain phenomena. For the Securitization Theory, they are social processes that determine whether a given issue is a security issue or not. Thus, depending on how it is interpreted, any subject can be a security issue and, consequently, contrary to traditional approaches in International Relations, the Securitization Theory goes beyond the sovereign State, considering multiple reference objects (Malik, 2015).

Of course, if any issue can be a security issue, none will be. To avoid this problem, Buzan et al. (1998) suggest three criteria for identifying a security issue: (1) the presence of an existential threat; (2) the need to act to prevent a given threat must become a priority; and (3) the possibility of breaking the rules that govern the relationship between agents under normal

conditions. In any case, securitization is a self-referential practice, because it is in the social process that the subject becomes a security issue, being presented as such, and not because it is necessarily a threat.

We also consider that an issue is usually presented as an existential threat by elites, but the next step depends on an audience's acceptance that that threat is real and of concern to everyone involved in the context. Only then, emergency procedures can be adopted, such as removing that subject from a policy field under normal conditions and the possibility of breaking the rules (Malik 2015). The points highlighted above about securitization and the explanatory power of the constructivist approach are important in understanding how the securitization of environmental issues has developed over time.

Hough (2015) argues that the securitization of environmental issues in international relations is still a debate far from a consensus. Although securitization does not necessarily refer to the militarization of an issue, some scholars believe that the environmental issue should not be militarized. Others, like traditional realists, advocate that issues that are not military in nature should not be securitized. An alternative path, which is perhaps one of the most promising, and which only began to be developed in the 1990s, places environmental issues in the perspective of human security, understanding that thousands of people die from air pollution and other consequences climate change. Allenby (2000) also points that the intersection between national security and environmental problems started to become more clearly when the stability of the world's ecosystems began to be questioned, in the end of Cold War and the 20th century. Hence, the

implications to States, more importantly, their societies, became undeniable.

One of the first debates on this issue focused on the State, highlighting the connection of climate and key issues in the security debate, such as war and conflict. At the origin of these problems would be global warming, scarcity of resources such as water, environmental disasters, floods, diseases and refugee movements (Hough, 2015). To this day, many believe that these are isolated problems and still far into the future. However, these problems are systemic and are already happening, as shown by data from institutions such as the IPCC on high temperatures in tropical areas of the globe, the challenges of societies dependent on agriculture, sea level rise, forest fires and the spread of pests (Wallace-Wells, 2019). The point is, if before the debate was about the connection of these problems with the State, today it is increasingly evident and inseparable from the impact on human beings' lives.

Another argument that reinforces the seriousness of the situation is the discussion about the Anthropocene. Especially from the 1970s onwards, the increase in scientific evidence reinforced the impact of human activity on the environment, aggravating certain environmental problems and increasing global warming. The pressure of human beings on the planet allowed the disruption of systems essential to the stability of life, and the result is that since the Industrial Revolution the Earth has abandoned the Holocene period, abandoning a stability of the last twelve millennia (Franchini et al. 2017).

At this point, we need to clarify what we are calling international environmental problems and what climate problems are. The first are "those impacts on the natural environment

of human activities that some significant set of people view as negative and that have either a transboundary or international commons aspect" (Mitchell, 2010, p. 21). This is, a problem exists, in fact, when it is perceived as such by a set of actors who understand it as so. A climate problem, on the other hand, is related to the period in which we live, the Anthropocene, and concerns, above all, global climate change and global warming, which in turn are also international environmental problems.

In the last thirty years, in addition to the increase in scientific evidence, it is possible to identify countries and international organizations that carry out initiatives that bring the environmental issue closer to the field of security. Often this happens only in a discourse, but, as seen, it is in the social process that securitization takes place. For example, in 1994, Russia adopted a declaration stating that environmental security was part of the country's national security. In 2012, Brazil mobilized the armed forces to fight fires in the Amazon, signaling the concern with this problem (Hough, 2015). It is also noteworthy, as stated by Santos (2015) that, although the IPCC presents itself as a neutral institution, aspects of securitization can be identified in its discourses on global warming. For the author, this securitization is shared by Small Island States, as they have high levels of vulnerability and exposure to rising sea levels caused by climate change.

In a recent work, Mendes et al. (2020) questioned whether vulnerability to climate change increased or decreased a country's attempt to securitize an issue. According to the authors, the hypothesis that a country with a higher level of vulnerability would be more likely to securitize the climate agenda does not hold, as the information available to deal with

this issue may be sufficient for policy making, and how emergency measures can lead to political instability, it is preferable to deal with the issue within traditional channels. In other words, in the debate on the relationship between the environmental agenda and international security, it is necessary to be aware of the existence of a series of elements.

It is also necessary to consider the arguments of those who are against the inclusion of environmental issues in security studies. According to Deudney (1990), analytically it would be misleading to think of threats to the environment as threats to national security, because its traditional focus would be intra-state violence and not environmental problems. Furthermore, according to him, environmental degradation is not likely to cause wars between states. Note that this reasoning reflects a logic that does not consider human security as an analytical object of debate and, in addition, as already pointed out, securitization does not necessarily refer to the militarization of an issue.

Although it cannot be said that climate change has already caused conflicts between States, in the domestic sphere the situation is different. Climate change already has effects on peace and security, for example in armed conflicts in institutionally fragile contexts, and the trend is that with the increase in temperature this will intensify. Although climate is part of the agenda of important international security agents, such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), there is still a long way to go, thinking in terms of State security and human security (IMCCS 2021).

Furthermore, Deudney's (1990) argument about the focus on intrastate security can also be criticized, since an event potentially harmful

to the environment can start domestically and affect other countries and regions as well. For Carter et al. (2021), the consequences of climate change are transboundary and have a systemic impact, varying in scales and dynamics, depending on the geographic conditions and socioeconomic contexts of the affected places. Again, an approach that pays attention to the implications of these developments on international security is important, as only in this way can adaptation and mitigation planning be able to build an effective resilience structure.

After these brief considerations on the environmental theme in the field of security, what is observed in the theoretical sphere is that there is still much disagreement and a scarcity of works on the articulation between the themes. In practice, initiatives by countries and international organizations were pointed out in the articulation between these themes, but there is still a lack of studies to know the contribution they have to the securitization of the environmental theme.

Environmental Security in the international politics of the Paris Agreement

Resuming the question that guides this paper, if there has been, in recent years, a movement by political leaderships to securitize environmental problems, an analysis will be made of the initiatives of international policy agents that have elements that can be interpreted as attempts to securitize the environmental theme. Speeches by political leaderships will be analyzed – former US President Barack Obama, former US Vice President Al Gore, Pope Francis and the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Clima-

te Change (UNFCCC), Cristina Figueres; and the environmental NGO Greenpeace. These agents were chosen because it is assumed that their positions were important in the context that led to the establishment of the Paris Agreement in 2015, and also because, they can be understood, according to theory, as elites which discourses matters to determined audiences.

By political leadership, we are assuming that it is an actor or a set of actors that can play important roles in a given negotiation or issue, depending on their attributes. As stated by Wettestad (1999), a leadership is normally focused on the success of a negotiation according to the values that guide their understanding of success. Underdal (2002) goes beyond this dimension of negotiation, thinking of a more diffuse and subtle process, where leadership may not present itself explicitly and will depend on the observer's identification of his role in the issue.

As discussed, the constructivist contribution to security studies believes that securitization takes place through a social process, and one of its primary components is discourse. Texts, pronouncements, statements and images are examples of speeches, as they can contain words or symbols with meanings that go beyond language, which can also be part of a historical and social process (Maingueneau 2003). Discursive manifestations can mobilize a set of elements to try to securitize a given issue.

There are three modalities of Discourse Analysis. For this work, modality 2 (AD-2), commonly associated with the constructivist field, is the one that offers the greatest explanatory contribution, as it considers the concept of discursive formation by Foucault (2008), which establishes that discourses come out of

a specific social place and are also invaded by other discursive formations (Foucault 2008; Mussalim 2006). To operationalize this analysis, we searched for discursive formations in discourses that associate environmental degradation to a situation of risk, crisis, emergency, mass extinction and threat to the next generations.

In 2015, the context in which the discussion on environmental governance took place was marked by the expectation that the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP-21) would manage to establish a strong agreement that would succeed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The context was driven by increasing scientific evidence attesting to the serious consequences of GHG emissions and rising global temperatures on the environment. At the time, two countries were fundamental agents (and continue to be): China, currently the country that emits the most GHG annually, and the USA, which occupies the second position annually, but first in the historical emissions (Silveira, 2019).

In August 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released the Clean Power Plan. The plan, which had the support of President Barack Obama, set limits on carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from power plants, and proposed a 32% cut below 2005 levels by 2030 (Clean... 2015). Previously, also endorsed by Obama, the US had presented its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (iNDC) with a total GHG emission reduction target of 26-28% below 2005 levels by 2025 (US... 2015). These targets represented a concern on the part of the US and Obama with emissions of CO₂, the most harmful to the atmosphere, and of the GHG as a whole. However, for Greenpeace, the proposals were not enough.

The Obama Administration has submitted a plan to reduce US climate impacts that begins to *treat the wound*, but does not *stop the bleeding*. As the world's second largest emitter, the US *must strengthen its commitment* to climate solutions before Paris to ensure an agreement that *immediately* spurs the necessary transition away from fossil fuels and towards 100 percent renewable energy (Greenpeace... 2015, s/p, author's italics).

This position by one of Greenpeace's leaderships shows an association between the environmental problem and a disease, as seen in the terms "wound" and "bleeding". These terms are metaphors, a resource widely used by political agents in speeches in order to bring the target audience closer to the object they want to draw attention to. Metaphors are in the construction of discourses, whether literary or scientific, and allow associating a certain cognitive structure to an object that is being debated (García, 2004). In addition to metaphors, Greenpeace also uses the verb "should" conjugated in the present tense and the adverb "immediately", signaling the degree of urgency it believes should be attributed to the issue.

Although Greenpeace did not consider the Obama administration's proposal enough, the fact is that, at least in his speeches, former President Obama was aware of the enormous environmental challenge facing humanity. On June 25th, 2013, Obama stated:

And someday, *our children, and our children's children*, will look at us in the eye and they'll ask us, did we do all that we could when we had the chance to deal with this problem and leave them a *cleaner, safer, more stable world*? And I want to be able to say, yes, we did. *Don't you want that?* (Remarks... 2013, s/p, author's italics).

In this excerpt, we observe that Obama associates the environmental challenge with a generational issue, questioning his interlo-

cutors about the future they would leave for their children. Obama also uses the adjectives "clean, safe and stable" to refer to the future he is questioning. For many societies, security and stability are attributes considered fundamental to the social order, therefore, by putting these attributes in check, it is believed that there is an initiative on the part of Obama to place the debate on the future of environmental governance in the field of security.

In addition to the highlighted points, the last sentence underlined, "don't you want that?", reinforces the idea of trying to convince an audience about a certain issue. As mentioned, one of the elements that make up the securitization of an issue is the acceptance by an audience that it is urgent. Only in this way is it possible to remove it from a field of politics under normal conditions, and place it in another that allows for the adoption of more urgent actions and even the breaking of rules (Malik, 2015).

Albert Arnold (Al) Gore Jr., former US Vice President, is also known for being an environmental activist, founder of the NGO Climate Reality and, a 2007 Nobel Peace Prize laureate with the IPCC (The Nobel... 2020). In 2015, when speaking at COP-21, he declared:

make no mistake, the *next generation* will inherit the Earth we bequeath to them. [...] If they live in a world in which we have not addressed this crisis [...] they would be justified in looking back at us, this group of us gathered here in Paris in December of 2015 and asking, *'what were you thinking?! Why did you not act?!*' (Envirobeat, 2015, s/p, author's italics).

As we see, this speech has many elements that are similar to the one delivered by Obama. There is a mention of the generational issue and the Planet that humanity is leaving for

our successors. Furthermore, Al Gore uses the same strategy as Obama when questioning his interlocutors about “why did you not act?!”. Furthermore, he also calls the environmental problem a “crisis”, adding an element that refers to something more worrying and that demands more attention.

Another important figure in 2015 was Pope Francis, who published an Encyclical Letter called *Laudato Si'*², which addressed the interconnected nature of environmental, economic, and equity issues. In the text, Francis states that “it is necessary to reinvigorate the awareness that we are one *human family*. There are no borders or political or social barriers that allow us to be isolated” (Francisco, 2015, p. 42-43, author’s italics). In another excerpt, he refers to “a *crisis* that is a ‘dramatic consequence’ of the uncontrolled activity of human beings” (p. 4, author’s italics). The text also highlights the presence of terms such as “ecological crisis” and “urgency” in relation to human awareness. As noted, the document mixes elements that give faith, such as the allusion to the “human family”, but it also recognizes the anthropogenic nature of environmental problems. In addition, like Obama and Al Gore, Francisco calls the situation a “crisis”, communicating to his audience, mostly made up of Catholic Christians, about the seriousness of the situation.

One of the reasons for the importance of the encyclical letter is precisely the audience it reaches, bearing in mind the figure of Pope Francis. For Cristina Figueres, UNFCCC Exe-

cutive Secretary at the time, “Pope Francis’ encyclical underscores the *moral imperative* for *urgent action* on climate change to lift the planet’s *most vulnerable populations*, protect development, and spur responsible growth (Pope... 2015, s /p, author’s italics). In this speech, the Executive Secretary highlights the impact on the most vulnerable populations, reinforcing that this cut is also important for the debate. Furthermore, in addition to emphasizing the call for “urgent action”, Figueres also emphasizes that taking care of the Planet would be a “moral imperative”, making use of the assumptions that guide the Catholic Christian faith, and also of concern for future generations. In other words, his speech is also in tune with those of the other agents analyzed, especially in the understanding that urgent action is needed.

Considering Buzan et al. (1998)’s three criteria, what we can observe in each political leadership is: Greenpeace uses metaphors and verbs characteristic to securitization speeches, but asks for an action of the U.S. government into the institutional channels, such as a stronger NDC. Obama and Al Gore allude to the generational issue and a moral commitment of humanity, but they do not make it clear whether this should become a priority. In Obama’s case, although he speaks of values such as security and stability, which are commonly related to security, there is not a possibility of action through the breaking of rules. With regard to Pope Francis and the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, both mobilize in their speeches the issue of humanity’s moral imperative towards the environment and the next generations, but also do not go beyond the identification of an existential threat.

2 *Laudato Si'* comes from “*Laudato Si', mi Signore*”, a chant sung by St. Francis of Assisi whose meaning was “Praised be You, my Lord”. In the letter, Francisco addresses all of humanity, warning of the consequences of the devastation that has been done to the planet. Published in a book, the text originated the *Laudato Si'* Movement, whose goals are inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda (Francisco, 2015).

Conclusion

Among International Relations academics, depending on their theoretical affiliations, there is a series of disagreements about the reading of environmental problems and their impacts through the lens of security studies. Among political leaders and decision makers, focusing on those who bring the environmental issue in their discourse, what is observed is the presence of elements that can be interpreted as attempts at securitization, but which do not go beyond the identification of an existential threat.

We asked whether in recent years there has been a movement by political leaderships to securitize environmental problems? Some elements of the Securitization Theory were presented and its consequences were discussed, when the focus is on environmental problems. In our speech's analysis, what was observed were important leaderships of countries and institutions with speeches that make use of common resources in securitization attempts, such as the use of metaphors and the intention to convince a certain audience about a certain issue. However, none of them said openly that environmental problems must become a priority, or at least, they did not specify how it should be done. And more important, all of them are speaking from institutional channels and saying that measures need to be taken through them, encouraging, for example, the adoption of the Paris Agreement.

Thus, although it is not possible to state that there is a movement of securitization on the part of international leaderships, what is clear is that this is a debate among academics – which needs to be intensified - and that, in the context of COP-21, important leaderships

spoke out by associating environmental problems with an existential threat to the future of humanity. Furthermore, if in previous years there were environmental movements and dispersed voices that denounced environmental problems, what we had in the 2015's context, at least discursive, are speeches of the international political elite relating these themes.

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