



Climate Change as Environmental International Security Issue: The Threat of Global Warming in Small Island States

*Mudança Climática como Questão de Segurança Ambiental Internacional:
A ameaça do Aquecimento Global nos Pequenos Estados Ilha*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the process of securitization of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is seen as a securitizer agent and the Small Island States as an audience. The possibility of those countries disappearing is a threat to the national and the human security.

Keywords: *Securitization, Climate Change and Small Islands States*

Sumário

Este artigo discute o processo de securitização da mudança climática. O Painel Intergovernamental sobre Mudanças Climáticas (IPCC) é visto como um agente securitizador e os Pequenos Estados Ilha como seu público. A possibilidade destes países desaparecerem é uma ameaça à segurança nacional e humana.

Palavras-chave: *Securitização, Mudança Climática; Pequenos Estados Ilha*

1. Doutoranda em Relações Internacionais na Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais

Introduction

This study aims to present new security concepts that expand the traditional concept of security and allow us to consider “new” threats. The second section will present the new theme of security in International Relations, the concepts of human security and environmental security as they were originally formulated and currently understood; then will present the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School, which takes into consideration how the idea of security is built in the speech act and how the audience is persuaded to see climate change as a risk to human security. The third section will contextualize climate change, presenting an overview of its historic international regime and the related organizations, analyzing the role of the IPCC in the securitization process of climate change. The fourth section will analyze the Small Island States as an audience of the securitization process of climate change. In the fifth, and final, section, the conclusion is presented.

The new theme of security in International Relations

The field of security studies has become one of the most dynamic and contested ones in International Relations in recent decades (Williams, 2003 *apud* Barbosa, 2008). Among the formulators of the new theme of securitization is the Copenhagen School, of which the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever is associated, and it has developed the Theory of Securitization. This theory highlights the political nature of the security as a speech act, challenging the traditional approach to security and introducing a social constructivist perspective. This theory considers how problems are transformed into security issues (Barbosa, 2008).

Human Security

The concept of security, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1994), was primarily viewed as security of a territory from external aggression, the protection of national interests in foreign policy, or as international security meaning when all countries perceive the same threat, e.g., a nuclear risk. This concept relates more to nation-states than to people.

The concept of human security, presented in the UNDP Report of 1994, states that the international system should protect both national sovereignty and individual rights and, therefore, the concept of security should be reformed. Thus, human security is a universal concern and is relevant to people all over the world, whether they live in rich or poor countries, and many threats are common to all, such as drugs, crime, pollution, and violations of human rights. According to the UNDP, the intensity may differ from one part of the world to another, but the threats to human security are real and growing.

The concept of human security, according to the UNDP (1994), is people-centered and is concerned with how human beings live in society and whether they live in conflict or in peace. The report also states that it is less costly to protect human security by early preventative measures than by later intervention. According to the UNDP Human Development Report (1994, p. 24):

The list of threats to human security is long, but most can be considered under seven main categories: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security

Human security is focused on protecting the basis/center of society vital core in order to protect and improve upon human freedom in threatening situations. There must be willingness and the ability to maintain security and

stability in the integration of political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural systems (Liotta and Taylor, 2006). Human security is a perspective on the study when it comes to addressing threats to the survival of societies, groups, and individuals.

Environmental Security

Thus, national security primarily involves military issues related to the defense of territoriality, sovereignty, and threats that a country has already received. Other human security issues involve the protection of individuals at risk due to certain threats, among which are the ones related to environmental issues that pose threats to human life itself.

It is understood that the notion of environmental security is even broader than the human security, because threats such as natural disasters and global warming are endangering the lives of other species and threatening the Earth's ecosystems, which are indispensable to the maintenance of any life form.

Discussions as to whether or not to consider the environment as an issue of security for international relations purposes, according to McDonald (2005), do not consider one central question to evaluate the socially constructed character of international security as an academic discipline. Therefore, the question of whether or not the problem is a security issue, presupposes the existence of a universal concept of security, and, according to this author, security is a term that has different meanings for different groups of people at different times and for different situations.

These questions would be more consistent, according to McDonald (2005), if we understood what type of security we are approaching or conceptualizing when we consider the issues of environmental changes. Thus, you might think of global climate change as a matter of socially constructed international security due to the nature of

the threat to human life, the ecosystem, and the international system.

Because the issue of security should be focused on the survival of humanity, when environmental issues began threatening the survival of humanity, these issues were included in the security agenda. Given the catastrophic impact that environmental changes could have on the international society, these issues have started to become a threat to the international system.

Several post-positivist theorists and scholars of the subject of security, have pointed to the open nature of the concept of security in this context, although this argument was addressed more thoroughly by the Copenhagen School.

Securitization Theory – The Copenhagen School

According to Buzan, Wæver & Wild (1998) the end of bipolarity after the Cold War provided more space for the globalization and integration of countries and the advent of a new international setting expanding the concept of international security in international relations. No longer left to rely only on classical realism, there was now room for new perspectives in security studies. In addition to the military issue, new phenomena were considered threats to states and individuals, such as terrorist networks, economic crises, global epidemics, and environmental variations, which are considered global risks. This leads us to the Copenhagen School's study of security threats as constructed through social interaction (Buzan, 1997).

The concept of securitization proposed by the Copenhagen School is based on the constructivist perspective of the social world, as well as the identities and interests of actors and structures and is built by intersubjective and collective processes. While traditionalists link the study of the existence of objective security threats, the Copenhagen

School authors consider that securitization and the criterion of securitization are intersubjective practices through which one securitizer agent demands to socially establish the existence of a threat to a group survival (Buzan et al, 1998, pp. 29-31).

This criterion is based on an analysis of specific contexts on which security is built, offering insight into the meaning of security policy. In certain communities, a special situation can arise where a particular matter is transformed into a security issue of paramount importance that needs to be addressed immediately.. (McDonald, 2005).

Security is understood as protecting fundamental values from potential threats to nations, reinforcing the responsibility of addressing vulnerable populations. If a legitimate political issue exists, especially if you accept the argument that the definition of a problem is a matter of security, this will allow exceptional measures to be taken through various policy responses (Buzan et al., 1998).

The Copenhagen School initiated discourse to analyze the process by which a particular issue is considered a security issue. For Buzan et al. (1998), securitization is a “speech act.” Security does not refer to a physical object, security is an idea that involves interactions between individuals through discourse that an act is to be considered. By saying the word security, a state representative refers to an event in a specific area that demands a special right to use any means that may be necessary to avoid the event (Buzan et al., 1998).

Thus, we seek to understand the securitization of new issues on the international agenda such as environmental issues, specifically the issue of climate change. Scientists, especially those involved with the IPCC, have built a causal connection between climate change and the related consequences by focusing on the changes to natural phenomena such as: rising oceans, melting glaciers, changes in rain patterns, and floods in various regions of the planet.

The consequences that relate to the lives of individuals are perceived as threats to current economic conditions. Because this is a new phenomenon that, according to scholars, creates risks and uncertainties in the relations between actors in the international system and because it may pose threats to individuals, issues such as ensuring access to water, the need for protection against extreme weather events such as floods and droughts, and also uncertainties about the future existence of Small Islands States have been seen as security issues and are being urgently addressed in international conferences for the protection of life and to guarantee the conditions of human survival.

Contextualizing climate change: IPCC as securitizer agent

Scientists from the IPCC believe that global warming² can change the Earth's climate, contributing to the intensification of some natural phenomena, such as droughts, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, changes in rainfall patterns resulting in major flooding in several regions of the planet, and increased occurrences of hurricanes, cyclones, and typhoons. (IPCC, 1990)

The trajectory and the role of the IPCC in the International Regime on Climate Change is to provide information on which states will base decisions. Thus, in 1990, the IPCC concluded from the analysis of a data set that emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere increased as a result of uncontrolled human activities. (IPCC, 1990) The Human activity was identified as the driving force of climate change. One can anticipate that the securitizer content of the IPCC speech act

2. Global warming is defined by the IPCC as a global temperature increase that has been observed in the last 150 years due to the increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (IPCC, 1990)

was accepted by various actors in the international system who understood the necessity to establish multilateral measures and conditions for international cooperation in order to reach an agreement on how to solve the common problem.

Faced with this information, developing countries have heeded the warnings put forth by the IPCC and have begun to address the issue of climate change from the perspective that Small Island States are the biggest “victims” of global warming. As a result, small island states have blamed developed countries for the threats posed by climate change.

One of the indications that the issue has been securitized is that fact that there have been discussions on the topic at meetings of the Security Council³ of the United Nations (UN). The issue of climate change was first brought to the Security Council on April 17, 2007⁴ to discuss its implications for international peace and security. According to the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, Margaret Beckett, “*climate change referred not to the issue of national security,*” but the “*collective security in a fragile and increasingly interdependent world,*” thus transforming “*the way the international community thinks about security*” (Barbosa, 2008).

At this time, it was predicted that the rise in sea level by the end of the century would be between 20 and 60 cm. However, according to new studies by the IPCC, the most likely rise could exceed one meter, due to the acceleration of melting glaciers. According to the speech acts of IPCC scientists, this increase would be significant enough to threaten the existence of most of the coastal towns

and small developing countries, such as the islands of the Maldives and Tuvalu (IPCC, 2007).

On June 21, 2011, the Second Meeting on Climate Change of the Security Council of the United Nations was held, and they discussed the risks of climate change on food security and global peace. There were divergent opinions on whether or not to treat the issue as a matter of international security (Lipinski 2011).

The most vulnerable countries, like Nauru, the smallest island nation in the world, questioned whether the opinions at the meeting would be different if more nations were being affected by climate change. Nauru President Marcus Stephen asked, “What if the pollution coming from our island nations was threatening the existence of the major emitters? What would be the nature of today’s debate under those circumstances?” (Lipinski 2011).

After discussing this issue, the members of the Security Council reached an agreement that would incorporate the projections of climate change in its global report on local issues and suggested that member countries develop a text on the possible implications of climate change on security. They also considered that, apart from the consequences of climate change in the short-term such as rising seas and drought, there could also be long-term impacts such as changes in food production, the migration of inhabitants, and territorial conflicts in the Pacific Islands and countries in Africa. Following the reports issued by the IPCC, many still believed that the effects of climate change would continue (Lipinski 2011).

Small Islands States: The audience of the securitization process of climate change

The Small Islands States are organized in a coalition called the Alliance of Small Island States

3. More information can be found at: <http://www.unep.org/newscentre/Default.aspx?DocumentID=2646&ArticleID=8817&cl=en>.

4. The Security Council recognized other UN agencies (in particular the Framework UN Convention on Climate Change) that will pursue other aspects of climate change (including negotiations on the stabilization of concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere) that are not under the mandate of the Security Council (DE SOUSA, 2009).

(AOSIS). In 1990, during the Second World Conference on the Environment, held in Geneva the AOSIS presented itself as a unique diplomatic corps and since then has been characterized as a diplomatic entity at the UN. It is accepted that the recognition by the international society of small island states as an alliance was something gained over time (Abreu, 2011).

These countries are allies because they share challenges and concerns about environmental development and because of their shared susceptibility to environmental disasters, especially in terms of climate change as warned by the IPCC. These countries also have geographic and demographic similarities such as small populations, a lack of transportation resources, remoteness, and a dependence on international trade, among others.

Being countries with few capabilities, including financial and political resources and little influence in the international system, it is likely they would have difficulty being heard in this scenario. (ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES, 2013). This alliance works as a bargaining tool and represents these nations so that their needs are brought to the international community. The individual actions of members of AOSIS do not have a strong chance of success and the formation of the coalition is the best alternative for this group of coastal countries. (Abreu, 2011).

These goals reflect on how the audience receives Small Islands States, and based on the securitizer speech act and the IPCC reports, the very creation of the alliance was based on the belief that these are the countries that have contributed least to the increase of global warming and, admittedly, would be the first to suffer the dramatic consequences of this phenomenon.

AOSIS has a membership of 44 states and observers from all oceans and regions of the world including Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean,

the Mediterranean, the Pacific Ocean, and the South China Sea. The states are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Puerto Rico, Samoa, Singapore, Seychelles, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Timor Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The observers are American Samoa, Netherlands Antilles, Guam, and the Virgin Islands of the United States. Of these, 37 are members of the United Nations, corresponding 28% of the UN developing countries, and the AOSIS makes up 20% of all UN members. Together, they constitute five percent of the world population (ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES, 2014).

Members of AOSIS are geographically divided into three regions: the Caribbean; the Atlantic, Indian, and Mediterranean; and the Pacific, as shown in Table 3. Each region has specific needs and interests, but AOSIS seeks to find common ground between participants so that everyone can be represented equitably (Abreu, 2011).

Conclusion

Given that security issues in general have, at least implicitly, a position of value and ideology, in this case, the issue of security was focused on the survival of humanity and contained ideologies or value positioning imposed by the IPCC: the belief in global warming. This issue is addressed as a problem relating to human and environmental safety, as environmental issues have come to be interpreted as a risk to human life itself. Then, it proceeds to be included in the security agenda, as was seen in the

section dedicated to the expansion of the themes of the international security agenda.

The theory of the Copenhagen School, securitization, warned of the political nature of the security action, which was often observed in this study through the IPCC reports. Thus, it is a challenge to the traditional approach of security because from the social constructivist perspective, the problem of climate change and the impacts on the global hydrological cycle, were established through the social interactions of these security speech acts and conferences and were then transformed into a security issue.

Beginning with the idea that speech is a practice, an action by a person in the world founded on an interpretation can construct a truth. Thus, though the IPCC claims that its reports are neutral, it discusses certain subjects that interact with other subjects in international society (as in the case of the Small Islands States), and this can influence values and beliefs.

The security speech act by the IPCC denotes a threatening tone, which ultimately makes the Small Islands States reveals its beliefs that the subject should be treated as a security issue. Vulnerable states are in a condition that applies both to the effects of climate change as well as to the political discussions and deliberations on the environment.

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Recebido: 09/02/2015
Aprovado: 07/04/2015