

# CLIMATE CHANGE SECURITIZATION:

**A ROLE FOR THE SECURITY COUNCIL AND AN  
OPPORTUNITY FOR CHINESE LEADERSHIP**

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# INTRODUCTION

Countries like the United States actively frame climate change as a security concern and often focus on the security implications of climate change impacts.<sup>1</sup> Other nations, like China, act to weaken these linkages and instead frame climate change as primarily a sustainable development issue.<sup>2</sup> As part of this effort, China questions the appropriateness of using security forums, like the United Nations Security Council, to discuss and set climate change policy.<sup>3</sup>

China and the United States are the largest and second largest economies in the world respectively.<sup>4</sup> They are also the largest and second largest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> from the consumption of energy<sup>5</sup> and were responsible for almost 40% of the world's cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions between 1850-2011.<sup>6</sup> Both nations are permanent members of the UN Security Council and important trading partners. Given the urgent need for global cooperation on climate change, and the importance of including both countries in any solution, it is vital that China and the US come together to effectively deal with climate change.

This paper will consider existing research on securitization, sustainable development, and framing to understand efforts to securitize climate change at the international level. It will look specifically at national security, how the UN Security Council could play a role in addressing climate change, and the arguments put forward for and against the Council's involvement. The paper will then review latest developments in climate diplomacy and argue that a window

of opportunity has opened for China to take a global leadership role in climate change negotiations and that China should reconsider securitization in light of its own strategic interests.

# A VIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

In reviewing the existing literature on the issue, I looked at research covering securitization, sustainable development and framing in the context of climate change. Although much work has been done in these three fields, there appears to be little overlapping analysis, looking at securitization at the international level and its utility in fostering closer international cooperation on the issue of climate change.

Although the relationship between climate change and security can be tracked back to Lester Brown's '*Redefining National Security*' in 1977<sup>7</sup> there is still uncertainty over the direct links between climate change and violent conflict,<sup>8</sup> and comprehensive evidence that environmental factors do not lead to open conflict between nation-states.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, the idea that climate change and security are related is common among scholars and think-tanks.<sup>10</sup> Literature on securitization typically explores the benefits and risks involved, including the gains made from raising the profile of an issue and creating an urgency to act<sup>11</sup> and the dangers of security framing that leads to militarized solutions at the risk of crowding out other factors.<sup>12</sup>

Research on the relationship between climate change and sustainable development has traditionally focused on the connections between poverty and climate change impacts<sup>13</sup> and how best to protect the world's most vulnerable people from the impacts of climate change.<sup>14</sup> More recently, scholars have explored the importance of sustainable development and changing development pathways as a third leg, along with mitigation and adaptation, in dealing with climate change.<sup>15</sup>

While there is a growing body of work on framing and communications science, this research looks mainly at communicating to domestic audiences.

Interestingly, data suggests that in the United States, using a conflict frame is most effective at soliciting support for action on climate change.<sup>16</sup> However, a study of Chinese newspapers shows a preference for a more positive, collaborative frame over one of conflict.<sup>17</sup> While this may have implications for their respective international postures, there is little research on framing at the international level.

## SECURITIZATION & THE SECURITY COUNCIL

To understand the debate over securitization, it is important to look at how climate change diplomacy is currently governed. Since 1992, the lead institution involved in addressing climate change has been the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).<sup>18</sup> This multilateral treaty is based on the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CDR),<sup>19</sup> which recognizes that although all countries must take action on climate change, developed countries should take the lead in light of their historic responsibility for carbon emissions, their ongoing emissions and their capacity to act.<sup>20</sup> Under the umbrella of the UNFCCC, the principle of CDR was incorporated into the architecture of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol<sup>21</sup> and into the design of its successor, the 2015 Paris Agreement.<sup>22</sup>

Partly due to perceived shortcomings of the UNFCCC process, attempts have been made to securitize climate change, which in effect will create an opening for the 15-member UN Security Council<sup>23</sup> to address the issue.<sup>24</sup>

There have been three significant moves to securitize climate change at the international level.<sup>25</sup> In 2007, the Security Council held its first ever debate on the impact of climate change on security, under the leadership of the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> The meeting exposed deep reservations among developing countries, including China, over the legitimacy of the Council addressing the issue.<sup>27</sup> The debate ended with no formal outcome.<sup>28</sup>

In 2009, a second effort was launched primarily by a coalition of Pacific Small Island Developing States, at the UN General Assembly.<sup>29</sup> Although China's stance was more relaxed than during the debate in the Security Council,<sup>30</sup> it still focused on climate change as a sustainable development issue rather than one of security, and emphasized the primacy of the UNFCCC.<sup>31</sup> Following the debate, the General Assembly passed a resolution noting that impacts of climate

change could have possible security implications while reaffirming the UNFCCC was the key institution for addressing climate change.<sup>32</sup> There was no outcome at the Security Council.<sup>33</sup>

A third move occurred in 2011 when the Security Council, under the direction of Germany, held its only other debate, to date, on security and climate change.<sup>34</sup> Once again, there were sharp differences in opinion. Most developing countries, including China, continued to insist that climate change be discussed in terms of sustainable development.<sup>35</sup> As in 2007, the Security Council did not pass any resolutions following the debate, although it did conclude with a non-binding Presidential statement that again reaffirmed the UNFCCC's key role.<sup>36</sup>

Since 2011, Security Council members have either addressed climate change through 'Arria-formula' meetings,<sup>37</sup> which are not formal meetings of the Council and therefore considered less provocative,<sup>38</sup> or by holding discussions on broadly non-traditional security threats, that include climate change as one of many issues under consideration.<sup>39</sup> Given the difficulty in openly discussing climate change and security, or in reaching any formal outcomes, it is clear that efforts to internationally securitize climate change are still at a very early stage.<sup>40</sup>

# CHINA'S POSITION ON SECURITIZATION

China has worked to limit the success of efforts to securitize of climate change at the international level. It has consistently argued that climate change should be viewed as sustainable development issue, although it may have certain security implications,<sup>41</sup> and that the principle of CDR is necessary.<sup>42</sup> It also insists on the leading role of the UNFCCC in addressing global climate change and has questioned the compatibility of climate change with the Council's mandate under the UN Charter.<sup>43</sup>

China's official government policy explicitly avoids linking climate change and national security<sup>44</sup> and the country takes a similar position in its approach to regional forums. At the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) for example, where China has an influential role and where environmental protection is listed as a key goal in its charter, climate change is not prioritized as a regional security concern.<sup>45</sup>

Although China does not officially recognize a relationship between climate change and security, it is also not ignoring the security implications of climate change impacts.<sup>46</sup> In 2009, a military-owned newspaper voiced national security concerns due to climate change<sup>47</sup> and the military has established a Military Climate Change Expert Commission that brings together experts from inside and outside the military establishment to advise on the impact of climate change on military operations.<sup>48</sup>

It appears that at the international level, China continues to officially reject the framing of climate change as a security issue in order to specifically avoid giving the Security Council space to act on climate change.<sup>49</sup>

# A ROLE FOR THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Under Article 24 (1) of the Charter of the United Nations, the UN Security Council is mandated to maintain international peace and security.<sup>50</sup> Under Article 25, member states agree to carry out the decisions of the Council.<sup>51</sup> This framework provides the Council with the unique power to pass binding resolutions that supersede all other legal obligations for member states.<sup>52</sup> Binding resolutions can be issued under Chapter VII of the UN Charter,<sup>53</sup> following a determination under Article 39 of a "threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression".<sup>54</sup>

There are two ways in which the Council can reach a conclusion that climate change is a 'threat to the peace' under Article 39. First, the Council can determine that climate change is an indirect 'threat multiplier' that exacerbates already existing tensions, resulting in potential conflict.<sup>55</sup> This is a traditional conceptualization of climate change as a security threat.<sup>56</sup> Examples of such scenarios include the Darfur conflict in Sudan, where desertification and land degradation were major factors in the conflict and in Somalia, where drought served as an important factor.<sup>57</sup>



Second, the Council can determine a 'threat to the peace' is from the direct environmental impacts of climate change, such as from rising sea-levels and extreme weather events.<sup>58</sup> Although this is a more radical conceptualization, it is possible that sea-level rise could in future require whole island nations, like the Maldives, to be evacuated.<sup>59</sup> Kiribati, a country made up of low-lying islands and atolls, recently purchased land in Fiji that may be used for relocation as a last resort.<sup>60</sup>

Although the framers of the United Nations likely had more traditional conflicts in mind when drafting the UN Charter,<sup>61</sup> it is commonly accepted that in practice, a 'threat to the peace' is whatever the Security Council deems it to be.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore likely that either of the conceptualizations of climate change described above would suffice to meet the requirements laid out in Article 39 and empower the Council to pass binding Chapter VII resolutions.<sup>63</sup>

In this way, the Security Council could, upon making a determination regarding climate change as a 'threat to the peace', use a Chapter VII resolution to assume the lead role from the UNFCCC in addressing climate change.<sup>64</sup> It would be able to set mandatory mitigation and adaptation measures for member states to follow and apply sanctions, and possibly the use of force, to ensure compliance.<sup>65</sup> This would sharply contrast with the multilateral process that is currently used by the UNFCCC<sup>66</sup> and deeply concern many developing countries including China.

It is important to note that although countries like China have broadly curtailed any official role for the Security Council in addressing climate change, the

Security Council has already passed resolutions that recognize climate change as an indirect security threat.<sup>67</sup> In response to the conflict in Somalia, which has been exacerbated by climate change induced-drought, the Council passed Resolution 794, which authorized the use of force to protect aid and food deliveries.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, following a mission to the Lake Chad Basin, the Council passed Resolution 2349 which included language that specifically identified climate change as a negative factor on stability in the region.<sup>69</sup> It is very likely that the Council will continue to respond, on a case-by-case basis, to situations where climate change is an indirect threat to security.<sup>70</sup>

## THE CASE FOR SECURITIZATION

Proponents of climate change securitization at the international level often point to four key arguments as to why the Security Council should play a role in addressing climate change; that securitization elevates the level of urgency, the current treaty model is flawed, time is running out to act, and only the Security Council is capable of driving the needed aggressive action.

Both supporters and critics of securitization acknowledge that doing so raises the profile of the issue.<sup>71</sup> By recognizing climate change as a threat to national security, governments gain power over the issue and can mobilize large amounts of political and financial resources to address it.<sup>72</sup> John Ashton, the UK's former Special Representative for Climate Change, openly admitted this, stating in 2006

that “while environmental experts know how to make emissions trading work, it's a ‘political fact’ that you get a quicker response to a security crisis’.”<sup>73</sup>

The current institutional framework for dealing with climate change may also be flawed. The UNFCCC, is a global multilateral treaty with 197 parties to it.<sup>74</sup>

Following a multilateral treaty model, the UNFCCC brings together as many states as possible to negotiate texts that serve as a record of their mutually accepted approach to the issue of climate change.<sup>75</sup> This process is by necessity a compromise, and runs the risk of embodying the lowest-common-denominator approach to the issue.<sup>76</sup> The model is also premised on the principle of sovereign consent, which allows for optional participation and often lacks a strong compliance regime.<sup>77</sup> Given the ambitious steps that are required by governments to avoid dangerous climate change impacts, the treaty model may be unsuited to address the issue of climate change.

There is also concern that the UNFCCC process is too slow and the window of opportunity to act is rapidly closing. 2016 was the hottest year on record, with Arctic winter temperatures recorded to be 20°C warmer than average and with the most volatile El Niño ever documented.<sup>78</sup> Urgent action is required and it may be too late to experiment or make mistakes in addressing climate change.<sup>79</sup> It is widely accepted that the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which was established through the UNFCCC, failed to meet its goals and cost the international community 15 years which cannot be brought back.<sup>80</sup> This is a mistake that we cannot afford to repeat.

Advocates of securitization note that only the Security Council can set binding requirements on national governments through Chapter VII resolutions. The Council has also developed a model that can potentially be applied to climate change through the use of more 'legislative' resolutions that are open-ended and not directed at any individual country.<sup>81</sup> The first example of this was Resolution 1373 which was adopted in response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. The resolution contained a detailed list of obligations for all member states to undertake,<sup>82</sup> required states to become a party to relevant protocols and conventions combatting terrorism<sup>83</sup> and created the Counter-Terrorism Committee, a subsidiary body to monitor compliance.<sup>84</sup> Although there has been some criticism over the Council engaging in legislative activity,<sup>85</sup> it can be argued that in doing so, it has set a precedent for expanded action on climate change<sup>86</sup> including on compliance and on providing the Council with expertise and progress reporting.<sup>87</sup>

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHINA

Although there are potential benefits to securitizing climate change, China has been reluctant to open a space for the Security Council for fear of the implications of such a move. However, recent developments in climate diplomacy have changed the landscape and offer China an opportunity to embrace a leadership role in climate talks to its own benefit and in support of action on climate change.

An important development in climate politics is the Paris Agreement, which went into effect in November 2016.<sup>112</sup> The agreement was negotiated within the UNFCCC and establishes a CDR-compliant framework for countries to undertake nationally determined actions in the face of climate change. The agreement establishes a process of mandatory transparency and international review and requires parties to make increasingly ambitious commitments every five years.<sup>113</sup> Unlike past arrangements, the Paris Agreement gives equal importance to mitigation and adaptation and stresses the need for parties to improve preparedness and establish contingency plans for high-impact scenarios.<sup>114</sup>

Before the Paris Agreement, countries like China were concerned that involvement of the Security Council could lead to binding mitigation targets through a Chapter VII resolution, that would infringe on their sovereign development rights.<sup>115</sup> However, the architecture of the Paris Agreement gives confidence to a managed mitigation approach without the need for the Security Council to set targets.<sup>116</sup> Mitigation targets under the Paris Agreement are determined nationally and can align with each nation's sovereign development choices.<sup>117</sup>

The Paris Agreement has moved the discussion over the role of the Security Council away from mitigation targets and towards managing the impacts of climate change.<sup>118</sup> It also opens up the possibility of more fruitful collaboration between the Council and the UNFCCC rather than one overriding the other.<sup>119</sup> The timing for change is fortuitous as this year marks the start of the first term of office for the United Nations' new Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who ran on a platform of preventative action, sustaining the peace and UN reform.<sup>120</sup>

Other issues regarding the appropriateness of the Council's involvement can also be resolved through collaboration with the UNFCCC and by working in concert with the Paris Agreement. Although critics have argued that the Council does not follow the principles of CDR, there is no reason why these principles cannot be incorporated into climate security resolutions passed by the Council.<sup>121</sup> The experience of the Counter-Terrorism Committee shows that it is possible for the Council to enforce varying obligations on states based on their particular circumstances.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, China argued in 2007 that the Security Council lacked the 'professional competence' to deal with climate change.<sup>123</sup> However, the Council could easily access the necessary expertise through the UNFCCC if required.<sup>124</sup>

Concerns that the Council lacks representation and therefore legitimacy in dealing with climate change can also be addressed through the use of a two-track approach that involves achieving simultaneous resolutions in the Security Council and the General Assembly.<sup>125</sup> This approach has been used in the past and provides a precedent to ensure broad representation in debates.<sup>126</sup> It should also be noted that when the Security Council passes binding resolutions, it still requires states to comply with them. If a large enough number of countries rejected a resolution as illegitimate, it would be impractical for the Council to sanction them all, so resolutions must be broadly acceptable to the international community.<sup>127</sup>

If China were to accept a role for the Security Council in coordination with the UNFCCC, it stands to gain significant benefits due to its status as both a developing country and permanent member of the Council.<sup>128</sup> By setting the

agenda, China can ensure sustainable development is taken into consideration and all decisions incorporate the principles of CDR, gaining respect from other developing countries.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, there are tremendous advantages to being a permanent member of the Council with the power to veto resolutions. By working within the Security Council, China will be able to ensure it is not subject to obligations it does not want to accept, while also being able to impose binding conditions on other countries.<sup>130</sup>

A final development that lets China exert its influence and leadership in climate diplomacy is the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Accord. Announced in June 2017, this step is widely viewed as a serious blow to global efforts to deal with climate change.<sup>131</sup> The move by the US creates a large leadership vacuum in international climate politics and has led to calls for greater leadership from China.<sup>132</sup> To date, 168 countries have ratified the Paris Agreement<sup>133</sup> which will proceed, but there is a new opportunity for China to actively engage with the international community.

As a large but developing economy and the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases,<sup>134</sup> China can safeguard its interests by participating in the formulation of rules and norms governing mitigation and adaptation. Adopting a collaborative approach to dialogue aligns with China's overall foreign policy strategy of presenting the country as a responsible great power that participates in international rule-making and helps to shape the global order.<sup>135</sup> Particularly during a period of US withdrawal, a proactive China can improve its global image and enhance its soft power.<sup>136</sup> By considering a role for the Security Council, while using its status as a permanent member to protect the principle of

CDR and the interests of developing countries, China can position itself as a valuable partner and a champion for the cause of sustainable development and the concerns of developing countries.

# CONCLUSION

China has been wary of securitizing climate change at the international level because of fears that doing so would create an opening for the United Nations Security Council to play a role in addressing climate change – and that once given that space, the Council might depart from the principles of CDR and impose binding obligations that challenge its sovereignty and its right to determine its own development path. But recent developments in climate diplomacy are creating new incentives for China to engage the international community and to revisit the idea of using the Security Council to support and enhance existing efforts to deal with climate change. If it opts to accept a degree of securitization and a role for the Council, China might gain more geopolitically than it risks losing. In doing so, it would allow for a more comprehensive use of the diplomatic tools available to reach the goals set by the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement. The UN Security Council is unique among global institutions and can be a powerful ally to the existing UNFCCC framework. China should step forward and work with other progressive nations to reach the best possible outcome for China and for the international community.



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