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SYMPOSIUM ON J. BENTON HEATH, "MAKING SENSE OF SECURITY"

CLIMATE CHANGE AND GLOBAL SECURITY: FRAMING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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Should the climate change crisis be framed in security terms? Many argue that it is dangerous to treat non-military threats as security issues. Such "securitization" is associated with the expansion of executive power and the exercise of exceptional measures involving the suspension of individual rights, secrecy, state violence, and a weakening of the rule of law. Nonetheless, climate change has already been identified as a security issue by many government agencies and international institutions.[1] But, as J. Benton Heath explores in "Making Sense of Security," the very concept of security is both ambiguous and contested.[2] There are different and competing ideas about what it means, when, and by whom it should be invoked, the kinds of law and policy responses it should trigger, and, crucially, who gets to decide these questions. Heath argues that differing approaches to security reflect deeper struggles over whose knowledge matters in identifying and responding to security threats. He develops a typology for assessing these different approaches, and the implications they have for international law and institutions. But, while he notes that climate change is precisely one of those issues around which there are competing security claims, he leaves to others the question of whether, or how, to frame climate change in security terms. This essay takes up that question, continuing the inquiry into how best to understand the concept of security, and how Heath's typology helps think about the question. It argues that it may indeed be important to frame climate change in security terms, but as a matter of global security rather than national security.

Heath's "Making Sense of Security"

Heath starts from the observation that security means different things to different people, and these various conceptions evoke different types of policy responses. He queries whether experts, and which experts, hold a privileged position in both identifying security issues, and in developing policy responses to security threats. And, he explains, the conflicts over these issues have implications not only for policy, but also for international law. Security is both a "generative condition" for international law—leading to demands for the expansion, derogation, or other operations of the law—but also, international law and institutions in turn play a role in shaping the competition itself.

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[1] *See*, e.g., U.S. Department of Defense, Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense (2019); National Intelligence Council, Implications for U.S. National Security of Anticipated Climate Change (2016); UK Ministry of Defence, Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today (6th ed. 2018).

[2] J. Benton Heath, *Making Sense of Security*, 116 AJIL 289 (2022).

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Heath develops a typology to make sense of the different approaches and to better understand them. The four approaches—realist, widened, discursive, and pluralist—reflect differing levels of reliance on expert knowledge, military methods, exceptional measures, and concern over the risks of "securitization."[3] This analysis is helpful in many respects, particularly for unpacking different kinds of security claims. But the concept of security itself remains somewhat amorphous, and the typology alone does not seem likely to result in clear answers to normative question such as: should climate change be framed in security terms?

The Concept of Security

Heath rightly claims that there should be more interdisciplinary work between international security studies and international law.[4] David Baldwin, in an influential article in the development of international security studies, argued that it is important to establish an understanding of the concept of security itself, separate and apart from the related debates about policy, or even value judgments regarding different dimensions of the concept.[5] Such an understanding may also enhance Heath's typology, and clarify our thinking about the best framing of climate change.

Security is typically understood as protecting against threats—or reducing the probability of harm—to certain specified values, such as the life of a person or the territorial integrity and political independence of a state.[6] And the discipline of international security studies, which emerged during the Cold War, tended to focus primarily on protecting against external threats to the state—that is, national security. But this is only one form of security. As Barry Buzan has written more recently, security is about protecting some "referent object" that needs to be secured, whether it be the nation, the state, the individual, the ethnic group, the environment, or the planet itself.[7] Indeed, the discipline is itself structured around a series of questions, which include whether to privilege the state as the referent object, whether to focus on external threats, and on military-type responses to such threats.[8]

Once security is thus understood as a concept for shaping policies to protect specified values, then one must identify the "referent object" to be secured, and which values are to be protected. These first two criteria are key to identifying the form and defining the scope of the security in question.[9] But note that security can operate on different levels and dimensions: "economic security, environmental security, identity security, social security, and military security are different forms of security, not fundamentally different concepts."[10] These different forms of security will of course call for different types of policy response. This requires several further criteria or specifications: how much security? from what precise threats? by what means? at what cost? and, in what time frame? These considerations are necessary in thinking about how to shape the policy response, and for comparing different policy alternatives.

[3] *Id.* at 321. The concern over "securitization" is represented most clearly by the Copenhagen School. *See* Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis (1998); and Barry Buzan & Lene Hansen, The Evolution of Security Studies 212–17 (2009).

[4] Heath, *supra* note 2, at 294.

[5] David Baldwin, *The Concept of Security*, 23 Rev. Int'l Stud. 5, 5–6 (1997).

[6] This contemplates the reality that, depending on the threat, the policy objective may require harm reduction, rather than trying to address the threat itself.

[7] Buzan & Hansen, *supra* note 3, at 10.

[8] *Id.* at 10–12.

[9] Baldwin, *supra* note 5, at 14.

[10] *Id.* at 23.

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National security is thus only one form of security, and even in security studies the trend has been away from focusing primarily on national security and military responses.[11] Even the security of the state can implicate broader values and different threats—it has been argued that security should encompass, for instance, the threats posed by natural disasters.[12] Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, which killed over 15 million people in 2020–2021 alone,[13] has affected the way we think about security.[14] But security cannot be cast too broadly or vaguely, or it risks becoming useless in assessing competing policy objectives. This conception of security is essentially about shaping policies to reduce the probability of harm to specified values from particular threats.[15]

There is some debate in security studies about whether security is limited to issues characterized by urgency and intensity.[16] Buzan and others argue that these characteristics are inherent to the very concept of security.[17] The claim that security is reserved for threats of a particular magnitude, urgency, and intensity, also seems consistent with common intuitions. The objects and values to be protected and the threats to be defended against may vary, but security typically evokes a sense of both gravity and importance. In short, the concept of security is invoked to prioritize policy responses designed to protect certain specified objects and values that are considered vital—typically involving human life and welfare—from imminent or urgent threats of harm. It is a concept that elevates certain policy objectives as crucial, privileging their claims to resources and effort over other policy objectives.

Armed with this conception of security to complement Heath's typology, we may turn to the question of whether the climate change crisis should be framed in terms of security.

National Security Framing of Climate Change

Framing—both in terms of identifying the right mental model, and then applying it correctly—is a crucial step in resolving complex problems.[18] But one of the difficulties with trying to frame climate change, or even specific aspects of the crisis, is the sheer magnitude and complexity of the problem. This is true even within the different possible security frames for climate change. In thinking about the initial specifications for security—"security for whom?" and "securing what values?"—climate change poses a threat at almost every level and dimension, from the individual to groups and communities, through to the state, and beyond to the international system, and indeed all of humanity. Similarly, in thinking about the specification, "from what threats?," we are confronted with a dizzying range of negative consequences of climate change, which pose an array of different threats against a spectrum of values. Even at the level of the state, the values to be protected range from the health and welfare of the population, and the functioning of infrastructure and the economy, through to the territorial integrity and political independence of the state in the face of increased political instability, massive migration flows, and armed conflict with neighboring states.

There are thus competing forms of security claims in relation to climate change. The U.S. Department of Defense and national intelligence community have identified climate change as a national security issue.[19]

[11] Buzan & Hansen, *supra* note 3, at 258.

[12] Richard H. Ullman, *Redefining Security*, 8 Int'l Sec. 129 (1983).

[13] World Health Organization Press Release, 14.9 Million Excess Deaths Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (May 5, 2022).

[14] Oona Hathaway, *COVID-19 Shows How the U.S. Got National Security Wrong*, Just Security (Apr. 7, 2020).

[15] Baldwin, *supra* note 5, at 14.

[16] *Id.* at 20.

[17] Buzan & Hansen, *supra* note 3, at 9, 12–13.

[18] On framing generally, and its importance, see Kenneth Cukier, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger & Francis de Véricourt, Framers: Human Advantage in an Age of Technology and Turmoil (2021).

[19] *See,* e.g., sources in note 1 *supra.*

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I have elsewhere explored how these consequences of climate change, and even state contributions to climate change, may come to be seen as threats to traditional notions of national security and even international peace and security.[20] Several scholars have argued that the climate change crisis should be classified domestically as an "emergency," thereby triggering expansive executive power to respond, often with the very kind of exceptional measures that trouble opponents of securitization.[21] All of this very much reflects Heath's "realist security" approach.

Others, critical of the security frame, have argued that if climate change is to be framed in security terms at all, it should be approached in terms other than national security. Maryam Jamshidi and others have argued, for instance, that it should be approached in terms of "human security."[22] The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change itself considered climate change in terms of human security in its 2014 report.[23] This approach is deeply suspicious of both the military features and the state-centered focus of a national security-type response, and looks to civil society to drive an approach that focuses on people. This, it is argued, would militate against the kinds of exceptional measures, secrecy, and erosion of democratic norms typical of the national security response.[24]

One conceptual problem with human security is that the concept may encompass many levels or forms of security, protecting differing referent objects and values, from the individual to all of humanity. But its basic intuition is surely correct, to push back against the national security frame, which is primarily aimed at protecting the values of territorial integrity and political independence of the state.

A major objection to framing climate change in national security terms, is that doing so exacerbates rather than resolves the fundamental collective-action problems inherent in any policy response to the crisis. It tends to make the issue a zero-sum competition, with states adopting a military orientation geared toward the second-order threats posed by other states. Even in their direct response to the crisis, states under this approach will privilege adaptation over mitigation. [25] This approach will not encourage the coordinated and cooperative policies that, in the aggregate, are necessary to address the ultimate threat, but will make collective failure more likely.

Climate Change and Global Security

We now know that without radical action we are likely to exceed a 2° Celsius temperature increase by the end of the century, and that the consequences of this will pose significant threats to human civilization.[26] Even at 2° Celsius, we will witness massive dislocation of populations and forced migrations, political instability and increased armed conflict, and the failure of political institutions. Some states will descend into chaos, others will cease to exist.[27] There is

[20] Craig Martin, *Atmospheric Intervention: Climate Change and the* Jus ad Bellum *Regime*, 45 Colum. J. Envtl. L. 331 (2020); *see also* Joshua W. Busby, States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security (2022).

[21] Daniel A. Farber, *Exceptional Circumstances: Immigration, Imports, the Coronavirus, and Climate Change as Emergencies*, 71 Hast. L. Rev. 1143 (2020); Mark P. Nevitt, *Is Climate Change a National Emergency?*, 55 U.C. Davis L. Rev. 591 (2021).

[22] Maryam Jamshidi, *The Climate Crisis Is a Human Security, Not a National Security, Issue*, 93 S. Cal. L. Rev. Postscript 36 (2019); *see also* David Andersen-Rodgers & Kerry F. Crawford, Human Security: Theory and Action 44–48 (2018).

[23] W.N. Adger, et al., *Human Security*, *in* AR5 Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability, Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC (2014).

[24] Jamshidi, *supra* note 22, at 42.

[25] *Id.* at 41.

[26] For most recent projections, see IPCC, Sixth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2022, Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (2022).

[27] For discussion of the consequences of different temperature rise scenarios, from a state-security perspective, see Climatic Cataclysm: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Climate Change (Kurt Campbell ed., 2008); and, for my review of the issues and sources, see Martin, *supra* note 20.

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arguably no greater threat to a more important array of values, and the threat is both imminent and urgent.[28] Security provides a frame that helps to emphasize the magnitude and urgency of that threat, the importance of the values at stake, and thus provides the basis for a valid priority claim for resources and collective effort in shaping policy objectives. But we need a security framing that widens the scope of our concern beyond mere national security, or any other form of state-centered security, in order to focus on the most important values threatened, facilitate the coordination necessary to overcome the collective action problems, and provide the basis for shaping policy that can best reduce the likelihood of harm through both mitigation and adaptation.

Given the enormity of the threat, the values at stake, and the complexity of the collective-action problems involved, the appropriate level of the frame—the referent object to be secured—is all of humanity. It is a global threat, and so we require a "global security" response. International law is clearly the crucial institution for coordinating any global response. The primary subject of international law is of course the state, and international peace and security typically relates to security among states, but international law need not frame this issue in terms of state security. It simply needs to frame it as a security issue in order to prioritize the matter and activate the legal and political authority necessary to mobilize collective state action to respond to the global threat.

This should include involvement of the UN Security Council.[29] Some may object that the Security Council is largely associated with realist state-centric conceptions of security, and that its primary policy responses involve coercion and the use of force. But while its authority is necessarily triggered by the determination of a threat to international peace and security (which climate change surely is), pursuant to Article 39 of the UN Charter, the scope of member-state responses it may authorize is not limited to sanctions and the use of force. This is illustrated by several of the Security Council's resolutions in response to drug trafficking and transnational terrorism.[30]

The primary benefit of Security Council involvement is that it has the authority to dictate coordinated action by member states, even to the point of overriding other treaty obligations. It may frame an issue in security terms to mobilize state action, but it may do so to protect objects and values other than those central to states, with means and methods appropriate to the values to be secured. And the Security Council is certainly not the only, or even the best, international legal institution to effectively respond to climate change as a global security issue. The key point is that framing the issue as one of global security can help make it an urgent priority for all international legal institutions.

In terms of Heath's typology, the foregoing reflects a "widened" and a "pluralist" approach to framing climate change as a security issue, while also acknowledging the "discursive" approach's concerns that invoking security often produces national security responses. But while climate change should not be framed in national security terms, that does not mean that the climate change is not a security issue. Not every security issue should be mistaken as a nail for the hammer of the national security state. The problem is not in framing an issue in security terms, but rather in not developing a more sophisticated understanding of the different kinds of threats to our security, and in not tailoring policies to best respond to the risks they pose.

Conclusion

Climate change should be framed as a security issue because we urgently need to respond to the threats to humanity's most fundamental values, at every level, including that of the international system itself. Such framing

[28] It is both urgent and imminent in the sense that the window of opportunity for acting to prevent the future harm is rapidly closing in the present.

[29] For other arguments in favor of Security Council involvement, see, e.g., Mark Nevitt, *Is Climate Change a Threat to International Peace and Security?*, 42 MICH. J. INT'L L. 527 (2021).

[30] *Id.*

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provides the basis for making priority claims for resources and for collective efforts, precisely because security objectives tend to trump other concerns. But a wider and more pluralized security frame—a "global security" frame—helps to emphasize both the distinctiveness and the importance of climate change policy objectives, relative to other more traditional state-centered security threats. It focuses on tailoring the means and methods to address the causes and consequences of the core threats, with the authority and power of the most powerful international institutions, accepting the great collective cost, and in an urgent timeframe, to reduce as best we can the grave risk of harm to human civilization.

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