Climate Change and National Security: Contradictions Challenging the Status Quo

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Abstract

Presenting climate change as a national security issue provides an appropriate sense of urgency needed for serious climate action. However, there are several contradictions between the national security framework and climate change, four of which are explored in this paper. First, a focus on national borders inadequately deals with the problem's global nature and allows for climate injustice. Second, long-term impacts are not captured by the short-term focus of national security's main agents such as policy makers. Third, seeing the military as the traditional provider of national security does not address the root causes of climate change but leads to its inappropriate militarisation. Finally, national security is primarily concerned with protecting the status quo, which is itself the cause of the threat. Climate change thus exposes the flaws of national security as the dominant framework of international politics, being inherently antithetical to properly understanding and addressing this major threat.

Keywords: Climate change, Climate injustice, National security, Borders, Militarisation

The United Nations have called climate change "the defining issue of our time", and while it has become clear that it will have severe impacts "global in scope and unprecedented in scale", international action to mitigate its effects remains limited (UN website 2019). Meanwhile, there is a growing trend to present climate change as a national security issue, which provides it a sense of urgency demanding a serious response. The national security discourse focuses on the security of the state and its institutions. It assumes that the state shares interests with its population and considers the military the main protector against external threats. The interaction between climate change and national security thus contains several contradictions, four of which are explored in this paper. Firstly this paper explores how climate change's global nature is understood within a framework based on national borders, and whether the problem is adequately addressed; secondly it considers how the long-term effects of climate change contradict the short-term focus of policy makers on 'traditional' security threats; thirdly it analyses how the military as the primary provider of national security addresses the non-military threat of climate change, particularly through its militarization; and finally it considers how national security's primary aim of preserving the status quo renders it inherently antithetical to comprehensive climate action, protecting state institutions rather than vulnerable populations. If the status quo is based on fossil capitalism and therefore itself is the cause of climate change, systemic transformation is the only viable solution. Overall this paper questions whether reframing climate change as a national security issue is constructive in countering its impacts.

Global problem versus national borders

The first contradiction in the interaction between climate change and national security is that while the latter's scope is limited to the borders of a state, the former is a fundamentally global issue, both in its cause, its impact, and the response required. By approaching climate change merely "in terms of its implications of nation-states", the problem itself "is not addressed at all, only its manifestations" (Lacy, 2005: 162). A national security approach focuses on climate change as a threat to "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation-state", with national governments and security institutions as the main agents to provide security (McDonald, 2018: 160). This assumed dichotomy between inside and outside the nation-state leads to a focus on external threats which can be kept from harming the state. However, focusing on the nation-state as the entity to be protected provides too limited a scope to properly address an issue as broad as climate change. Neither emissions nor global warming are bound by national borders, and in fact oppose such a separation between states. Since a comprehensive response to climate change requires international cooperation, "invoking national security may actually be counterproductive" (Dalby, 2009: 50). Moreover, a nationalistic discourse framed in military terms emphasizes the antagonism of external threats rather than a globally shared threat (ibid). This results in the latter not being properly addressed, while the supposed 'threat' from international migration is given priority.

An international approach is even more crucial because of the profound injustice that "[t]hose most affected by climate change are those least likely to have caused it" while "[t]hose most likely to have caused it are those most likely to avoid its negative effects" (Voskoboynik, 2018: 19). This is because while high income countries (HICs) in the Global North are responsible for the majority of emissions, low income countries (LICs) in the Global South who did not benefit as much from fossil fuel use still suffer from the consequences (Diffenbaugh and Burke, 2018). In fact, many LICs are geographically more vulnerable to climate change because they are small island states or located in tropical regions, and therefore set to experience worse impacts than HICs (King and Harrington, 2018). This differentiated impact is exacerbated by LICs' relative lack of resources to adapt to climate change. These climate inequalities do not only occur between countries but also within them, as marginalised groups are more vulnerable to climatic changes and disproportionately affected (Islam and Winkel, 2017). If national security remains the dominant paradigm of international relations, those countries most responsible for climate change are in practice allowed to continue their high consumption without being held accountable for the insecurities this causes in the Global South. Meanwhile, countries with low historical emissions and low consumption levels but more vulnerable to climatic changes are left to face major challenges on their own, since it is then considered a national issue only. This essentially allows Northern governments to "shift the burden of environmental adjustment" on Southern governments (Renner 2004: 316).

This lack of accountability and responsibility explains why national security discourses usually focus on adaptation while human security, taking as its referent object all people including the most vulnerable, prioritises mitigation (McDonald, 2018: 161-162). The poor and marginalized of the Global South only enter the security of the North when they migrate and are "portrayed as a threat to Northern societies "requiring" security measures to prevent their immigration" (Dalby, 2009: 2-3). This indicates the bias in national security discourses to prioritise the security of states in the Global North, with climate change "shifting sensibilities from matters of protecting borders to thinking about global interconnections and the fact that affluence is making the poor and

marginal insecure" (ibid: 12). This connection is crucial in understanding how the global economy creates both security and insecurity as an inherent part of 'modernization' and 'state-making', since "impacts of consumption in one place are frequently displaced into other states and regions" (ibid: 45,75).

Long-wave event versus short-term thinking

A second contradiction in the interaction between climate change and national security is that the latter's focus on short-term policy making and on maintaining legitimacy does not prioritise long-term issues until it is too late. Tony Barnett's analysis of such 'long-wave events' helps to explain why so little is done against climate change despite its evident urgency. He describes such events as having long-term implications but no clear starting point, resulting in its nature and impact often being understood only when it is already underway and difficult to slow down or stop (Barnett, 2006: 302). Moreover, their long timespan demands long-term thinking, which people in power do not usually prioritise since the effects "fall outside the normal time horizons of politicians and business strategists" (ibid). Not only do such events require a broader scope in planning, it is also unclear whether there is even the political and administrative capacity to deal with such events at all, as they require completely new policies, being unlike any previous experiences (ibid: 303).

This explanation of the lack of climate action is complemented by Mark Lacy's analysis of how Realism - the school of thought at the heart of national security - constructs anthropogenic climate change as a "Second-Order problem" (Lacy, 2005). In the traditional hierarchy of security, first-order problems are granted priority, and constitute more 'traditional' threats such as war and terrorism. Second-order problems are often "non-traditional threats": they do not fit the objective realist understanding of threats, because they are uncertain and complex (ibid). In contrast, the human security approach focuses on "amorphous threats that are unintentional and global", or "threats without enemies" (Dalby, 2009: 35). The dominance of realism in international politics means traditional threats are taken more seriously than non-traditional threats. Climate change is considered a non-traditional threat because it is uncertain, distant in time and space, and cannot be dealt with through traditional means since there is no clear enemy (Lacy, 2005:18). Meanwhile, the 'techno-optimistic' belief that human ingenuity and technological innovation will provide solutions reinforces the notion that it is an illegitimate threat (ibid:104). Consequently, policy makers are encouraged to focus on adaptation rather than mitigation, fixing problems when necessary without having to address the root causes which would extend beyond the timespan of their career. This reflects Barnett's finding that once long-wave events are 'discovered' they are dealt with as emergencies through short-term solutions that can actually exacerbate the issue in the long term (Barnett, 2006: 303). At an international level this is illustrated in the World Bank increase of its 'adaptation funds' from $2.3 billion to $4.6 billion in 2012 while only increasing mitigation funds by $100,000 (Marzec, 2015: 9). 'Techno-optimists' even warn against expensive measures to address long-term dangers that are uncertain, since "they may actually harm the capitalist culture that can create solutions to problems" (Lacy, 2005: 51). This overwhelming focus on climate change adaptation as opposed to mitigation is not merely a result of naïve and short-sighted thinking. It is actively promoted by those who profit from the current political and economic system. Lacy calls this the "network of Realism", a network of power and influence that has strong motives to construct climate change as a secondary issue (ibid: 21). This involves the downplaying of mitigation in order to maintain the traditional hierarchy of threats in which for example the War on Terror is the "First-Order problem" (ibid: 22). This is equally reflected in the

fact that the global economy does not naturally have to be based on fossil fuels because they are cheaper or better than renewable energy sources, but that the link to fossil fuels is actively reinforced with global fossil fuel subsidies in 2015 being estimated at $5.3 trillion (Coady et al., 2017: 21).

Militarising a non-military threat

National security's traditional focus on threats of a military nature limits its understanding of non-military threats such as climate change, where militarization might bring it higher on the policy agenda but compromises the chance of an effective solution. Taking states as the referent object of security generally assumes threats will come in the form of external military attacks or "internal subversion of the political order" (Dalby, 2009: 2). Consequently, the military and related security institutions are considered the main actors in providing this security. As mentioned above, climate change being a non-traditional, non-military threat for a long time kept it off the policy agenda. Thus, the military addressing climate change is a positive development in that its securitisation makes it "an urgent, existential threat which demands immediate action" (Trombetta, 2018: 595). Particularly since the 2007 UN report on climate change there has been an "extension of the military and the national security state into the arena of environmentalism" (Marzec, 2015: 1). However, serious questions must be asked as to whether the military is in fact an appropriate actor to address the issue of climate change, especially considering it is "one of the most polluting of human institutions" (Dalby, 2009: 4). While military threats usually involve intentional attacks by states or terrorist organisations, threats related to climate change are "diffuse, indirect, and international, originating both inside and outside the state concerned" (ibid: 50). Additionally, while the former tends to be occasional and rare, "environmental degradation is a long-term process usually derived accidentally from routine economic activities," and therefore not easily 'fixed' by the military (ibid).

Although the profound differences between 'new' environmental threats and 'traditional' military threats requires a non-traditional approach to security, this is not yet the case in the militarisation of climate change. Military reports addressing climate change as a national security threat exclude the possibility of transformative policies that could mitigate its effects, considering it unavoidable and attempts at mitigation useless (Marzec, 2015: 2). The result is the militarisation of the environment with a singular focus on adaptation as a crucial element in "the "exceptional" war on global warming" (ibid: 4). This is exemplified in the 2007 US military report National Security and the Threat of Climate Change which concludes that "the U.S. war machine must expand its power globally to avoid significant disruptions to international stability" (ibid: 7). Furthermore, climate change is presented as a "threat multiplier" exacerbating conflicts and existing vulnerabilities in alarmist discourses that direct policies to limit migration rather than solve the root causes of poverty and environmental change (Dalby, 2009: 50). This is partly because in the militarisation of climate change the ideological basis is left unacknowledged, an ideology that "disadvantages the potential for alternatives and can result in the reduction of the state to an aggressive ecological policing agent" while still prioritizing "market forces over the needs of the planet's dispossessed and their environments" (Marzec, 2015: 26). Ignoring this is dangerous, considering that the relative affluence in the Global North combined with higher vulnerability to climate change in the Global South could lead Northern security institutions to impose a "defence-oriented solution that seeks to remap the earth along the lines of a gated community" (ibid: 27).

Thus, climate change itself remains unaddressed, and its victims are turned into a threat that is more readily understood in the realist framework of national security.

The status quo: threatened or threatening?

The most fundamental contradiction in adopting a national security approach to climate change is that while the former aims to preserve the status quo, this is exactly what is driving the latter. The painful "irony of climate change is that the threat is self-imposed", at least for those in affluent consumer societies (Dalby, 2009: 2). Therefore, any adequate response to this threat requires transformation of the current political system of nation-states and the economic system of carboniferous capitalism. In this way anthropogenic climate change questions the legitimacy of the dominant conceptualisations of modernity and development, since the security this has given the Global North is based on fossil fuels that are now creating insecurity (ibid: 3). However, as pointed out by Lacy, there are "networks of power that have an interest in protecting a limited vision of security", which is reflected in the strategies employed by national security agents in relation to climate change (Lacy, 2005: 6). These strategies focus primarily on "securing and protecting a particular mode of existence" and the people who benefit from that, as opposed to "disrupting the strategies of powerful actors in the fossil fuel economy" (ibid: 105-106). For example, the European Union was advised to take responsibility for 'managing climate security risks' through "more proactive […] interventions in crisis regions" (Fetzek and van Schaik, 2018). Meanwhile, fossil fuel subsidies were recently estimated at €55 billion per year in the EU (Coleman and Dietz, 2019). Other scholars have noted that the dominant way of conceptualising environmental change implies that climate change can only be addressed by "remaining within the existing [neoliberal] frame of our politico-environmental relations" and following the realist conclusion of the inevitability of adaptation (Marzec, 2015: 26).

The preservation of the status quo is based on the assumption that states share the interests of their population, meaning that insecurity experienced by humans may be neglected as long as state institutions survive. Thus, adaptation is considered the best strategy to preserve state sovereignty, while mitigation might be considered a threat to "core national values of political communities" such as high living standards and economic growth (McDonald, 2018: 162). This is in stark contrast with a human security approach which considers mitigation necessary for the protection and welfare of vulnerable communities (ibid). National security's assumption of shared interests ignores how states can actually cause insecurity, which is convenient for countries with high consumption patterns. These countries constitute what Lacy calls the 'tame zone', where security discourse is more concerned with containing the 'wild zone', for example by restricting migration, rather than mitigating climate change which creates vulnerabilities that might actually prompt migration (Lacy, 2005: 107). Narratives of national security thus allow countries in the tame zone to turn the primary victims of climate change into threats, without actually addressing the problem that they themselves have caused. Rather than climate change threatening national security, it is action against climate change that poses "a threat to the conceptual hegemony of state centred national security discourses and institutions" (Deudney, 1999 cited in Dalby, 2009 :51).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that climate change cannot be fully comprehended or adequately addressed by a national security approach. It thus exposes the flaws of national security as the dominant framework of international politics, since it fails to provide solutions to what is arguably the most

serious security issue of our time. First of all, a fundamentally global issue cannot be addressed in national terms, because its causes and effects are not bound by national borders. A national security approach thus allows for climate injustice instead of promoting a solution based on international cooperation. Secondly, short-term thinking in state and security institutions fails to provide solutions that mitigate the long-term impacts of climate change, emphasizing instead short-term technological solutions. Thirdly, the military as the traditional provider of national security is equally ineffective in addressing the problem because of its focus on adaptation rather than mitigation and by framing migration as the more pressing security issue. Finally, climate change exposes the fundamental unsustainability of the current political and economic systems that national security aims to preserve, which specifically challenges the foundations of the Global North's wealth and security. The shortcomings of the national security approach in these four aspects means that the security of those most vulnerable to climate change is neglected in favour of those profiting from the status quo. Although climate change has been gaining increasing attention in international politics, comprehensive action to combat it is still disappointingly limited. Moving away from a national security approach is necessary to create space for transformational policies that do mitigate climate change and ensure climate justice and security for all people, now and in the future.

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