Securitising the Environment?

Analysing the Limitations of Securitisation

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ABSTRACT

In the Brundtland Commission & Brundtland (1987) report, natural disasters were codified as a threat to the populations. It is inferred that changes in the environment will lead to a scarcity of resources, conflict, and trigger refugee crises. Thus, with great urgency, the developed countries have started discussing environment-related issues in the security council. Securitisation of the environment was projected as the sole policy preference to deal with climate change. Ever since, India and others in the Global South have been demanding delinking the subjects of environment and climate change from international peace and security. They suggest that securitisation will not give fruitful results in calling out the real perpetrators and policy implementation.

In the light of this continuing debate between the Global North and the Global South, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: What is securitisation and what does it mean in the context of the environment? Will climate change overburden Europe with the conflict and refugee crisis associated with it? And if yes, why is the Global South apprehensive of securitisation? What are the demerits of securitisation of the environment and climate change? Finally and most importantly, what implications does securitisation have on the environment policy implementation?

Keywords:
Securitisation, Environment and Climate Change, Limits, India, Conflict and Refugee crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Voting against the UNSC draft on 13 December 2021, Ambassador T S Tirumurti said,

> *"India is second to none when it comes to climate action and climate justice. But the security council is not the place to discuss either issue. In fact, the attempt to do so appears to be motivated and driven by a desire to evade responsibility …." (India at UN, 2021)*

A natural question arises around India voting against the UNSC draft that sought to codify climate change as a security challenge (Haidar, 2021). A step that could be viewed as one against climate action. Russia vetoed against the resolution on the same day and China abstained from voting. Does this voting pattern suggest a political tussle among countries or does this vote mean a big no to the common determinant in many climate change and environment meetings – 'securitisation'? Looking at the prior mentioned speech of Indian representatives at the UN alludes that it is securitisation of the environment that India has been vehemently opposing.

This paper explains securitisation and lays down the existing, available empirical analysis that points at the limits of securitisation. The first section offers a descriptive analysis of what securitisation means and how a sector can be securitised by way of rhetoric and a series of policy options. The second section looks at the securitisation of the environment and climate change. Here, the northern perspective of environmental security situated in the conflict discourse is presented. The third section discusses the worries of southern countries against the securitising move. The final section looks at how securitising failed to get the policies implemented. While the rhetoric remained strong, the execution of policies, decided upon in several national and international agreements, picked up no steam. Alongside, it created insecurities and exhausted the enthusiasm of the mobilised population by always presenting a "doomsday discourse" (Vuori, 2010). In conclusion, this paper hints at four limitations to securitisation. Drawing from the existing research, the paper undertakes a correlational study between the limitations of securitisation and stagnation in environmental policy implementation.

UNDERSTANDING SECURITISATION THEORY

The policy or the act of securitising everyday issues was theorised by the Copenhagen School (Buzan et. al., 1998; Kilroy, 2018) . Securitisation theory primarily states that security issues are not a given. Instead, a "securitising actor", that is a social and institutional power in a state, constructs security issues as essential to or beyond politics (Kilroy, 2018). According to Copenhagen school, security is about survival and so, the securitising actor would employ extraordinary measures to ensure the referent object's survival. Measures such as this often claim something to be an existential threat, making security a "self-referential practice" (Trombetta, 2007). For instance, immigration has become a matter beyond simply 'politics'. It has become an existential threat in several nations not because it innately is a threat, but because it is constructed as one through "speech-act" (Stritzel, 2014).

Ole Wæver[1], drawing from Derrida's interpretation of Austin, considers security as a speech-act

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[1] Ole Wæver is a professor of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen and is credited as being one of the main developers of the Copenhagen School.

(Trombetta, 2007). Copenhagen school applies the social-constructivist approach via subjective assessments rather than objective ones to propound whether an issue is a security issue. Using rhetoric, an actor legitimises extraordinary measures to defend the referential object from the constituted threat. Though security is an intersubjective construct, it can't be successful without:

1. a securitising actor
2. a securitising move
3. a target audience

Any act of securitisation requires the successful interplay of these three variables. Moreover, security is a collective phenomenon or a "social praxis" (Buzan et al., 1998) that follows specific rules. It is only when the intended audience is satisfied with the securitising move that the securitising actor takes the issue out of the public realm, cuts out the democratic process, and halts public debate on the said issue in the name of national or international security. Therefore, the Copenhagen school sees securitisation as a "failure to deal with the normal politics" (Buzan et al., 1998). The over-dramatisation of a security issue invokes the logic of enemy and war (Williams, 2003). By labelling something under security, an agent claims the right to treat the issue by extraordinary means. Buzan et al. (1998) have identified five securitised sectors: military, politics, economy, society, and environment.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY AND THE CONFLICT DISCOURSE

Our Common Future (1987) report released by the World Commission on Environment and Development is considered as the first step in securitising the environment. The report emphasised that the scarcity of resources can result in violent conflicts across the globe. Hence, the report positioned the environment within a paradigm of threat to international peace and security. Brauch (2009) further argues that the speech-acts have largely successfully made the environment a security issue at international and national levels. Brauch becomes more relevant when the shift in the discussion on securitisation within the United Nations is analysed (Koukos, 2019).

For instance, until 2007, environmental issues had been dealt with by the organisations specifically formed to deal with them, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] and United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP]. However, a significant change occurred in the security discourse when the United Nations Security Council [UNSC] discussed climate change in 2007. This was then followed by a 2011 discussion (Scott, 2012), and ones in 2018 and 2020. The fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] from 2007 claimed climate change to be, according to Koukos (2019), a "non-linear issue" thereby suggesting that threats are posed abruptly from it and hence sought the involvement of security actors. The developing countries have a different understanding of environmental security than the developed countries. The developed countries perceived that the threats coming out of environmental disasters would be the refugee problem and the related changes in demographics and socio-economics of the developed countries. When climate change is securitised, the Global South has a genuine worry that the democratic discussion might get stalled. How the security council took over the issues is an 'act' that was a manifestation of decades-long 'speech'.

Securitisation, however, has its own merits. For instance, perceiving something as a risk or a threat results in the creation of institutions and welfare mechanisms designed to overcome them (Mythen, 2004). Securitisation becomes instrumental in

> *"Social and political mobilization…the obvious reason for putting environmental issues into the security agenda is the possible magnitude of the threats posed and the need to mobilize urgent and unprecedented responses to them. The security label is a useful way both of signalling bias against danger and setting priority, and for this reason alone it is likely to persist in the environmental debates." (Buzan et al., 1998)*

John Ashton, the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office's special representative on Climate Change from 2006 to 2012, believes that securitisation can attract international attention (Warner and Boas, 2019). According to him, this attention will help states make compromises and help build solidarities in working together against the fast-approaching crisis. But, the developed countries' environment-as-security idea is usually a part of a "conflict discourse" (Koukos, 2019).

Conflict discourse is associated with national security and other traditional security concerns. It juxtaposes the idea of national security with individual security (Buzan, 2008). Those in agreement with the discourse argue that natural disasters can increase the risk of conflict and instability through heightened competition for natural resources, population displacement, loss of livelihoods, and migration, ultimately leading to conflict amongst populations.

This equation of the environment with conflict or refugee narratives is criticised as counterproductive and could lead to unnecessary "militarisation of the environment" (Marzec, 2015). Such a discourse is a part of 'us vs them' understanding (Deudney, 1990). Such an understanding simply degenerates into pointing out threats coming from outside the national borders. One's attention is likely to steer away from their contribution to environmental problems. This is precisely the concern of the southern countries.

AGAINST SECURITISATION: THE GLOBAL SOUTH PERSPECTIVE

In 2020, India inquired at the UNSC: "Problems arise [in developing countries] from issues related to people living at subsistence levels. The question then is: Do we want to treat poverty and subsistence agriculture as peace and security issues?" (Chaudhary, 2020)

Environment-related issues are seen by southern countries, including India and China, as a socio-economic or a development issue rather than a security issue. In several instances, the G77 countries have emphasised that climate-related discussions ought to happen more democratically in the UN General Assembly. The discussions must follow principles that govern the climate agreements (Bo, 2016), like the "common but differentiated responsibilities" clause of the Kyoto Protocol. Countries of the global south fear that a successful securitisation of the environment can put equal responsibility on all countries. Developing nations point out that their developed counterparts generate more greenhouse gases, so it is unjust to put equal responsibility on developing countries at the expense of their development. Moreover, restricting discussions to the UNSC alone may result in interventions by the veto countries into domestic affairs of other countries under the shadow of envi-

ronmental security. This is strictly against the principles of non-interference in domestic affairs held close to heart by several developing countries, including India. When discussions are held only in the UNSC, there is no scope to help developing countries find more adaptive measures (Bo, 2016). The dictatorship of the security council in climate change matters would paralyse the discussions and be catastrophic to humankind. By viewing climate change as a security issue, especially in terms of conflict discourse, the developed countries seem to be shrugging off their commitments regarding emission reduction.

However, all these are speculations. In praxis, environmental security has not yet assumed a militarised shape, nor have the securitising actors taken exceptional measures. Trombetta (2007) argues that by securitising "non-traditional sectors", the logic of security is transformed and the practices associated with securitisation are challenged. She suggests that the logic of "prevention and management" prevails in environmental securitisation over the traditional Copenhagen school's logic of security based on "contingency and emergency". If exceptional measures are not undertaken, as suggested by Trombetta and feared by the global south, it becomes crucial to evaluate the functional value of securitisation in the first place. Doubts arise around securitisation being translated into effective environmental policies, giving way to the larger question that is: is securitisation effective at all?

DOES SECURITISATION LEAD TO POLICY PARALYSIS AND POLICY BOOMERANG? A CASE-STUDY

This section of the paper scrutinises the functional aspect of securitisation based on secondary data. It is true, as Trombetta (2007) suggests, that securitisation of climate cannot be understood in the "contingency and the emergency" logic of security because research proves that securitising actors did not take extraordinary measures. But the will to securitise these issues and present them in the doomsday discourse is always evident in several moves by the UN and the world countries to discuss, for example, climate change in the security council. The question then becomes: Does securitisation lead to mundane ways of prevention and management of climate change as the predominant global action? Additionally, can securitisation also backfire?

Prevention and management simply seek to defend the status quo. Securitisation does not prompt positive action towards the transformation of the existing condition. The resultant action tends to be mundane. Warner and Boas (2019) give a detailed analysis of how securitisation has resulted in ineffective policy implementation and "backfired". The Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom framed climate change as a security threat. The aim was to build up such a view amongst the commonwealth countries to work together against the would-be security crisis (ibid.).

Warner and Boas' (2019) study lays down, after a series of interviews with the securitising actors and audiences especially from India, that grand narratives only came up with mundane aims and actions to mitigate the problem. Furthermore, because of this over-dramatisation of consequences of climate change, the audiences were sceptical of even the mundane actions and outrightly rejected them. Crises are a construction.

Because only

"Certain events are considered crises while others of equal gravity are not. Security concerns and risk assessments tend to be about what might happen. We worry about them before they happen, seeking a 'way out' in anticipation of a potential crisis to retain a sense of agency. This may incite would-be securitisers to crank up the alarm to get heard, invoking apocalyptic visions of climate-induced violence and mass displacement. But the danger of crying wolf remains: the threat may fail to materialize …if the point is pressed too hard, it fails to resonate with its intended audience and the discourse of fear boomerangs." (ibid.).

The securitisation theory claims that states would pass a series of legislations and policies to make climate change exceptionally more important than many other international concerns and would therefore be able to impose extraordinary measures to obtain results. However, the recent research by Warner and Boas (2019) suggests the contrary. Neither the policy formulation nor the policy action anywhere closer to what was imagined by the Copenhagen School. Therefore, the worry around securitisation is two-fold for the Global South: that democratic engagements at UNGA, UNEP, or UNFCCC may be halted in the name of securitisation and that securitisation may not translate into right policies to deal with climate change.

At the September 2020 'Humanitarian Effects of Environmental Degradation and Peace and Security' UNSC meet, the Indian delegation rightly situated the problem of securitisation in not merely the use of exceptional measures to address the problem, but also how securitisation will not provide a solution to the climate crisis. India argued that by raising this issue above politics, there is an obvious trap of not adequately addressing the implementation of policies. The "real perpetrators" responsible for climate change cannot be located if the talk about climate and the environment is abstract and superficial (Chaudhary 2020). Warner and Boas' (2019) work also confirmed how the securitisation in the Netherlands, regarding the Dutch Delta Commission, encouraged people to become disinterested in the doomsday discourse after a short while.

This "threats without enemies" discourse creates an adverse impact on policy implementation (Prins, 1993). The audience may worry about the would-be apocalypse, and they may get "insecuritised" (Bigo & McCluskey 2018). This insecuritsation is a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness that will discourage activity. Inactivity will not solve the severe effects of climate change. However, a serious engagement and positive action towards contributing to the global efforts to mitigate climate change, especially on the populations from the Global South, will.

Securitisation is not only stalling democratic discussions but is also giving way to ineffective policy implementation. This is sometimes a result of a trust deficit between the Global North and Global South countries. This is often the product of fear of invocation of "the logic of exception" (Bourbeau, 2015). Other times, the constant apocalyptic discourse demoralises enthusiasm and may create insecurities, famously codified as "the logic of routine" (ibid.). Insecurity could frighten people into inaction. Passivity will not help make policy implementation effective. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that securitisation policies not only do not work, but also backfire.

CONCLUSION: THE FOUR LIMITATIONS

Security is about survival. Thus, a security-based policy invokes extraordinary measures to combat the problem. But, for Wæver (2011), climate securitisation is "all dressed up and nowhere to go". The environmental sector is an altogether unique example of how securitisation has unfolded. While there is plenty of rhetoric, its manifestation is not near what the securitisation theory expected (Scott, 2012). The process of securitisation in the environmental sector appears to be slower compared to other sectors.
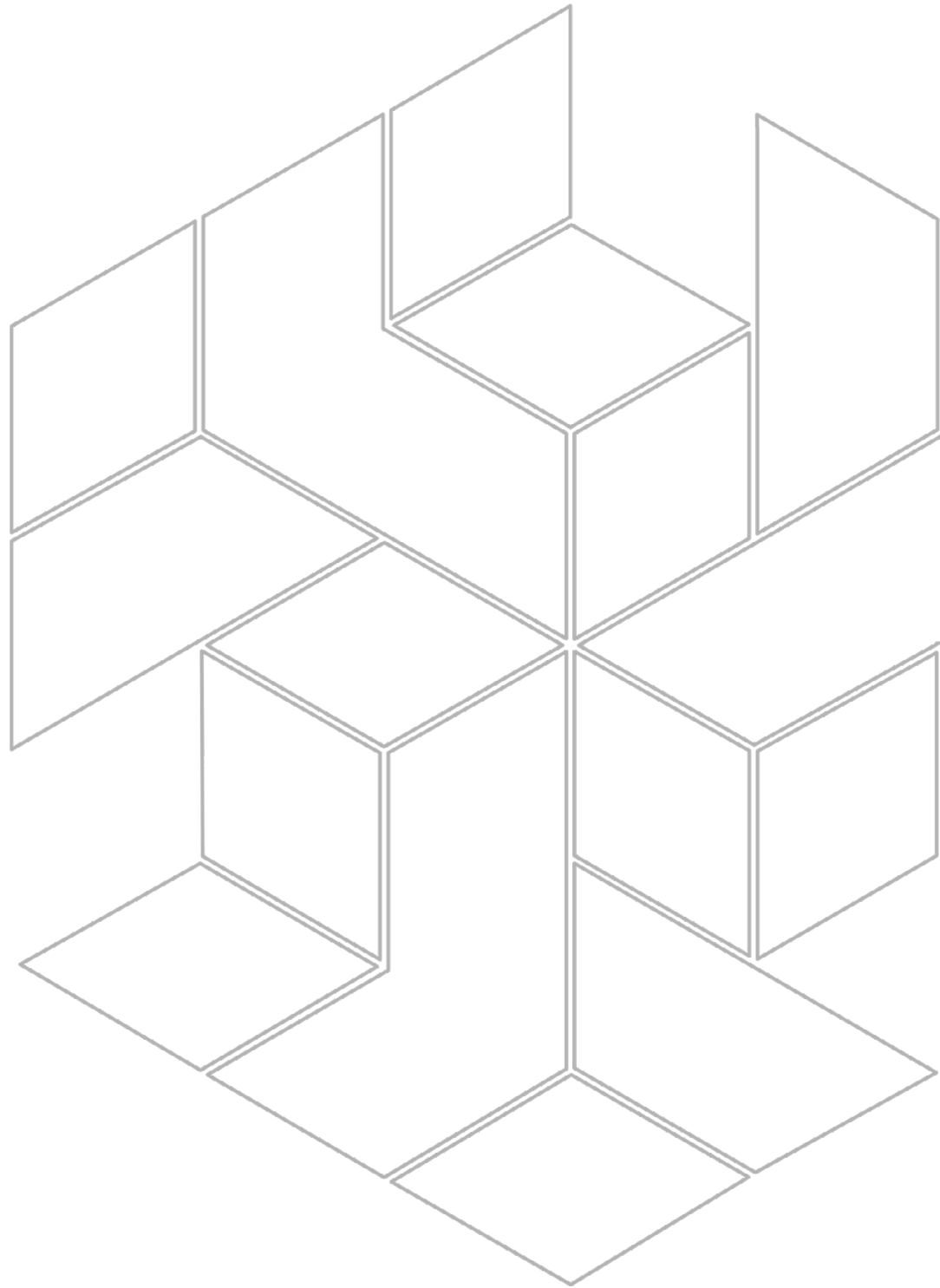
As is elaborated in the preceding discussion, there are primarily four limitations to the adoption of policies of securitisation of the environment. Firstly, there has been a creation of an 'us' vs. 'them' discourse between northern and southern countries. This has hampered cooperation. Secondly, unlike what the theory propounds, exceptional measures have not been employed to control the threat emanating from environmental disasters. Thus, simple codification of the environment as a threat is not showing its results. More so, it is seen to be backfiring, sometimes, by creating insecurities. Thirdly, flowing the second observation, if exceptional measures are taken up as a part of securitisation policies, that may soon escalate to the militarisation of the environment as it happened with all other sectors. Perhaps, the next step to halting democratic discussions on climate is militarisation. Militarisation would mean an ultimate breakdown of democratic ethos. And finally, security logic seeks to protect what 'is' via a status-quo approach. Climate change needs more than a simple act of defending. It needs positive action towards transforming the existing relations of domination between human and nature.

In the last three decades, the trends of environmental security have been concerned more with security than with the environment (Barnett, 2001). Limited attention to conflict can potentially downplay the wider implications of climate change. This view may distract the first world countries from doing what is most needed: creating and developing the adaptive capabilities of developing countries that are the first to face the wrath of climate change due to their domestic socio-economic conditions. The logic of the enemy is interwoven into the logic of security. To address the problem of climate change, cooperation becomes essential over the invocation of logic of war and enemy. As Deudney (1990) suggested, ecological awareness should be linked to solid values of "human desires and aspirations" to protect their environment and nature, not regressive security logic.

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