

The Securitisation of Climate Change in Australia and Beyond.

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SYNOPSIS

There was a time when the only thought given to climate change in terms of security was a cursory mention of a doomsday scenario. Yet in a relatively rapid turnaround, climate change has assumed a place of increased importance in discussions of national security. This article discusses the securitisation of climate change and the way this is shaping political responses to climate change. It concludes by outlining a contrasting approach to raising the profile of climate change in the national discourse – by using the language and framework of international human rights.

In 2007, the United Kingdom, in its then capacity as chair of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), [called](#) for the first debate on the impact of climate change on security. The day-long debate identified that climate change has increased the likelihood of extreme weather and its numerous risks include; population movement and displacement, food and water insecurity, and infrastructure damage. As a result of this debate, the securitising of climate change began and the rhetoric spread relentlessly. By 2009, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd began [invoking](#) climate change as a security issue in Australia. By 2014, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [Report](#) included, for the first time, a chapter dedicated to human security. The [Pentagon](#), the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) and the [Group of 7](#) followed shortly thereafter with their own reports.

The [reasoning behind](#) the 'securitisation' of an issue is to elevate the threat, increase its awareness and encourage urgency to take action. The severity and immediacy of a security threat is highly effective at achieving these goals, much more so than other threats. A distant environmental threat, or one only couched in economic terms, or, as this article will later consider, a threat to human rights, tends to be dealt with normally in the political arena. In contrast, once the issue has left the usual democratic arena and is being dealt with as an emergency, it can be said to be fully securitised. But what are the consequences of securitising an issue? How does the audience receive it?

In fact, there are many security risks associated with climate change and it is unclear how well equipped Australia is to deal with any, let alone most of them. Militarily, climate change will likely shape the environment of operations and necessary facilities, and thus impact the military's overall capability. Rising sea levels risk displacing millions of people – including Australia's Pacific neighbours – and could ignite serious border disputes. Conflict over resources is hardly limited to oil as changes in rain patterns and increasing droughts have already affected food production and the availability of drinking water. Increasingly frequent and severe so-called 'natural' disasters will continue to damage Australia's infrastructure. Aside from the physical aspects of security, there are also economic considerations. As a result of heat-related injuries, global warming will likely continue to affect [field and factory workers'](#) productivity. Tourist attractions most affected by the phenomenon. The Great Barrier – which contributes \$5 billion per year to the economy – could take a serious hit, as only 7% [has avoided coral bleaching](#) caused by coal mining and long-term warming of the ocean.

Despite Prime Minister Rudd's 2009 rhetoric on the securitisation of climate change, a [2011 survey](#) showed that a *declining* number of Australians considered climate change to be a very important foreign policy consideration. And those survey participants were not alone. During the 2007 UNSC debate, the Group of 77, a coalition of developing nations, raised concerns that the Security Council was not the appropriate forum to address the topic, and emphasised sustainable development in an attempt to downplay climate change as a security risk. This trend was carried into the [second UNSC debate](#) in 2011. This is evidenced by military data from China and Russia that suggested they [rejected the link](#) of climate change as a security risk.

The recognition of climate change securitisation depends not just on whether one accepts that climate change threatens national security but also on what the consequences of such acceptance could be. Would that mean a state of emergency in Australia? Would it mean that the UNSC – the international body charged with security challenges – would decide on the international response to climate change and begin to dictate standards and targets? Or would it enforce those standards through intervention? Those opposed to securitisation tend to reject what is potentially a military involvement as a perceived environmental challenge. Evidently, climate change has not yet reached that level of securitisation, either in Australia or in the international system. The UNSC might dip its toes into the issue every so

often, however as seen in the recent outcomes of the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#), the treaty-based system is still the most desirable platform to agitate the matter internationally. Within Australia, climate change is far from being declared a national emergency.

Has securitisation produced any significant results? One might argue that the Paris Agreement is an indicator of its success, but the UNSC debates are unclear. On one hand, there was insignificant movement in the position of the Group of 77 in the UNSC debate on climate change between 2007 and 2011 so its impact was limited. But on the other hand, progress is evidenced by the US, where it initially played a minor role in 2007 but then embraced securitisation several years later. However, securitisation does not appear to have had much of an impact on the climate debate in Australia and if anything, a negative relationship was recorded during this same period. Therefore, attributing the international consensus to securitisation alone seems unlikely.

There is an alternative conception of climate change and that is climate change as a matter of international human rights. Many human rights are reliant on, or associated with, a healthy climate, including; the right to food and water, shelter, and the right to life. Rights for indigenous populations who have traditionally close relationships with their land. Rights for environmental defenders, who rely on freedom of speech to get their message out. Therefore, the UN Human Rights Council and a litany of treaties and declarations – all with existing enforcement mechanisms – could assist in this new conception of approaching climate change as a matter of international human rights.

But [the 2014 IPCC Report](#) explicitly rejected such a characterisation as it would specify ‘minimum standards that apply universally, and such rights are often not realised in national and international law and practice’. Legally protected human rights are far less fluid than political standards and have a history of being taken far less seriously than threats to human security. Likely for this reason, and despite the potential offered by a human rights analysis of climate change, climate securitisation has become the dominant framework for debating and promoting the issue of climate change in Australia and around the world.

Nevertheless, as this article has examined, it is difficult to ascertain how successful securitisation has been, and whether it will break the malaise of the climate change debate. Whether conceived as a risk to human rights, to economic success, to our physical security, or to a combination of those and many more, future progress on this topic within Australia will hinge on the ability to change the notion of climate change as a distant threat.

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