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Political Regime Type and the Securitization of Climate Change by State Actors

Searching for Mechanisms behind Discourses and Actions in China and Japan

Topic and Research Question

Today, security is considered to cover more than traditional, military-related aspects. As a matter of fact, climate change is one of the most pressing non-traditional security concerns. Yet, global action falls short of what is necessary to prevent the worst. This suggests that many governments do not perceive climate change as threatening enough to justify drastic countermeasures.

The concept of securitization allows to unearth how state actors shape security perceptions of climate change, provided we better grasp how securitization is influenced by country-specific contexts. In particular, the impact of regime type is an unquestioned assumption. Following from this reasoning, the thesis addresses the research question: *How is political regime type shaping the securitization of climate change by state actors?* China and Japan were selected as appropriate cases.

Adding to academic concerns, the ongoing increase in autocracies will further complicate finding compromise in international cooperation on climate change. Answering the research question offers access points to increase leverage in favor of more constructive climate diplomacy while also helping to reduce investment risks.

State of the Art

Most works applying the concept of securitization start their derivative journey with the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). It defined securitizing moves as speech acts through which an actor declares something to be an existential threat to a referent object which, provided the relevant audience accepts, legitimizes extraordinary countermeasures. Various aspects of the Copenhagen School's understanding of securitization have been criticized (Balzacq 2010, 2016; McDonald 2008, 2013; Vuori 2008, 2016). This concerns a lack of clarity about how and when successful securitization occurs (in particular, missing criteria to determine audience acceptance, underrepresentation of non-discursive practices, and the unspecified role of context), an exclusively extraordinary, militarized logic of security, the centrality of the state as securitizing actor and referent object, and an overreliance on discourse analysis as the sole method of choice.

Climate change is an issue widely discussed in the securitization literature, leading to the first interesting classifications of climate security discourses (Diez, von Lucke, and Wellmann 2016). However, climate change has not yet been approached with a focus on regime type

and the mechanisms through which it shapes the securitization of climate change in a comparative way.

Methodology and Approach

The method of structured, focused comparison (SFC) was chosen to conduct exploratory, comparative case studies highlighting mechanisms between regime type and the securitization of climate change. China and Japan were selected as diverse cases, being situated at opposite ends on the political regime type spectrum.

Applying SFC requires the disaggregated description of regime type by using indicators from various indices to measure relevant components and discussing country-specific aspects these indices do not depict. Afterwards, the securitization of climate change by state actors in China and Japan between September 2020 and December 2022 was analyzed, following the steps:

1. Identification of relevant actors/enabling audiences
2. Identification of securitizing moves
 - Quantitative (word frequency and co-occurrence) and qualitative assessment using eight-fold typology
 - Discussion of countermeasures
3. Determining audience acceptance
 - Discursive acceptance
 - Non-discursive acceptance (policy instruments, parliamentary voting behavior, and public opinion)

Typology of Climate Security Discourses

Referent object	Logic of securitization	
	Threatification	Riskification
National Security	Non-traditional: Imminent threat to economic growth, energy security, and great power image Traditional: Danger to sovereignty/territorial integrity through inducing violent conflict/mass migration/other events	Non-traditional: Potential threat to economic growth, energy security, and great power image in the longer term Traditional: Potential instigator of violent conflicts/mass migration/other events that might endanger sovereignty/territorial integrity
Human Security	Direct threat to individuals' food, health, economic, personal, community, political, and environmental security	Long-term risk for individuals' food, health, economic, personal, community, political, and environmental security
Planetary Security	Imminent threat to the biosphere	Causing unforeseeable, long-term consequences for the biosphere

Finally, to answer the research question, the SFC answered six questions across cases, to systematically collect data on the impact of regime type on securitizing actors, enabling audiences, referent objects (national, human, and planetary security), and proposed countermeasures in the realm of climate diplomacy.

Main Facts

In China, there hardly exist ways to be independently politically active and the executive is poorly controlled by the legislative or judiciary. The shift from a single party to a personalist regime suggests rising personal loyalty to Xi Jinping and repression, including censorship. Japan features free political and civil society participation and separation of powers. However, only a moderate share of citizens is active in political interest groups and civil society is limitedly integrated in policy deliberations. Besides, in the one-party democracy, the LDP is heading a strong executive, seldomly challenged due to a weak legislative, voter apathy, and its valence advantage.

Relevant actors and audiences in China and Japan can exist on three levels. Ministries and individuals in charge of climate, energy, foreign, and security policy serve as securitizing actors on level one. Top-level decision-making individuals and bodies on level two constitute the enabling audience for level one and securitizing actors for the public and the parliament (in Japan) on level three.

In China, those at level two accept climate change as a threat to non-traditional national, human, and planetary security. This threat is particularly large for developing countries, of which China is thought to be part. They mainly echo proposed countermeasures, committing to self-determined international cooperation, while urging others to step up. However, policy instruments suggest that they struggle to cooperate to an extent satisfying the international climate change regime's core provisions. The public does not approve threatification moves, while predominantly supporting proposed countermeasures.

In Japan, level two accepts climate change as a threat to human and planetary security in Japan and abroad, a threat to Japan's non-traditional national security, and a risk to Japan's and others' traditional national security. It mainly reiterates level one countermeasures, committing to international cooperation, calling out other major emitters, and promising to take a leading role. Yet, policy instruments in line with the international climate change regime's key provisions are defined only if they do not conflict with other goals. The parliament agrees with these securitizing moves, while the public predominantly does not conceive climate change to be an imminent threat warranting greater government action.

Results

In China, observed indicators help grasp why a shrinking core executive is free to unilaterally securitize. Regime

stability concerns imply a dependence on performance-based legitimation, hence the focus on threats to social and economic development. Creating threats to human and planetary security might be connected to similar concerns. Both are subsumed under national security, requiring top-down, centralized responses. Extending securitization moves to other countries demonstrates attention to their concerns without requiring significant increases in assistance or challenging the insistence on non-interference. Regime indicators also help understand the combination of cooperative and uncooperative climate diplomacy, with the need for identity-based legitimation leading to portraying China as a strong international actor that is cooperative, yet equally willing to protect the interests and rights of the developing world.

In Japan, the LDP-led executive's unchallenged position lets it securitize based on its own preferences, without great need to convince a weak legislative and public. A priority for securing economic growth and stable energy might explain why climate change is considered a threat to non-traditional national security, while other concerns prevail on the traditional side. Regarding human and planetary security, the government arguably reacted to pressures from abroad, in addition to the desire to uphold its leading position in advocating for adaptation-based human security. Without strong domestic pressures, the executive can cooperate only if it promotes broader objectives or pleases an international audience.

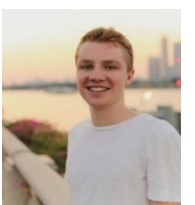
Future research can build on these exploratory findings, applying diverse methods, including those based on a more positivist ontology and epistemology, to gain broader, more generalizable insights into factors shaping the perception of climate change as a security issue.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at theses.univie.ac.at/detail/69140/.

About the Author

Florian Klumpp holds a BA in Asian Studies and Management. During his studies, he spent two semesters at universities in Shanghai and Taipei and interned with the German Federal Foreign Office, MERICS, and the German development agency GIZ.



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