

Security, with Caveats

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International efforts to counter climate change are proving insufficient. In search of more effective mechanisms against climate change, scholars and states, including vulnerable Small Island Developing States, have started framing climate change as a security threat. At the centre of this mobilisation of the United Nations (UN) collective security system is the Security Council, which is called upon to take concrete measures against climate change as a threat to international peace and security. At the same time, there is a plethora of critiques against this collective security system, both in general and in the climate context in particular.¹

Against these critiques, security framings of climate change often come with caveats. For instance, it is supposed to be seen as a threat to ‘human’ or ‘global’ security, instead of national or international security.² Among the security measures available, the most confrontational ones, especially the use of force, are supposed to remain unused.³ In addition, the institutional framework of the Security Council is supposed to be reformed and function more inclusively when addressing climate change.⁴

Considering the perceived need for all these caveats, the question is: why still mobilise the security system against climate change? Behind the scepticism of this question are several reasons why I view the resort to security – and the caveats accompanying it – as ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. In this brief impulse, I highlight one concern for the (probable) scenario that the caveats would not be effective and another for the (improbable) scenario that they would be.

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¹ For example, Eliana Cusato, ‘Of Violence and (In)visibility: The Securitisation of Climate Change in International Law’, *London Review of International Law* 10 (2022), 203–242.

² For example, UNSC Provisional Verbatim Record of the 6587th Meeting of 20 July 2011, S/PV.6587, 28–29; Craig Martin, ‘Climate Change and Global Security: Framing an Existential Threat’ *AJIL: Unbound* 116 (2022), 248–253.

³ For example, Mark Nevitt, ‘Is Climate Change a Threat to International Peace and Security?’ *Mich. J. Int’l L.* 42 (2021), 527–579 (576–577).

⁴ For example, Christina Voigt, ‘Security in a “Warming World”: Competences of the UN Security Council for Preventing Dangerous Climate Change’ in: Cecilia M. Baillet (ed.), *Security: A Multidisciplinary Normative Approach* (Brill 2009), 291–312 (312).

To begin with, there is a tension between the coercive logic of security and the cooperative logic of the climate regime that the abovementioned caveats are unlikely to overcome. There are many different understandings of 'security'. What seems to underlie most is that security is something extraordinary. This is highlighted by securitisation theory, which characterises a security threat as an issue framed as an emergency condition beyond everyday societal and political challenges. Securitising an issue is oriented towards finding a response to the issue that is equally extraordinary.⁵

Under the UN collective security system, extraordinary security measures are typically coercive. The coercive nature of the use of force is obvious. Other measures, such as sanctions, are propagated as effective yet peaceful alternatives.⁶ Even if the use of force was off the table, many alternative measures share the coercive nature. Sanctions, for instance, are taken against the will of the targeted state, with the purpose of bending its will and bringing it back to a desired conduct.⁷ This structural similarity between the use of force and sanctions as a form of economic coercion was reflected in the attempt, albeit unsuccessful, by various Global South states to include economic coercion in the conception of prohibited force.⁸

In contrast to the typically coercive nature of security measures, the international community has chosen the path of cooperation to respond to climate change. In recognition of climate change as a global and collective problem, one of the legal principles undergirding the climate regime is that of cooperation.⁹ The Paris Agreement foresees international cooperation as an integral element of many of its actions. For example, state parties shall strengthen cooperation on technology development and transfer to support mitigation and adaptation.¹⁰ Cooperation plays a crucial role in compensating for the disadvantaged circumstances of developing countries.

The tension between the coercive logic of security and the cooperative basis of the climate regime risks undermining the latter. This is regardless of whether climate change is called a threat to national, global, or human security. The prioritisation of coercive measures typical of the security system de-prioritises responses to the issue that are outside the security logic,

⁵ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998), 21-26.

⁶ For example, Voigt (n. 4), 306-308.

⁷ Georges Abi-Saab, 'The Concept of Sanction in International Law' in: Vera Gowlland-Debbas (ed.), *United Nations Sanctions and International Law* (Brill 2001), 29-41 (39).

⁸ See Erin Pobjie, *Prohibited Force: The Meaning of 'Use of Force' in International Law* (Cambridge University Press 2024), 117-123.

⁹ ICJ, *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change*, advisory opinion of 23 July 2025, paras 214-218, 260-267, 301-308.

¹⁰ Article 10 Paris Agreement.

such as cooperation and economic transformation.¹¹ Major greenhouse gas-emitting states are already cautious about agreeing to any legally binding obligation they might be found in breach of in the future. The risk that they might become subject to coercive measures is likely to have an even greater chilling effect. This could affect states' willingness to agree to individual mitigation obligations as well as cooperation and support for adaptive capacities in developing countries. Ultimately, cosmetic caveats are unlikely to offset the risk that the security system's fundamentally coercive nature poses to the ambitious cooperation that is required to limit global warming.

But what if coercive security measures are actually necessary, considering the insufficiency of cooperative efforts against climate change to date? In this case, and if the caveats made for the securitisation of climate change (no force or coercion, inclusive procedures, *et cetera*) were to be effective, they would contradict rather than support the purpose of securitisation. The more effective the caveats are, the fewer extraordinary features of security remain. Shifting towards a cooperation-based forum that requires consensus among states to decide on measures, the security system would become increasingly akin to the ordinary climate regime. Taken seriously, the caveats to the securitisation of climate change mean that there are few benefits left in resorting to the security system, other than mere symbolism.

¹¹ Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (n. 5), 23–26.

