

## Realism Convincingly Interprets Security Issues: Take Climate Change as an Example

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### Abstract

The development of international security theory can be divided into two stages: traditional security studies and non-traditional security studies. Traditional security studies are represented by realism. After the cold war, new research theories emerged that shifted the object of study from the state to the non-state. Critical security studies was one of them. Since the modern era, critical security studies has been seen as a critique of traditional security theories, especially realism. However, this paper argues that the realist focus on the balance of power and interests in international relations remains the more compelling explanation of security. Using climate change as a case study, this paper demonstrates the theoretical value of realism.

**Key words:** International security studies; Realism; Critical security studies; Climate change; International relations

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### INTRODUCTION

As an essential field of international relations studies, the deepening and expansion of international security studies was marked by the Cold War as a watershed. Before the Cold War, international security studies were dominated by traditional security theories represented by realism, one of the characteristics of which is that the state was

the main object of security studies and the military was given primacy over all else (Hough et al., 2015, p.29). Critical security studies is one of the theoretical schools of security that emerged around the end of the Cold War that differs significantly from traditional security studies. It critiques the traditional military and state-centric view of security and shifts the study of security from the state to the individual (Hough et al., 2015, p.43). Depending on the object of study, these theories are divided into state-centric and non-state centric theories. Due to their different theoretical bases, these theories have different interpretations and solutions to security issues, which can be beneficial in real-world situations because they provide multiple dimensions of frameworks for understanding security issues and guiding security practice.

Non-traditional security theories are seen as a break from the long-standing monopoly of traditional security theories. The representative of critical security studies, Barry Buzan, offers a more prosperous and diverse interpretation of international security issues, expanding the security agenda from military issues to political, economic, social and ecological domains (Eadie, 2007, p.641). As a result, critical security studies' critique of realism has received increasing attention and advocacy internationally.

Nevertheless, in this article, it is still argued that realism is the most convincing explanation of security issues as it emphasizes the importance of power, interests and balance in international relations. To demonstrate this, this article will use climate change as a case study. Climate change's effects on food, water, and energy supplies, as well as greater competition for natural resources, job loss, and forced migration, can lead to instability. Although "security" differs among theories, climate change is always a hot issue related to world security. The article will be conducted as follows: first, it will be defended that it makes sense to interpret climate change from realism. Then, a critique of critical security studies will be presented.

## A REALIST VIEW OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Wohlforth (2009) summarizes three core assumptions that underpin realism, namely groupism by state, the logic of egoism and the pursuit of power. Thus, realists define “security” as the security of the state. The ability to successfully defend itself against attacks from other states and to maintain its territorial integrity and the security of its citizens is seen as the measure of a state’s security (Walt, 2010, p.2). In other words, for realists, the insecurity of states can only be caused by each other.

Walt (2010, p.7) suggests that “competition and insecurity are an inevitable condition for sovereign states coexisting in anarchy”. Insecurity cannot be eradicated, but be mitigated. Both offensive realism and defensive realism argue that states will continue to increase their power in order to maintain their own security. The offensive view is that in order to gain or maintain a position of hegemony, states’ quest for power is infinite, while defensive realism argues that power is finite and that it is increased to maintain balance (Snyder, 2002, p.151). Both the overriding power claimed by Mearsheimer and the counterbalancing power defended by Waltz are fundamentally centered on economic and military power, which is the ultimate means of keeping other states in check and fearful. Therefore, in order to maintain the security status in the international pattern, or to reduce the likelihood of insecurity, states must focus on improving their economic and military capabilities.

This can explain why climate change, as an environmental phenomenon instead of a state, is a threat and a security issue. Climate change can undoubtedly hinder economic development and increase social instability. This is reflected in the fact that, on the one hand, natural disasters caused by climate change can cause losses in production and profitability in agriculture, forestry and tourism, and on this basis, it hinders a country’s previous economic activities of import and export (Brown & Crawford, 2009, p.24); on the other hand, the increased demand for energy and the lack of availability of resources such as water and land slow the development of national industries and business investments. These have had a significant impact on the national economy. In addition, Jones and Sullivan (2020) note that climate instability can drive the spread of corruption, conflict, crime and even terrorism. In summary, climate change poses a range of environmental, social, economic and political challenges. These challenges can have a significant impact on a state’s economy. Economic sluggishness and social instability inevitably undermine armaments’ capabilities. As a result, climate change threatens states’ security by impeding their pursuit of power and weakening their capability to cope with instability.

In response to the threat to security from climate change, countries with different powers and positions in

the international community tend to act in different ways. In general, to improve security, a state will take different measures for internal and external. States can address security issues through internal efforts like arms building (Waltz, 1979, as cited in Walt, 2010, p.12). In dealing with climate change, most countries have chosen to adapt their economies to the new trends by adopting measures such as energy saving and emission reduction, developing policies and strategies and placing climate-resilient infrastructures. For example, The Pact for a Green New Deal (PGND) was launched in Canada in May 2019 to reduce emissions and replace fossil fuels with renewable energy sources, so that Canada will achieve a green transition (MacArthur et al., 2020, p.2). These similar approaches are because when states engage in internal self-improvement of security, a socialization-like interaction also occurs in this process, where one consciously imitates other states. Too much imitation can lead to the loss of initial advantage, and this potential competitive pressure also encourages states to innovate in various fields, including the military (Walt, 2010, p.13).

Although for egoist realists, a state is only concerned with its security, this does not mean there is no possibility of cooperation. In terms of external efforts, the cooperation of states to tackle climate change is also in line with the principle of realism. On the one hand, it helps to protect states’ interests and preserve their own development and security; on the other hand, it is based on checks and balances of power. In the international system, the power of states is unbalanced, with great powers always having more resources and influence. On the issue of climate change, cooperation can prevent those great powers from unilaterally deciding and controlling global climate policy, and achieve checks and balances of power. The medium of such cooperation can be either an alliance or an institution. Realism sees institutions as tools of powerful states that help countries to cooperate in specific situations. Effective diplomatic communication promotes balance and mutual restraint among states, thus allowing them to address common security issues (Walt, 2010, pp.13-14). “Weak states were believed to be somewhat more inclined to bandwagon than the great powers” (Walt, 2010, p.11). Thus, relatively weak states will follow the actions of the great powers that reach an agreement first. One example is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the first international treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally, signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which has grown to over 190 parties so far (Kuyper et al., 2018, p.344). However, international climate agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, have failed to meet their objectives, largely because of the difficulty of reaching consensus due to conflicting national economic and political interests. As Grieco believes, states’ focus on relative interests makes cooperation difficult (Grieco, 1990, as cited in Walt, 2010, p.13).

The basic assumption of realism is to always defend one's own interests, even if it affects other states (Unny, 2020, p.94). States only care about the gain and loss of relative interests. This results in states being unable to deal with climate change together the entire time, and when states' interests are threatened, cooperation is likely to be disrupted, reducing the efficiency of solving security issues. Take the US as an example, in June 2017, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement. One of the reasons for this is that the Paris Agreement's requirement for the US to contribute to the Green Climate Fund has cost the US a great deal of wealth. Furthermore, any form of regulation of emissions is detrimental to the economic interests of the US (Unny, 2020, p.98). Although this action defended the interests of the US, it also damaged the international reputation of the United States. The Biden administration's return to the Paris Agreement in 2021 was a response to domestic social pressure, to preserve its international image, and to seize new opportunities for low-carbon economic development. Ultimately, the state will act after analyzing the costs and benefits (Morgenthau, 1985, as cited in Unny, 2020, p.95).

In short, the pursuit of power makes climate change a security issue. As interactions between states increase, climate change evolves from an initial security issue into a new battleground for power competition. More than solving the problem itself, states are concerned with gaining more than others from their interactions with each other, overriding others. This is why global greenhouse gas emissions are still increasing and climate change is still on the rise. No state wants to sacrifice its own development, its own power, unless other states sacrifice more than it does.

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## CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES

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Critical security studies is an offshoot of the Copenhagen school that emerged in the 1960s. Unlike traditional realism that equates security with the military and survival of a state, critical security studies widens the agenda. Buzan et al. (1998, pp.21- 23) argue that threats to survival need to be understood in a particular sector, and that security should not be understood only as military or national security, but include economic, environmental, social and political aspects. These security threats are transformed into development challenges, specific to various fields of society, through which a general problem is divided into operational sectors to deal with and actions are taken to solve it (Wæver, 1995, p.7). This process is called "securitization". A combination of forces such as groups, media and individuals drive the securitization. Thus, its actors can be any non-state subjects. They associate an issue with security to strengthen government

control and intervention on the issue, such as the securitization of climate change.

Critical security studies has advanced nature from the perspective of the practice of security issues. Firstly, it is concerned with human security as it emphasizes human subjectivity and participation, arguing that people should be involved in the decision-making and practice of security governance. Ken Booth in *Theory of World Security* highlights a concept of human emancipation that applies to the whole of humanity (Sjoberg, 2019, p.82). To some extent, critical security studies is more human rights-oriented and humanistic compared to realism. Additionally, critical security studies emphasizes the plurality and complexity of security issues, placing them in specific social contexts and closely related to several aspects including society, politics and economy. This makes security issues more operational and the abstract problems are dealt with concretely. Methods and tools of analysis are presented effectively to better understand and address them. One example is the climate change action in New York, which combines the efforts of experts in energy, transportation, policy and other sectors (Solecki, 2012, p.565).

Although critical security studies has deepened international security theory and supplemented the blind spots of traditionalism, its interpretation of security issues is still less convincing than realism, because the process of securitization has little value to the state's perception of the security issue itself.

It has been argued that there is no single concept of security in critical security studies that fits all contexts, as the definition of security varies in different contexts (Ciută, 2009, p.-00301). However, Wæver (1995, pp.6-7) understands security from the language theory perspective, arguing that security does not represent a real interest but "a speech act". This means that the concept of security is not only physical, but also a communicative or linguistic act. Security can be achieved through the use of language, symbols and communication. Wæver emphasizes the importance of discourse and speech in shaping people's understanding of security. From this perspective, securitization is a process of constructing "a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat (Buzan et al., 1998, p.26)", which aims to consistently persuade the audience to accept that something is becoming a threat that urgently needs to be mitigated by measures (Balzacq, 2005, p.173). Although the forms of securitization have evolved with the production of visual images and the dissemination of media (Williams, 2003, p.512), it is essentially a construction of social ideas implemented through inter-subjectivity.

According to critical security studies, the key to the success of securitization, or the key to a phenomenon to become a security issue, lies in the effective transmission of the discourse by actors. A security issue is defined,

constructed and securitized through discourse by non-state actors. This is what makes critical security studies discredited. It overstates the power of speech and exaggerates the influence of individuals and non-state groups. This is not to deny the role of language as a crucial cognitive tool in responding to security issues, but to point out that it is not the logic or interpretation behind the way states respond to security issues.

The objectivity of security issues is one proof. A security problem becomes “a security issue” because it existed long before actors used a speech to securitize it and has had an impact on all aspects of national and global development that cannot be ignored. Wæver (1995, p.7) shows that security and insecurity are not dichotomous and that security depends on the response to an already existing security problem. In the case of climate change, for example, the phenomenon of rising carbon dioxide concentrations and frequent global weather extremes preceded that scientists have discovered through analysis and modeling of data. Whether scientists and the media inform the public, and whether they discourse effectively or ineffectively, the possible impacts of climate change on the global are objectively present. In other words, it is not the discourse that makes the problems exist, the discourse simply draws public attention and discussion, naming them as “security issues”. Thus, the act of speech is not able to predict or direct the behavior of a state, the construction of the idea does not have any effect on objective existence itself. Now that the security issue exists and has an impact on the security of survival discussed in the previous section, the states are bound to take action.

One example is Greta Thunberg, one of the teenage climate activists. She has advocated environmental protection through social media and speeches, and attended the United Nations climate summit, calling on the government to take proactive measures to combat climate change. A study of Sabherwal et al. (2021, p.331) shows that Greta’s actions can inspire the American public. However, there is a growing dissenting voice, with social media users commenting more critically than encouragingly on Greta’s anti-flight practice (Mkono, 2020, pp.2089-2093). Indeed, the negative comments focused more on radicalism of Greta herself than on dismissing her call for environmental action. In any case, Greta has attracted the attention of all circles to climate change and played a positive role in environmental awareness. However, her appeal cannot determine the response at the level of states. Some states adopt policies contrary to Greta’s advocacy. For instance, Weinthal (2022, pp.793-794) argues that Russia’s environmental movement has been weakened under Putin. This is because its state finances are too dependent on fossil fuels. Russia had no choice but to respond to the global energy transition from external pressures, such as European

decarbonization policies. Therefore, the states’ policies in the face of climate change are based on protecting national interests. When national interests are violated, strategies will change and the construction by discourse makes no sense in assessing national interests. The point that critical security studies ignores is that it is the interests of the state that drive state behavior, not the security issue itself.

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## CONCLUSION

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In summary, in this article, realism is argued to be more convincing and referential in interpreting security issues. It has been addressed using climate change as a case study. Firstly, the theory of realism has been linked to reality, showing that the value judgments and actions taken by states on the issue of climate change are based on the protection of the state’s relative interests and the increase of power; secondly, it has been criticized that critical security studies exaggerates the role of discourse and construction in perceiving and responding to security issues. Analyzing and comparing different theories of international security allows for a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the nature and complexity of security issues. The linkages and differences between the traditional and the non-traditional are what drive the progress of international security studies and informs the formulation of international security policies. It is undeniable that critical security studies refines the limitations of realism, but the theory is still based on realism, which raises the profile of security issues and provides a broader range of response ideas. However, it acknowledges the objectivity of the existence of threats and does not escape the framework of realist state competition. A limitation of this article is that it has not yet been discussed that the process of securitization is not only a political tool but also a contest for discourse. Different states have different understandings of security, for which they will compete for the right to have a say in setting standards and policies, shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards an issue through securitization to safeguard their interests to the maximum.

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