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Beyond Apocalypse: Securitization and Exceptionalism in Environmental Politics

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YIFEI (DESMOND) SHAO, FEB 11 2025

Environmental issues are frequently depicted as a significant security risk and an apocalyptic catastrophe, threatening all life on Earth (Žižek, 2010). The nascent discourse of a 'climate emergency' has prompted continuous discussions in academia, yet the crisis itself remains contested (Albert, 2022:2). The implications of environmental issues for international security have been fiercely debated at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) conferences; however, delegates from different countries have remained divided on the connections between climate change and conflict (UNSC, 2007a; McDonald, 2023a). Although environmental issues have been significantly securitised rhetorically and discursively, politicians have not translated the corresponding notion of urgency into extraordinary political measures (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998). This essay argues that, despite the apocalyptic framing of environmental crises, political actors frequently refrain from articulating exceptional or extraordinary responses due to the inherent risks and challenges associated with mobilising such actions.

First, this work explores the debates on environmental issues and security studies by introducing literature on Anthropocene studies, securitisation theory, and exceptional or extraordinary politics. It then elucidates the reasons why these political responses are rare, such as their associations with war metaphors and their potential risks and pitfalls, as exemplified by prominent China and US cases. Finally, drawing from debates at the UNSC conference, the essay illustrates that using extraordinary political practices and risk management for environmental issues would inevitably and artificially rupture the intimate entanglement between humanity and the natural world.

'The apocalypse' is a prevalent theme in environmental discourses. Environmental crises, including global warming and ozone depletion, have increasingly drawn public and academic attention (Veldman, 2012). For example, drafted by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, the Brandt Report (1980) indicated that 'few threats to peace and survival of the human community are greater than irreversible degradation of the biosphere on which human life depends' (quoted in Brauch, 2003:81). Likewise, at a UN General Assembly in 1988, Gorbachev emphasised 'the threat from the sky is no longer missiles but global warming' (quoted in Myers, 1993:11). These appeals suggest that with the dawn of the Anthropocene, human society has entered a new geological stage: the environment no longer constitutes the backdrop to our conduct but the condition for which we are jointly responsible and of which we are part (Rothe, Müller & Chandler, 2021). In this new epoch, humanity's impact on environmental development has reshaped Earth, challenging the foundation of our understanding and knowledge of this planet. As Hamilton (2019) argued, 'the Anthropocene reveals a new and deeper shift in human subjectivity', as well as the 'subject of security' (Walker, 1997). The Copenhagen School's securitisation theory first conceptualised security issues as socially constructed 'threats' (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998). These threats are not objectively real and are waiting to be discovered by humans because international security is wholly what people make of it through social construction (Buzan & Wæver, 1998). Once rhetoric and successful speech influence how we view different issues, they can be rendered security threats. This perspective contends that security is not a fixed condition or value but a way of societal interaction. In other words, once a problem is manually labelled a 'security issue', the approaches to handling it transform correspondingly.

Many scientists have highlighted the urgent danger to the environment if countries fail to control the rising global temperature. Supported by evidence such as continuously rising atmospheric CO₂, more than 11,000 scientists have

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'clearly and unequivocally' declared that 'planet Earth is facing a climate emergency' (Ripple et al., 2021:1). These proclamations seemingly highlight the urgency of global climate mobilisation. Some countries have even officially 'declared a climate emergency' (McDonald, 2023b:42–44). Although theorists tend to sympathise with environmental issues, exceptional and extraordinary political responses remain questionable and uncertain (Albert, 2022:6). Per Copenhagen School theorising, security allows exceptional action that breaks normative rules or democratic arrangements (Roe, 2012:251), which implies a 'decisional' attitude of emergency action in framing and dealing with issues rationally as an organisation (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998:4, 24). This logic is derived from Carl Schmitt's 'state of exception' and Kalyvas's conceptualisation of the 'politics of the extraordinary'. The former concept suggests that emergencies require suspending standard rules and procedures; according to Schmitt (1996 [1932]:37), politics is related to the ally-enemy dichotomy. This zero-sum—even antagonistic—interpretation of security aligns with how issues are securitised as a process (Trombetta, 2008:589). Similarly, climate emergencies demonstrate Kalyvas's extraordinary politics. Contrary to 'normal' institutionalised politics, these 'extraordinary politics' require massive popular support and high-level mobilisation to challenge the status quo and propose new norms and mechanisms for specific projects (Kalyvas, 2008:6–7).

However, exceptional or extraordinary political responses to environmental issues are uncommon. Rationalising actions outside of normal political procedure, the Copenhagen School distinguished between securitisation and politicisation as involving issues in policies that warrant government decisions (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998:23–24). Many appeals regarding environmental security aim to prioritise issues and transform the conventional security logic and related practices, but the politicisation of ecological issues that evoke apocalyptic terms still cannot transcend the boundary of security studies (Roe, 2012). Those who resist considering the environmental debate's resurrection in political agendas argue that war metaphors are embedded in environmental issues and security. Opponents warn that exceptional and extraordinary political responses to environmental issues would evoke confrontational actions associated with traditional national security behaviours (Deudney, 1990; Trombetta, 2008:586). For example, climate change policies often focus on strengthening the competencies and resilience of military troops in dealing with environmental issues (i.e., environmental militarisation); simultaneously, state actions aiming to protect the environment may lead to the rise of extreme nationalist sentiments. In this context, the logic of security is precisely the logic of war—a procedure of offence to defence and escalation to defeat. Such actions would not achieve the assumed goal of enacting climate emergency mobilisations by enhancing sovereign power (Deudney & Matthew, 1999:466–468). Instead, they could introduce arms races into the environmental area, fomenting fierce political antagonism and opposition. Given this analysis, exceptional political responses are nearly impossible to extricate from panic politics rooted in war metaphors and unacceptable engagements for decision-makers; related measures are usually designed and developed in ordinary politics.

Moreover, extraordinary politics suggests that outright securitisation surpasses the friend-enemy distinction. This approach involves transforming governance and introducing uncommon policies and measures (Booth, 2007:165). Political leaders usually consider climate change-related shocks as external and indirect (Kalyvas, 2008:13). Because environmental issues represent a discursive articulation that embodies the logic of security, they indirectly lead to imminent risks of catastrophe. The association between 'environmental issues' and 'conflicts' remains contested (Methmann & Rothe, 2012:327–328). Exceptional or extraordinary responses to environmental issues are characterised by their disruptive and devastating effects that could trigger a potential 'turning point'—an irreversible outcome caused by a seemingly stable climate emergency action or policy in a chaotic future (Patterson et al., 2021:847). As Rothe et al. (2021:4) noted, 'We are the problem as much as the solution, the "them" as much as the "us", the "enemy" as much as the "friend"'. This enmeshed relationship and paradoxical conception trigger an ontological security crisis for humans: no subversive 'other' exists as the threat from which human beings can distance themselves—thus, the human self cannot be asserted, producing a bleak and uncertain future for humanity (Hamilton, 2017:585–586). It is here that this essay must demonstrate that the Anthropocene values a relational ontology as well as a human-nature duality and characteristic discourse of securitisation wherein apocalyptically securitising environmental issues will, to an extent, overshadow the unprecedented interconnectedness of human society and nature (Trombetta, 2021:163).

This analysis focuses on the essence of this paradox: the need to depend on emergency political measures or develop preventive solutions to warn of environmental catastrophes (Trombetta, 2008:595). In this regard, China

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offers an interesting example. Its official narratives have increasingly recognised environmental problems in the security realm in recent years, yet China's UNSC delegate focused on sustainability as the core problem (UNSC, 2007b:12). In 2014, based on various assessments and reports indicating that China has been devastatingly affected by climate change and deforestation, the securitisation of climate change became more evident. This transformation of the security consideration paradigm is attributable to the rise of China's economy and the state's increasing participation in the international arena. Although China has officially used the language of security for climate issues, such issues are still handled within the margins of normal politics. Governmental movements are thus legitimised by securitising environmental issues through speech acts (Trombetta, 2019:104–105). Another issue tackled in this analysis is how a long-term environmental emergency programme can be sustained. In the US, for example, democratic constituencies are increasingly polarised, and legislative departments are often gridlocked (Albert, 2022:11). Even if an action receives support from the bottom, it will face intense boycotts from elites or the far-right. In an extraordinary political context, weakening or suspending existing democratic norms and systems to promote the radical proposals of an emergency programme signifies a risky prospect. New, more radical democratic institutions might emerge when the current political regime falls stagnant (ibid.). According to Kalyvas (2008:6–7), the expected goal of such participation exceeds the bounds of the Constitution and should narrow the distance between leaders and ordinary people.

However, the extraordinary political responses to environmental issues may erode electoral systems and executive power alike. Potential policies such as abandoning carbon-intensive products and land reallocation are questionable and contested. At a global scale, the 2007 UNSC conference demonstrated a more nuanced relationship between apocalyptic terminology and exceptional or extraordinary politics. The debate's discursive structure was formed based on the frequency of specific terms, a view compatible with Trombetta's (2008; 2023) argumentation on environmental security as a discourse. We can find that pre-emptive measures or other emergency actions on ecological issues played only a minor role, primarily due to the logic of the apocalypse significantly permeating two different articulations ('environmental issues' and 'security'). Accordingly, most interpretations demonstrate the universality of environmental problems (Methmann & Rothe, 2012:334–336): security in the Anthropocene context entails humankind becoming fundamentally entangled with itself rather than nature or the planet (Hamilton, 2017:582–586). No referent state for ecological issues exists; they only matter in how human beings deal with them. Adopting exceptional political measures would thus inevitably demarcate an antagonistic binary between human insecurity and climate change. Here, the war metaphor refers to war with a spectral enemy—a war for all against all. The apocalyptic terms exclude the exceptional or extraordinary political responses because 'our conflict is not being fought with guns or missiles but with weapons from everyday life—chimney stacks and exhaust pipes' (UNSC, 2007b:8).

In conclusion, this essay has explored the apocalyptic narrative surrounding environmental issues, starkly contrasting their meagre political responses. This seemingly paradoxical phenomenon is no accident in the Anthropocene but stems from a deliberate aversion shaped by the theoretical constructs of the Copenhagen School and the conceptualisations of Schmitt and Kalyvas. Exceptional or extraordinary political responses may unintentionally backfire. Politicians may refuse to unleash potentially adverse or destabilising forces and adopt extraordinary measures, fearing that they might kindle war metaphors and foster discord in already fragile geopolitical landscapes. Due to the possible risks of such measures, destabilising existing global structures and political regimes might occur under emergency political frameworks. Additionally, normal political practices may sustain overwhelming apocalyptic terms regarding environmental issues. Future conceptualisations of the anthropogenic condition may be refined through the intellectual framework of ontological security theory, focusing on social and cultural practices of the self as a promising perspective to research relationships between humanity, the social world and nature.

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