

Who Securitizes? Climate Change Discourse in the United Nations

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Abstract

When and why do states reframe issues as security problems? Which states advocate for these shifts? While securitization theory predicts that states that are existentially threatened by a problem are most likely to attempt to securitize it, I argue that accounting for the dynamics of institutional agendas can better explain this phenomenon. States that stand to gain agenda control as a result of securitization are likely to use the language of existential threat in their speech, while those that are materially interested in the issue are less likely to do so. I test this theory in the case of the climate change in the UN, leveraging data on speeches in the General Assembly. I provide the first quantitative test of the securitization of climate politics, finding that P5 states securitize to expand their agenda control, while Small Island Developing States do not securitize, contra previous expectations. I further find that the overall climate discourse cannot be characterized as securitized. These findings imply that the Security Council is unlikely to be significantly involved in climate change policy, and also demonstrate the importance of rhetoric for political outcomes and for the distribution of state power within international organizations.

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Introduction

Why are some issues in international politics discussed as security matters, while others are not? When and why do states make the political decision to frame issues as security concerns? The outcomes of these strategic discursive moves by states have substantial implications for the nature of policy responses by international organizations, and determine who are the key decision-makers involved in crafting such policies. In the United Nations (UN), the context of an issue determines whether it is addressed by the universally representative General Assembly (UNGA), or by the small group of states on the Security Council (UNSC). Once an issue is framed as a security problem, it shifts from the responsibility of the UNGA to that of the UNSC. Compared to UNGA, the UNSC can deliver more resources and salience. However, these issues may become conceived of more narrowly within a security framework, and states that are not members of the UNSC lose their voice in the decision-making process. Do states securitize issues in international organizations to obtain funding and attention for that issue, or to control the venue in which the matter is discussed? The implications of securitization benefit some states, at a cost to others.

Previous work on issue securitization has demonstrated that securitization is an effective means of increasing international attention for a given issue (e.g. [Buzan et al., 1998](#); [Elbe, 2006](#); [Allan, 2017](#)), implying that actors who care more deeply about that issue will typically support securitization. Yet, anecdotally, countries that do not have obvious material interests in particular issues have engaged in securitizing those matters, while countries that do possess such interests have not. The case of climate change is one such example. Climate change has not been taken as seriously by international organizations as many states would like, and securitizing the issue would be a way for these states to attract increased attention to the problem. Securitization theory would predict that Small Island Developing States (SIDS), territorially threatened by the effects of climate change, should be the states that care most about climate change action, and thus the most likely to make securitizing moves, while countries like the United Kingdom, which are not as severely threatened by climate change, would be less likely to do so ([IPCC,](#)

2018). In fact, I show that SIDS are *less* likely than other states to securitize climate change, while all of the P5 states, including the United Kingdom, are *more* likely to do so.¹

How can we explain this pattern? Securitization theory has focused on the attention-enhancing results of securitization, but has largely ignored the implications of securitizing moves on agenda control and power. Securitization may increase the salience of an issue, but it also influences the forum and manner in which an issue is addressed. Drawing on insights from studies on the politics of international organizations, I argue that securitization is a tool of agenda control within international organizations. While these theoretical expectations should hold in many multi-issue institutions, I examine them in the UN as a crucial case. Issues taken up by the UNGA are addressed by consensus, in a multi-dimensional approach that considers human rights and economic aspects of the matter. Issues taken up by the UNSC are addressed narrowly as security problems, and only the members of the UNSC are empowered to shape the response. This implies that if forum-shifting increases their control over the issue at hand, otherwise less materially-motivated states (i.e. the P5) have incentives to act as securitizing actors, while highly materially-motivated states would oppose securitization. By accounting intra-institutional agenda dynamics as well as for the role of discourse generally overlooked by rationalist theories (e.g. Fearon, 1994), we can better understand when issues are securitized within international organizations and what this implies for the distribution for state power within these institutions and the type of policies that they produce.

I test these dynamics in the case of climate change, an area of interest to securitization scholars (e.g. Trombetta, 2008; Gemenne et al., 2014; Conca, 2019) and a topic of tremendous substantive import that must be better understood in by international relations scholars (Green & Hale, 2017). While previous work asserts that climate change has been or is becoming securitized, it has not examined UNGA discourse directly, which is the key place to look for evidence of securitization in international politics. I remedy this gap and present the first statistical test of climate securitization in an in-

¹The Permanent 5 (P5) members of the UNSC are the United Kingdom, United States of America, Russia, France, and China.

ternational political context, employing a topic model on a corpus of speeches given by states at the UNGA General Debate from 1949-2014 (Baturu et al., 2017) to measure securitization. Leveraging this new approach, I find that the climate discourse in the UNGA is *not* fully securitized, and that each of the P5 members are more likely to make securitizing moves on climate change than are other states, while SIDS are less likely to make securitizing moves than others. I control for alternative explanations, including power, domestic politics, and geophysical measures of climate change effects. These findings shed light on the interaction between issue forums, institutional structure, and state power in the international policymaking process, and the implications of rhetorical shifts for this process.

The article proceeds as follows. I first review securitization theory, arguing that this approach has overlooked the importance of agenda control in international organizations. I incorporate insights from other work in the politics of international organizations to develop the argument that securitization is a tool of agenda control within international organizations. I generate theoretical expectations about what states are more or less likely to act as securitizing actors. I test these expectations in the case of climate change in the UNGA, discussing the data, methodology, and results. Finally, I highlight the implication of these findings and the potential generalizability of this theoretical framework to other issue areas and institutions.

Securitization and International Politics

Securitization theory has been an highly influential framework for security studies. Nevertheless, theoretical and empirical applications of securitization theory have largely focused on the attention-enhancing results of securitization, without incorporating attention to the implications of securitizing moves on agenda control and power in the context of international organizations. To account for these dynamics, I incorporate findings from research on the politics, agenda dynamics, and discourses of international organizations.

Securitization theory ('The Copenhagen School') derives principally from the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. Their approach defines securitization as "the discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political

community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat,” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, 491). Securitization occurs through a rhetorical process, in which a ‘securitizing actor’ frames a problem using the language of existential threat, emphasizing the security dimensions of a topic to the exclusion of others (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This performative speech act is the ‘securitizing move.’ If the other actors in the political community accept this move, then the issue is considered ‘securitized.’ Importantly, an issue may be successfully securitized through discourse and still may not be addressed by adopting emergency measures. It is the intersubjective understanding of security – not an objective feature – that makes an issue a security issue. The security label is a political choice that influences how an issue is presented in public debate, and subsequently how it is addressed (Elbe, 2006, 125). The decision to securitize is a strategic one made by the securitizing actor – an individual, state, or group – to change the way the issue should be handled (Floyd, 2010).

As a result of being securitized, special powers and means can be deployed to address the newly securitized issue outside the rules of traditional politics (Buzan et al., 1998, 21-42). This can increase the level of attention, awareness, speed, and resources dedicated to the issue (Lipschutz, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Elbe, 2006; Balzacq, 2011; Allan, 2017; Sindico, 2007). According to securitization theory, then, we should expect that the actors that are most interested in taking strong action on an issue would be most likely to make and support securitizing moves. States that are existentially threatened by a problem should securitize it to unlock these ‘special’ policy tools and increase attention (Lipschutz, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Stritzel, 2007). Yet, as discussed in the previous section, these expectations do not hold in the case of the climate discourse in the UNGA, where SIDS should securitize, but do not. To develop a theory to better explain these dynamics, I integrate securitization theory with existing work on the politics of international organizations.

An application of securitization theory to international organizations is a logical fit. The role of persuasive deliberation and consensus building in international politics

has been extensively studied (e.g. Habermas, 1984; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Risse, 2000; Johnston, 2001). Securitization fits neatly within this framework, as a discursive tool that states can employ to construct a new intersubjective understanding of a topic. In the context of international organizations, however, other considerations such as agenda control also must be taken into account to develop an understanding of who securitizes and why. Positive agenda control is the ability to put an issue onto the list of items for active consideration by an institutional decision-making body (Elder, 1975, 14), and negative agenda control is the ability to block an issue for such consideration (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962).

Agenda control – both positive and negative – is a source of power that allows actors to influence what issues are addressed by an institution and how they are addressed (Romer & Rosenthal, 1978; Kingdon, 1984), including in the context of international organizations (Pollack, 1997; Tallberg, 2003; Avant et al., 2010; Carpenter, 2010; Schneider, 2018). By exerting influence over the agendas of international institutions, states are able to obtain more favorable outcomes and a greater share of institutional power (e.g. Steinberg, 2002; Stone, 2011). Agenda control in international organizations has important strategic and material benefits for states. It follows, then, that states would support outcomes that *increase* their agenda control relative to others, and *oppose* outcomes that reduce their relative agenda control. I argue that securitization has such effects on agenda control, and understanding these implications will allow us to better understand when and why states securitize.

Securitization and Agenda Control in the UN

Securitization theory in its classical form expects that states with the greatest material interest in addressing an issue should be more likely to securitize (or at least to support securitization) to increase the salience of an issue and the likelihood of a strong policy response. However, while securitizing can increase the salience and resources an issue receives, it also influences agenda control. The dynamics of institutional agenda control can better explain securitization than can variation in material interest in an issue. I posit an *agenda control theory of securitization* to explain how, when, and why issues

are securitized (or not) within international organizations. This is a rational theory of rhetoric, in which states strategically try to control the institutional agenda to maximize strategic and material benefits.

I focus on securitization dynamics in the UN as a crucial case and a normatively important case. In the UN, shifting issues from the agenda of the UNGA to the UNSC has clear and obvious implications for institutional power because of the unique institutional arrangement of the UN that make agenda control highly contestable in this case. The agendas of the UNGA and UNSC are mutually exclusive – the UNGA is precluded from addressing topics that are concurrently on the UNSC’s agenda (UN, 1945). Agendas in the UN are very sticky, and once an issue is added to the UNSC’s agenda, it is rarely removed (Hurd, 2008). An issue’s placement on the UNGA or the UNSC agenda is consequential for the intra-institutional distribution of power, as well as for the nature of the institutional policy response. The 15 member UNSC represents only a small subset of the 193 member UNGA. Only UNSC decisions are unique in their binding authority, compelling specific actions from member states. Unique policy tools are available to the UNSC, from sanctions to the use of force, that the UNGA cannot employ. For all these reasons, agenda control between UNSC and non-UNSC members is likely to be greatly contested. The implications of securitization in the UN make it unlikely that securitizing moves would be ‘cheap talk’ (Fearon, 1994).

I contend that discursively securitizing an issue in the UN has direct implications for agenda control. Following securitization theory, I argue that it is through discursive practices that an issue is framed as a security matter (or not) within the institutional community. While non-securitized issues are within the remit of the UNGA, securitized issues move from the agenda of the UNGA to that of the UNSC. I argue that because of the important agenda control implications of securitization, states have different preferences over whether an issue becomes securitized, and a securitizing move is likely to be contested. The member states that are expected to make securitizing moves are those for whom this agenda-shift results in increased agenda control: the influential members of the UNSC. As a result of the securitization agenda-shift, UNSC members increase the

share of the UN's overall agenda over which they are the decision-makers. In addition to controlling a larger proportion of the UN's agenda collectively as the UNSC, each individual member of the UNSC increases their influence over the agenda. States are more powerful when they vote in the UNSC than the UNGA because of the smaller forum size – a state's likelihood of being the pivotal voter is greater in a forum of 15 than in one of 193.

The institutional power benefits of securitization particularly accrue to the P5 members of the UNSC. For non-permanent members of the UNSC, the expected gains in institutional benefits that would result from broadening the UNSC's agenda are much less for these states than for the P5. Temporary members would only obtain these benefits for the duration of their term, while the P5 would gain them indefinitely. The P5 have the most powerful votes in the UNSC, and with their veto power can expect to be pivotal voters more frequently than non-permanent members (Vreeland & Dreher, 2014). The institutional power benefits of securitization hold for each P5 member, even assuming heterogenous preferences. A P5 member seeking to block an activist coalition in the UNGA could more easily do so by deploying a veto in the UNSC. Alternatively, a P5 member seeking to take more activist measures could more easily assemble a coalition of the necessary size in the UNSC with side payments and than in the UNGA, and would be positioned to call for broader steps. Even with heterogenous preferences, the P5 members could be uniformly expected to prefer broadening the UNSC's agenda through securitization to accrue institutional benefits. Based on this logic of incentives to securitize, the P5 are more likely to securitize than other states.

Member states who stand to lose agenda control from securitization – states that are not members of the UNSC – are less likely to make securitizing moves, and would be likely to oppose such moves. For these states, securitizing would take decision-making power out of their hands. When the issue is of particular material importance to a member state, the potential costs of securitization are even greater. In this case, the state not only loses institutional power in its reduced agenda control on an issue selected at random, but also loses agency to shape the policy outcome on an issue of great importance, and

the loss is more salient. This expectation – that states for whom an issue is *the most* materially important are *the least* likely to support securitization – directly contrasts the expectations that would be derived from a classical interpretation of securitization theory.

In addition to explaining why states would or would not be expected to securitize, this theory of agenda control securitization implies clear expectations about when and where to look for issue securitization. Securitization would take place in the representative, general-purpose UNGA. Per the UN Charter, “The General Assembly may call the attention of the Security Council to situations which are likely to endanger international peace and security,” (UN, 1945). Because membership in the UNGA is universal, the key criterion of securitization – intersubjective establishment of an existential threat – is most likely to take place in this forum (Buzan et al., 1998, 25). In the restricted membership of the UNSC, general acceptance of a securitizing move cannot take place, and thus successful securitization cannot occur in that body. Evidence of a securitizing move can be seen in a re-framing of a non-traditional security issue as a security issue, specifically by employing the language of existential threat. This may manifest as using the same types of language to describe the securitized issue as other existential threats security issues (“threat”, “crime”, “disaster”, “violation”, etc), or to rhetorically associate the new issue together with traditional existential security threats (e.g. nuclear proliferation or interstate conflict). Through this re-association, the issue is moved conceptually closer to traditional security issues. Evidence of securitization is the adoption of such language by a broad set of states, indicative of general acceptance of the legitimacy of the securitizing move. The result of successful securitization – recalling that successful securitization is defined as the acceptance of the securitizing move, not necessarily the adoption of emergency measures – moves an issue from the agenda of the UNGA to that of the UNSC.

Institutional agendas are constrained by limited space and resources (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Hurd, 2008). The P5 may also be constrained in making securitizing moves by concerns about the erosion of legitimacy within the UN (Caron, 1993; Hurd, 2008;

Binder & Golub, 2020; Nevitt, Forthcoming).² In particular, non-UNSC members are wary of UNSC power concentration, lack of accountability, precedents set by increasing UNSC mandate scope, undermining of other UN organs, and shifting the locus of power to security experts (Hurd & Cronin, 2008; Binder & Heupel, 2015; Conca, 2019). These limitations discourage UNSC members from attempting to securitize across every issue area. Rather, they are expected selectively securitize issues when they are important to them in some sense, and when the securitizing move is likely to be accepted by the majority of UN member states.

In some cases, a securitizing move could be accepted by non-P5 states. As noted above, states are generally wary of increasing the authority of the UNSC. However, members must consider the tradeoffs: while the benefits of shifting an issue to the UNSC can include additional funding allocations and attention, but potentially sacrifice the more holistic consideration of the economic and human rights dimensions of a problem that would be afforded in the UNGA. The unique features of a given issue area, including which states would accrue the most benefits, and how important are the economic and human rights dimensions of the issue, are crucial to consider in predicting how likely non-P5 states are to accept a securitizing move by the P5, and thus how likely successful securitization is to occur. These implications are illustrated in the dual examples of the securitization of HIV/AIDS and children born of wartime rape.

After the UNSC took up the issue of HIV/AIDS in July 2000 from the UNGA's agenda, dramatic and rapid increases in global attention and funding occurred (McInnes, 2006). Following this agenda change, global expenditure on AIDS increased from \$893 million in 1999 to \$1.359 billion 2000 and \$1.623 billion in 2001 (Knight, 2008). The director of UNAIDS observed that the "Security Council debate brought AIDS to the forefront of the global political agenda," (Knight, 2008, 106). Other prevalent and deadly diseases such as Ebola, malaria, and tuberculosis did not receive the attention of the UNSC, and did not observe the same rate of increased international attention and funding as did HIV/AIDs in the early 2000s (Poku, 2013). While securitization can result in

²Legitimacy is defined as "the normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed," (Hurd, 2008, 34).

increased resources devoted to an issue, as in the case of HIV/AIDS, reframing problems as threats to international peace and security can also have negative impacts, sidelining economic and human rights dimensions of issues. For example, increased UNSC attention to the issue of children and armed conflict in the 1990s and 2000s led to a focus on child recruitment, to the neglect of other facets of the problem including problems such as displacement, refugees, labor and sexual exploitation, trauma, and trafficking (Carpenter, 2010). For many, the narrow UNSC approach was inferior to a rights-based approach, which could have been pursued in the UNGA. On the issue of HIV/AIDS, the benefits were seen to developing states and those in Africa and Eastern Europe as worth the potential risks, so securitization was accepted.

To summarize the proposed theory of agenda control securitization in broad terms, securitizing moves are expected to take place in the UNGA discourse. When an issue is successfully securitized, it moves from the agenda of the UNGA to the UNSC. Members of the UNSC, particularly the P5 members, are most likely to make securitizing moves, as they stand to gain agenda control as a result. Non-UNSC states are less likely to support securitization, as this would imply loss of agenda control for them. States with strong material interest in the matter at hand are expected to be the least likely to securitize of all, because the loss of agenda control is highly salient. To test the expectations of this theory, I apply it in the case of climate politics in the UNGA, deriving specific hypotheses in this context. I examine whether climate change discourse in the UNGA has been securitized, and which states are potentially driving securitization.

Climate Change and Securitization

The security relevance of climate change is increasing over time, although debates on the security implications of climate change are hardly new (Deudney, 1990; Homer-Dixon, 1991).³ Some of the important security dimensions of climate change include direct territorial threats, impacts on extraterritorial strategic interests, and exacerbation of existing conflicts (e.g. Homer-Dixon, 1991; Barnett & Adger, 2007; Busby, 2008; Dupont,

³For an overview of the development of the discourse on climate change and its security implications over time, see (Trombetta, 2008).

2008; Bernauer et al., 2012; Gemenne et al., 2014). In the UN specifically, securitizing climate change would empower the UNSC to address the topic with its greater menu of options than those available to the UNGA, for example, by imposing economic sanctions on states in violation of international climate treaties. The potential policy implications of the securitization of climate change in the UN are broad and are already well-studied (e.g. Sindico, 2007; Brzoska, 2009; Scott, 2015; Diez et al., 2016; Conca, 2019), and many works assert that climate change is securitized or becoming securitized (e.g. Rønnfeldt, 1997; Buzan et al., 1998; Barnett, 2003; Floyd, 2010; Trombetta, 2008; McDonald, 2011; Gemenne et al., 2014). Unlike the UNGA, decisions undertaken by the UNSC are binding on member states, and thus have greater potential to affect rapid change, potentially increasing in higher rates of compliance. On the other hand, securitization can amplify the voices of security communities over experts like climate scientists. In the case of climate change, this can result in a shift of resources away from adaptation and mitigation towards emergency response.

As previous researchers have argued, because of the growing understanding of the security implications of climate change, state actors are likely making securitizing moves in the UNGA debate by employing the language of existential threat in discussing climate change. However, as the theory of agenda control securitization describes, most UN member states are highly wary of increasing the agenda control of the UNSC, which would be the result of securitizing climate change. Thus, in contrast to the claims of previous work, I expect that the existential threat framing of climate change is not broadly accepted, and this language is not employed by a majority of UN members.

*H1: Most member states **do not** make securitizing moves on climate change.*

But which states *do* act as securitizing actors? I argue, per the theory of agenda control securitization outlined above, that states that would gain agenda control from securitizing would be more likely to make securitizing moves, while states that would lose agenda control would be less likely to make securitizing moves. Members of the UNSC, particularly the P5 states, stand to gain agenda control, while non-UNSC states stand to lose. These expectations are constant across issue areas. However, the theory also

predicts that states for whom the issue is extremely materially important – for whom it may represent an existential threat – are even less likely to securitize, and this depends on the issue at hand. In the case of HIV/AIDS, states in Sub-Saharan Africa were the most materially interested. Securitization of children in armed conflict was of greatest interest to states experiencing conflicts, such as Bosnia, Serbia, and Rwanda (Carpenter, 2010). Thus, understanding state preferences on the specific topic of climate change is crucial.

On the issue of climate change, states that are the most materially interested are those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and most in need of mitigation and adaptation support. Developing states, states in the global tropics, and in particular, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate changes (IPCC, 2018). For some of these states, the effects of climate change, and especially sea-level rise, pose an existential threat. Developing states and SIDS are particularly concerned with other dimensions of climate change besides security- notably, matters relating to the oceans, migration, sustainable development, and climate financing. Such topics would likely be ignored under a security approach to climate change, but would likely be addressed under a UNGA approach to climate change. These concerns outweigh the potential policy benefits that SIDS would likely obtain from securitization of climate change. This explanation supports claims that developing countries have been key “antipreneurs” against the securitization of climate change (Bloomfield & Scott, 2017; Peters, 2018; Warner & Boas, 2019). Because climate change is an extremely important issue to SIDS, the loss of agenda control on the topic would be highly salient. SIDS are wary of giving up their voice and allowing the P5 to shape the UN’s response to climate change. Thus, the theory predicts that SIDS would be *less likely* than others to employ the language of existential threat, while the P5 would be *more likely* to do so.⁴

The positions of the P5 and other member states on climate change in recent years are helpfully outlined by Scott and Ku (2018). Among the P5, France and the United

⁴Though my theory also predicts that SIDS would be more likely to *oppose* securitizing moves on climate change than would other states, testing this expectation is beyond the scope of the current project.

Kingdom are most supportive of expanding UN efforts to address climate change, while Russia and China are more frequently opposed to such steps, favoring state level responses (Scott & Ku, 2018, 209). The position of the United States has varied by administration, though not necessarily by party. Under the leadership of Barack Obama, the United States was generally favorable towards expanding international efforts to address climate change.⁵ Despite preference heterogeneity, we should expect each of the P5 to act as securitizing actors, because regardless of their issue preferences, all stand to obtain institutional benefits of agenda control as a result of securitization. France and the United Kingdom face an easier prospect of whipping a majority of the small UNSC than the large UNGA, while China and Russia are better able to block efforts with a veto in the UNSC than trying to strong arm the large caucus of developing states in the UNGA.⁶

A security approach to climate change serves the interests of the P5, who have the most forward deployed military assets that are vulnerable to the effects of climate change. A UNSC response to climate change would also preclude a broader approach to climate policy that would be less amenable to P5 preferences, addressing issues such as migration, reparations, sea-level rise, and statehood, and imposing higher costs on developed states (including the P5) as high carbon emitters. Regardless of preferences, each member of the P5 has a greater likelihood of influencing the voting outcome in the UNSC than they do in the UNGA. Non-P5 states would be expected to be less likely to support securitization, as their ability to impact the outcome would be diminished if climate change moved from the agenda of the UNGA to that of the UNSC.

*H2: The P5 states are **more** likely than other states to act as securitizing actors on climate change.*

*H3: SIDS are **less** likely than other states to act as securitizing actors on climate change.*

⁵American support in the Obama era was largely conditional on particular features of the agreed upon instrument (such as the inclusion of Nationally Determined Contributions) to achieve Congressional ratification.

⁶I do not disregard that second order beliefs might come into play in strategic considerations of agenda-setting, but focus on first order belief for analytical simplicity.

Looking for Climate Securitization

Given the potential import of climate securitization, scholarly attention to the matter has been increasing. However, I contend that this research has been looking for securitization in the wrong place. In line with the theory I describe above, evidence for securitization in the UN is uniquely found in the UNGA discourse. While a growing number of scholars argue that climate change is securitized or becoming securitized (e.g. Rønnfeldt, 1997; Buzan et al., 1998; Barnett, 2003; Floyd, 2010; Trombetta, 2008; McDonald, 2011; Gemenne et al., 2014), none have examined UNGA discourses for evidence of these trends. Other works have noted the particular relevance of the UNSC in climate securitization, exploring normative questions relating to the scope of the UNSC and whether climate change is an legitimate topic for its attention (e.g. Sindico, 2007; Detraz & Betsill, 2009; Scott, 2015; Conca et al., 2017; Scott & Ku, 2018; Conca, 2019; Nevitt, Forthcoming), but also fail to provide compelling evidence of securitization in the discourse of the general UN membership. Rather, these works observe that in 2009 the UNGA formally invited a potential relocation of the issue of climate change into the UNSC, calling in A-RES-63-281 for "relevant organs of the United Nations, as appropriate and within their respective mandates, to intensify their efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications," (UNGA, 2009). This resolution was adopted unanimously by the UNGA. While this presents suggestive evidence that there is a growing acceptance that climate change is viewed as a security matter, it does not show us a *discursive* shift. Only by examining patterns in discourse can we find compelling evidence of securitization.

Only a small amount of research on the securitization of climate change has actually looked at the UN discourse, and that which has has focused on three special ad-hoc sessions of the UNSC called in 2007, 2011, and 2017 discussing climate change. The occurrence of these ad-hoc sessions and the debates that took place therein are pointed to as evidence that the issue has been adopted into the security domain (Detraz & Betsill, 2009; Scott & Ku, 2018). However, this limited evidence cannot demonstrate broader discursive shifts. Climate debates in the UNSC itself cannot be reflective of securitization, because

securitization would require acceptance by the broader membership in the UNGA. The exploratory sessions have not had substantial substantive effects on the policy response, as there has been no UNSC resolution adopted on climate change, nor a move to feature climate change as a regularly occurring agenda item. My theory readily explains this lack of policy output, as does a careful interpretation of the definition of securitization. For an issue to be securitized, there must be acceptance of the securitizing move. To examine this process, we must examine rhetoric – not resolutions – in the UNGA – not the UNSC. Previous qualitative approaches have brought important themes to light, but cannot explore macro-level trends in UNGA discourse over time.⁷ By leveraging data on speeches given by high-level state representatives in the General Debate of the UNGA, I shed light on macro-level trends in the securitization of climate change in the key locale of the international political discourse.

UNGA Discourse on Climate

To test these hypotheses, I deploy new data to look for securitization in a more likely setting – the UNGA – than has previously been examined – the UNSC ad hoc sessions. Conceptually, securitization should be measured in discourse rather than examining the presence of climate change on the UNSC’s agenda. I then test my theoretical predictions that P5 states but not SIDS act as securitizing actors on climate change by employing the language of existential threat in on the topic.

UN General Debate

I utilize the data collected by Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhalylov (2017), which consists of all speeches given by state representatives in the General Debate from 1970-2014. Not only are speeches are good indicators of country preferences and priorities, by securitizing issues, they also perform an agenda-setting function.⁸ Each year at the opening of the UNGA in September, the General Debate affords the opportunity for

⁷Schäfer et al. (2016) conduct a large-N analysis on the securitization of climate change in media coverage, but trends in political discourse cannot be assumed to mirror those in mass media.

⁸Interviews with officials from state Permanent Missions to the UN inform and support the claims in this section.

each state to speak in a largely unconstrained setting (Smith, 2006). Because General Debate speeches are not linked to particular resolutions or votes, which are traditionally used by researchers to measure state preferences, they are more informative about a country’s underlying priorities and positions. Every country has equal opportunity to speak, affording small states a “rare moment for seizing the spotlight and putting a point of view that might otherwise be ignored,” (Nicholas, 1971, 108). The audiences for these speeches include domestic and foreign publics, bureaucrats at the UN, and members of other state delegations. States take the General Debate seriously: each year, nearly all countries who are can do so choose to give speeches in the UNGA plenary session. States send high-level representatives to the session, with 44.3% represented by heads of state or government, 49.3% by vice-presidents, deputy prime ministers, and foreign ministers, and only 6.4% by country representatives to the UN (Baturu et al., 2017, 3). An institutional norm restricts speech-time to 15 minutes. While some countries ignore the limitation on length, speech-length has indeed declined over time. We may thus consider speech-time as a limited resource – countries are simply unable to address every issue in a given speech because of time considerations. Allocating the scarce resource of speech-time to discuss a given issue is a signal that a country considers it to be of high importance.

One may worry that the speeches delivered in the General Debate are not independent observations, that is, the order in which the speeches are given may have effects on their substantive contents. Strategic coordination and political sources of influence are widespread in state voting records in the UN (see Voeten, 2013), but procedural constraints of the General Debate make this an unlikely concern in this data. Speeches are uniquely crafted each year to reflect current events and themes highlighted by the Secretary-General. The speeches are then submitted in advance of the General Debate to allow for translation into the official languages of the UN, and to circulate the text to the press and the other delegates of the UNGA. As such, speech content is determined in advance of the General Debate rather than crafted in response to statements by earlier speakers. Further, because states consider the General Debate a consequential platform, many people are involved in the speechwriting process from country missions

and governments, and therefore the content is determined well in advance of the General Debate.

The process in which the order of speakers is determined also weighs against a strategic selection process in which the order of speeches may affect their contents. Per tradition, Brazil and the United States always give the first speeches of the General Debate. Subsequently, the order of countries is determined by the importance of the delegation's speaker, as heads of state are prioritized. Only after these factors are used in ordering are other factors taken into consideration in setting the speech order, including individual country preferences for speaking order and geographical balance. Based on variation in these factors, the order of speakers and the speech content varies from year to year.

Measuring Climate Securitization

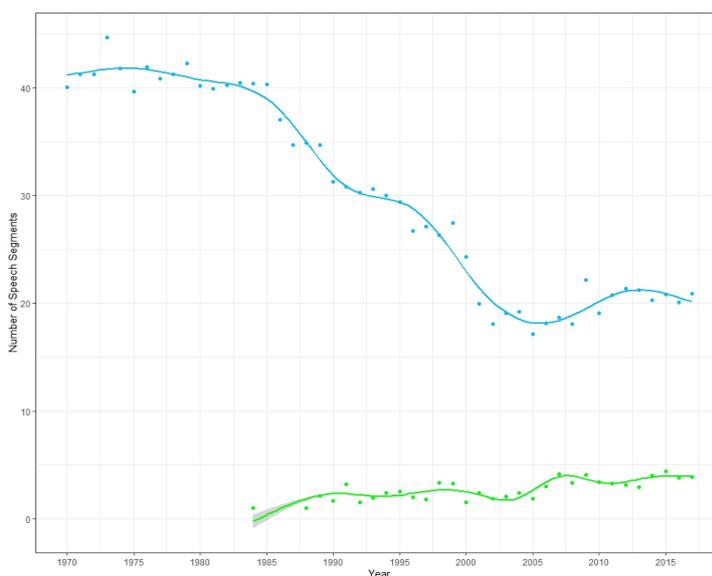
I examine state speeches from the General Debate from 1970-2014 and estimate dynamic topic models on this data. This data comprises 7,897 speeches and 205,913 distinct speech segments, which are analogous to paragraphs. In a given year, there are an average of 32 segments per speech. I filter this full corpus of speeches based on a set of key terms to obtain only the segments that discuss climate change. This procedure results in a subset of 4,525 segments relevant to climate drawn from 1,987 speeches.⁹ The earliest speech on climate change occurs in 1984, so this year is used as the beginning point for the remainder of the analysis.

For speeches that discuss climate change to any extent, on average 20% of the speech's segments are about climate change. There is high variation in this proportion, ranging from 1% to 73% of a speech's segments. On average, each country dedicates 23 paragraphs to the discussion of climate change. In addition to comprising a substantial proportion of focus at the country-speech level, climate change has been an important topic of the General Debate broadly. Across years, an average of 126 and a maximum

⁹A description of the procedure used to segment the speeches, the list of key words used for filtering, and descriptive statistics of the General Debate speech data can be found in the Appendix.

of 169 out of 193 countries speak about climate change, with an increasing share over time.¹⁰ While overall speech length declines, the proportion of speech segments dedicated to climate change increases, indicating that states take this issue seriously, as they allocate an increasingly scarce resource of speech-time towards its discussion, as seen in Figure 1. SIDS discuss climate change at higher rates than other states, with nearly double the average number of paragraphs discussing climate change (51 segments), and a higher proportion of speech segments. However, SIDS are not necessarily early adopters, picking up the climate discourse at the same time as other states. The P5 discuss climate change at roughly the same rate as the average state, devoting on average 22 paragraphs to the matter.

Figure 1: Over time, length of General Debate speeches declines, while attention to climate increases



Note: Blue dots are total number of speech segments in a given year, green dots are number of speech segments that discuss climate change. Trend lines are Loess smoothed.

To prepare this speech data for text analysis, I conduct additional pre-processing and estimate a topic model with a Structural Topic Model (STM), a variant of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), which is a Bayesian generative model of language. I estimate the STM with speech segments as the unit of analysis. The STM first assumes a vocab-

¹⁰States that do not speak on climate change at all, states that do not exist after 1984, and speeches that do not represent a specific state are dropped from the analysis – this includes speeches given on behalf of the European Union, the European Community, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Democratic Yemen, and the German Democratic Republic. All other states are included in the analysis.

ulary $\{1, \dots, V\}$ of words, and topics k , which are probability mass functions of words, allowing topic proportions and topic prevalence to vary over by covariates of the data, in this case, over time (Roberts et al., 2019).¹¹ Because this speech corpus is already filtered to one topic – climate change – the topics uncovered by STM can be thought of as different and coherent ways of speaking about the same topic, or in other words, topical frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Ultimately, this procedure represents every topic k as a unique vector of word probabilities β . The word probabilities are used to calculate document-level topic proportions, the share of the words in each document (speech segment) that are most highly identified with each topic, representing each document as a mixture of different topics summing to 1. The final model selected maximizes semantic coherence and exclusivity at the topic level, and minimizes correlations between the topics.

One of the key benefits of topic modeling is its inductive nature, reducing the impact of the *ex ante* beliefs of the researcher. Rather than pre-specifying the words that I expect to be associated with securitization, as in a dictionary-based approach, I allow the model to identify the words associated with securitization. However, topic modeling can be sensitive to the specifications of the model, so I take several steps to ensure the robustness of the results. I validate the results of the topic model by varying the parameters in the model specification, conducting a supervised analysis of the speeches for securitizing moves in their content, and crowdsourcing the topic labeling to ensure reliability. I also conduct a placebo test, comparing the results on climate change discourse to a placebo STM estimated with the same specifications on the full General Debate corpus. Details on these procedures can be found in the Appendix.

I find that coherent topics cluster around general types of parliamentary and institutional language, oceans, institutional language relevant to the UN, greenhouse gases, international treaties (in particular the Kyoto protocol), finance and development, rising sea levels, and language describing existential threats. The words most characteristic of each topic and the share of the overall corpus represented by each topic can be seen in

¹¹Details on the topic model pre-processing, estimation of the topic model, topic correlations, and robustness and placebo tests can be found in the Appendix.

Table 1: Climate Discourse Topics

Topic	Top Words	Topic Proportion
General	active education civil agencies organizations relations reform society organization taiwan	0.130
Oceans	solomon forum marine pacific low-lying declaration conservation barbados islands management	0.072
UN Institution	mr secretary-general thank president commend congratulate theme leadership election ki-moon	0.110
GHG	gases carbon per cent sources atmosphere greenhouse clean renewable forests	0.110
Treaties	protocol kyoto instrument parties 21 ratification ratified soon step early	0.120
Finance	transfer responsibilities differentiated principle technology technologies common measures responsibility strategies	0.138
Sea-Level	sea-level low-lying rise floods caused existence damage devastating sea coastal	0.165
Existential Threat	weapons nuclear problems destruction crime war mass threats hunger conflict	0.156

Notes: Highest probability words defined as the 10 words within each topic with the highest topic-word probability, β . Topic proportions represent the share of the overall corpus made up of words most commonly associated with the topic. The topic of interest, Existential Threat, is shaded.

Table 1, with the language of existential threat shaded. To recall, the definition of a securitizing move, per securitization theory, is to invoke the language of existential threat (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 491). This topic makes up the second most prevalent way of discussing climate change, after the sea level topic. The most frequent rhetorical strategy employed in the securitizing moves is to associate climate change with other existential threats like terrorism and nuclear weapons, describing climate changes as similar to these concerns. This is evinced in speeches such as the examples below. The existential threat topic is also distinctly characterized by more general security words, indicative of the UNSC’s responsibilities.

“Nobody can protect themselves from climate change unless we protect each other by building a global basis for climate security...Our climate presents us with an ever-growing threat to international security,” (United Kingdom, 2006).

“Today the greatest threats to our security often come not from other functioning sovereign States, but from terrorist organizations, from failing States and from man-made shocks to our environment like climate change, which can exacerbate State failure and breed internal instability,” (United Kingdom, 2004).

“Besides the economic crisis the first large-scale crisis of the era of globalization global development as a whole continues to be threatened by regional and local conflicts, terrorism, cross-border crime, food shortages and climate change,” (Russia, 2009).

But has climate change been securitized? That is, is there an intersubjective understanding among the members of the UNGA that climate change represents an existential threat? I predict in Hypothesis 1 that this is not the case, and the data supports this claim. To test this hypothesis, I examine the share of countries employing the topic of existential threat and find that while the language of existential threat is relatively common in the discourse, it is not employed by a majority of member states. For a given speech segment on climate change, the mean use of the securitizing moves topic is 15.6% (sea level rise characterizes 16.5% of the average segment's language, and the least commonly used topic, the general oceans topic, represents 7.2%). The securitizing moves topic is used more over time, while other topics, particularly the Kyoto Protocol topic, decrease in their use over time.¹² However, a majority of countries are not making securitizing moves: the increasing use of the existential threat topic is concentrated among a subset of states. I aggregate the document-level topic proportions to the country level to obtain the topic most commonly employed used by each country. While the language of existential threat is the most frequent modal topic (48 of 194 countries), this is less than a quarter of all members, and far below a majority. This lack of common usage indicates that there is not a consensus among the membership that the securitizing move is legitimate. At 16% of the overall climate discourse, while securitizing moves are certainly prevalent, it appears that the UNGA members have not reached an intersubjective understanding of climate change as an existential threat.

Who Securitizes?

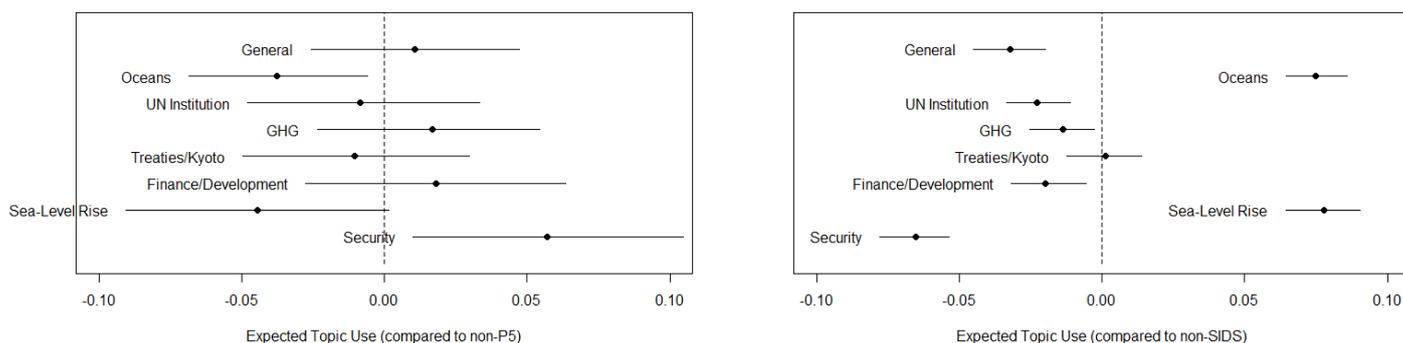
Which states are more or less likely to make securitizing moves? I expect that P5 states are more likely to be securitizing actors, and SIDS are less likely (Hypotheses 2 and 3). For the dependent measure of securitization, I use the document-level topic proportion in the existential threat topic estimated by the STM, described in the previous section. This is a continuous measure that can range 0:1. Bivariate examination supports the both expectations, shown in [Figure 2](#). P5 states are statistically significantly more

¹²Analysis of the trends in topics over time, as well as the proportion of use for each topic can be found in the Appendix.

likely to make securitizing moves compared to non-P5 states. This result holds across time, and for each of the P5 states individually, which is shown in the Appendix. P5 discourse on climate change is lead by the United Kingdom with 40 speech segments, France with 26, China with 18, the United States with 14, and Russia with 11 (recalling that the average state discusses climate change for 23 paragraphs).

This leadership by the United Kingdom comports with earlier descriptions of climate securitization in the UN (Scott & Ku, 2018; Peters, 2018). While previous evidence for British entrepreneurship on climate securitization has generally rested on the fact that the United Kingdom convened first UNSC debate on climate change in 2007, this new evidence provides broader support for the claim that the United Kingdom is a leading securitizing actor on the topic. In the US case, there is a high degree of variation across administration, which also matches previous assessments (Scott & Ku, 2018, 209-210). Figure 2 also shows that SIDS are significantly less likely to securitize than non-SIDS, but are much more likely to use the oceans and sea-level topics. In fact, these topics are almost exclusively employed by SIDS.¹³ If the P5 are more likely to make securitizing moves than other states but SIDS are not, this suggests that the patterns described in the agenda control theory of securitization hold in the case of climate change.

Figure 2: P5 make securitizing moves, SIDS do not



Note: Figures show expected speech segment proportion in the existential risk topic estimated by STM, comparing P5 states to non-P5 states, and SIDS to non-SIDS. Uncertainty calculated from the STM by composition with 95% confidence intervals.

¹³By region, a similar trend is observed: Oceania is more likely to employ the oceans and sea-level topics, likely driven by the prevalence of SIDS in this region.

Could it be the case that the P5 simply try to securitize across all topic areas, and the observed securitizing moves on climate by the P5 are not a unique feature of that discourse? The theoretical model described earlier contends that because of resource and legitimacy constraints, the P5 securitize issues strategically, and would not be likely to securitize across all issues, and the evidence supports this expectation. To verify that the P5 are not simply using the language of existential threat across all topics, I conduct a placebo test, fitting an additional topic model with the same specifications to the full General Debate corpus. Comparing the STMs on climate discourse and the full discourse reveals that security matters comprise a distinct topic in the General Debate, and that this topic particularly focuses on ‘hard’ security matters such as nuclear weapons, disarmament, and terrorism. There is not evidence that the overall discourse is securitizing: the prevalence of this security topic is declining over time, whereas the use of security language in the climate discourse specifically was increasing over time. Security language is also not prevalent across topics in the overall debate, but is confined to the particular security topic. In the general discourse, the P5 are no more likely to employ the security topic than other states. These findings support the analysis of climate discourse as a distinct case of securitization in UN discourse, and provide further evidence that the P5 are expected to securitize strategically, selecting particular issue areas where there securitization might be more likely to be accepted.¹⁴

While the evidence from these bivariate tests suggests that the expectations of the agenda control securitization theory are correct, status as P5 or SIDS is far from randomly assigned, and is likely associated with many other sources of variation. Though it is impossible to rule out all potential explanatory factors in an observational context, I can more carefully test the theory against alternative explanations by leveraging additional data to control for other relevant sources of variation. This approach can help to illuminate whether P5 and SIDS status retains explanatory power for the likelihood to make securitizing moves on climate change after controlling for other factors. I conduct this analysis at the country-year level, aggregating the document-level existential topic

¹⁴Details on this placebo test can be found in the Appendix.

proportion estimates from the STM to the country-year level as the dependent variable. Because the dependent variable is ranges continuously from 0 to 1, I employ a linear regression framework. The independent variables to be employed in these tests are described below.

States that have a strong interest in policy outcomes on climate change may be expected to make securitizing moves to increase the salience of the issue, as occurred in the example of HIV/AIDS, discussed earlier. Public opinion in democratic states has been found to be more supportive of climate change action than in non-democratic states (Lewis et al., 2019), and democratic states are more likely to be responsive to public opinion than non-democratic states (Moravcsik, 1997). As a possible domestic political explanation, I leverage variation in regime type, measured with Polity score. Countries with Polity scores greater than 6 are coded as democracies, while countries with Polity scores less than -6 are coded as autocracies. I also utilize cross-national public opinion data on public concern about climate change from a Gallup survey conducted across 106 countries in 2010. This panel included all of the P5 members except France, as well as 4 SIDS (Singapore, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Comoros, out of 37 total SIDS). Though this is unfortunately a small proportion of SIDS, it provides much better coverage than any other cross-national survey with data on climate change attitudes conducted to date.

States that are more geographically vulnerable to the effects of climate change also may have a strong interest in the matter, and thus might make securitizing moves. This expectation would be supported by classical securitization theory, which argues that states that are existentially threatened by a problem would be more likely to be securitizing actors (Lipschutz, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Stritzel, 2007). To control for geophysical features, I incorporate a measure of actual warming as a change in national average air temperature over land since 1960 in degrees Celsius, measured by Berkeley Earth. I also construct a measure of climate disaster occurrences to capture the experienced effects of climate change across states, utilizing data from the International Disaster Database from 1984-2018. I include data on climate-related disasters, including climatological (drought

and wildfire), hydrological (flood and landslide), and meteorological (extreme temperature and storm). The disaster database captures the number of deaths, injured, affected, homeless, and costs for many of these events. To maximize data availability and reduce the effects of income-dependence, I follow Roberts and Parks (2007) and use a smoothed measure of total persons affected.

Finally, organizational politics have been found to influence state behavior in international organizations like the UN (e.g. Voeten, 2013). To test for the influence of institutional politics on a state's likelihood of making securitizing moves, I use the measure of affinity constructed by Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten (Bailey et al., 2017). These measures of state preference similarity are constructed using voting records in the UNGA. To determine whether US influence is driving securitization choices in UNGA rhetoric, I include the measure of vote similarity for each country with the US. If relationships supporting the agendas of the 'important' state is driving securitization, higher levels of voting affinity would be expected to predict securitization.

In addition to these measures, I also control for general indicators of state power. These factors might reflect a higher level of overall state security concerns, which could be associated with a greater propensity to make securitizing moves. I include annual measures of country level GDP per capita (logged), population (logged), and military expenditures as a proportion of GDP, all collected by the World Bank. I also include year and a second order polynomial on year to capture linear and nonlinear time trends in the data.¹⁵ I conduct 5 multiple imputations to address problems of missing data and avoid introducing potential bias from listwise deletion. This analysis includes 1,987 observations of unique country-years, covering every year from 1984-2017 and 194 distinct countries.

The results of the main model, shown in Model 1 in Table 2, largely comport with the mean differences examined earlier. Controlling for alternative explanations, P5 status remains a significant predictor of securitization, with P5 states 5 percentage points more likely to securitize than non-P5. SIDS status is a significant predictor in the negative

¹⁵More details on the independent variables can be found in the Appendix.

direction, with SIDS expected to securitize 8 percentage points less often than other states. While these predicted effects may seem substantively small, as a shift in framing choices, a small increase in securitization could have substantial effects in terms of agenda setting and influencing topic choice by other states. Further, the mean securitization level by states is 16%, so a 5 percentage point shift represents an allocation change of nearly one-third. Variables associated with the domestic politics explanation (Public Concern and Democracy) are not statistically significant predictors of securitization, nor is the factor associated with the international politics explanation (Agree with US).

The variables measuring geographic vulnerability to climate change are of mixed significance: while Amt. Warming just fails to achieve statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level, Climate Disasters is a significant predictor of securitization. However, the predicted effect of Climate Disasters is substantively very small (less than 0.1 percentage point influence on predicted securitization) and in the negative direction. The expected first difference of increasing the mean value of the adjusted disaster score by one standard deviation is a decrease of 1% in the use of securitizing language. This result may be accounted for by the increased incidence of climate disasters in SIDS, which were found to be less likely to securitize. Two of the measures of structural power (Population and GDPPC) fail achieve statistical significance at the level of 0.05. Military Expenditure, however, has a statistically significant and substantively large effect on predicted securitization. This result comports well with the theoretical expectations of agenda-setting securitization: like the P5, states with large military complexes would expect to obtain an increase in institutional power with the securitization of climate change, ‘playing to their strengths.’ Such states may even be invited to participate in UNSC discussions of climate security because of their military expertise, thereby gaining agenda control. Even with the large amount of predictive power of military expenditure, however, the key finding of P5 securitization remains significant.

These findings are robust to several alternative model specifications, shown in Models 2-6 in [Table 2](#). Military expenditure may capture too broad of a phenomena, as the effects of climate change are likely to be particularly acute to naval forces. As an alterna-

Table 2: Linear regression model of securitization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
P5	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*	0.04	0.02	
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.049)	(0.06)	(0.76)	
E10						0.02
						(0.31)
SIDS	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
Pubic Concern	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
	(0.88)	(0.81)	(0.89)	(0.83)	(0.87)	(0.93)
Democracy	-0.00	-0.01	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.94)	(0.24)	(0.85)	(0.73)	(0.94)	(0.83)
Climate Disasters	-0.00*	-0.00*	-0.00*	-0.00*	-0.00*	-0.00
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.10)
Amt. Warming	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01*	-0.01*	-0.01
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Agree with US	-0.02	-0.02			-0.02	-0.01
	(0.50)	(0.50)			(0.51)	(0.85)
Agree with Brazil			0.01			
			(0.63)			
Agree with India				0.00		
				(0.99)		
Military Expenditures	0.79*		0.80*	0.80*	0.80*	0.85*
	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Aircraft Carriers		-0.00				
		(0.89)				
GDPPC (Log)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.86)	(0.66)	(0.86)	(0.94)	(0.88)	(0.58)
Population (Log)	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.10)	(0.18)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.23)
Year	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.17)	(0.31)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.17)
Year Sq	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.35)	(0.52)	(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.37)	(0.33)
P5*Year					0.00	
					(0.57)	
Constant	0.21***	0.22***	0.19***	0.21***	0.21***	0.18***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	(0.000)					

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Standard errors averaged from 5 imputations of missing data. 1,987 observations in all models.

tive measure for military expenditure that specifically captures naval powers, I construct an indicator for countries with aircraft carriers. I also specify models where the measure of affinity with the US is replaced for vote similarity with Brazil and with India to determine whether coalitions of developing countries are influential in setting the patterns of securitization discourse. None of these alternative specifications of these variables achieve statistical significance and do not meaningfully change the predicted effects of other variables, nor does adding an interaction term between P5 status and year. A possible rejoinder to the main finding would be that any state on the UNSC would be more likely to use security language, whether or not they are P5. These states could be motivated to maximize their influence during their temporary appointment or to signal their temporary role in security matters. To test this argument, I replace the P5 indicator with an indicator for non-permanent membership in the UNSC. This indicator is 1 for non-P5 countries during the years that they serve on the UNSC. This variable is not a significant predictor of securitization, indicating that the effect only holds for P5 members and not UNSC members more broadly. Overall, these findings support my argument that the P5 have an incentive to securitize the issue of climate change to increase their agenda control, while SIDS are less likely to do so.

Conclusion

This work provides new insight into a puzzle in the internal dynamics of international organizations. Why do some matters become framed as security problems, while others do not, and what states are behind these shifts? Classical securitization theory predicts that states that care greatly about the issue, and particularly states that are existentially threatened, should be more likely to make securitizing moves. However, I show that by accounting for agenda control dynamics in international organizations, we can develop the opposite expectations: states with the greatest material interest in an issue may, in fact, be the least likely to attempt to securitize it, fearing a loss of agenda control. I demonstrate these patterns in the case of climate change in the UNGA deploying a text analysis framework, finding that P5 states are more likely to securitize than others, even when controlling for possible confounders, while SIDS are less likely to do

so. The tendency of the P5 not to securitize across all UNGA discourse may indicate a persistent concern for institutional legitimacy, which may bode well for the continued relevance of the UN to both powerful and non-powerful states.

I add to a growing body of research employing rhetoric in international contexts to understand more nuanced phenomena of international politics. This work also presents the first statistical test of securitization in the more appropriate setting of UNGA discourse, rather than UNSC meeting records. By looking for securitization in a more appropriate setting, I provide new evidence that challenges prior claims that the international discourse on climate change has been securitized. We can observe that though the language of existential threat is not uncommon in the climate discourse, it is not deployed by a majority of states, indicating that there is not an intersubjective understanding of climate change as an existential threat. This finding has direct implications for the nature of the UN's likely response to climate change. It suggests that most UN members would not support a substantial role for the UNSC in addressing climate change, and that a policy response would be more likely to come from the UNGA. Such a response would likely include more attention to the non-security dimensions of climate change, such as financing, migration, and human rights, but it would also lack the compulsory force of a UNSC resolution, and may lose out on potential salience and resource benefits of a UNSC-driven approach.

Though this paper focuses on agenda control dynamics in one institutional and issue context, the expectations are generalizable to a variety of contexts, and thus contribute more broadly to our understandings of international politics and institutions. Institutional rules and rhetoric both matter in shaping institutional distributions of power and policy responses. The theory of agenda control securitization is expected to hold in any international organization with a division of labor across its sub-institutions. Many multi-issue international organizations besides the UN – including the AU, the OAS, ASEAN, and CARICOM – have a specific sub-institutional unit is tasked with addressing matters of conflict and security. In some of these organizations, including the AU, the security organ represents only a subset of member states, as in the case of the UN. Future work

should explore other cases when the theory would likely apply, such as the AU, and should also examine other topic areas besides climate change where securitization would be likely to take place.

Beyond climate change, securitization is an important phenomenon to understand as the nature of security challenges expands and becomes more complex. While I do not find that securitization is taking place broadly across issue areas in the UNGA, were such a trend to develop, it could have broad implications in expanding the UNSC mandate to other issue areas outside of the traditional security realm, including food security, public health, and cyber matters. If the set of actors empowered to act on such matters changes from the universal UNGA membership to the smaller UNSC membership, the likely nature of the resulting policies also changes. This could result in increased dominance by the more powerful actors in international politics. This pattern would not only have dramatic implications for the ability of the international system to respond to new challenges, but also to its continued legitimacy.

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