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“Sinking islands” and the UNSC: Five modalities of mobilising science

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ABSTRACT

Kiribati, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, the Maldives and other small island developing states in the Pacific are often incorrectly called “sinking islands.” With their highest points just a few meters above sea level, they face adverse impacts from climate change and especially sea level rise, which can cause them to disappear entirely or make their territory uninhabitable. After rather frustrating negotiations on other fora, the representatives of those states asked the UN Security Council to deal with their perilous situation in 2007. On the one hand, some countries used scientific argumentation to justify the introduction of this new security agenda. On the other hand, prominent UNSC members such as China and Russia, supported mainly by rapidly developing large countries, rejected it, arguing that the Security Council did not have the expertise to solve environmental problems. Since then the islands have echoed their plight to the UNSC in 2011 and 2015. This paper determines what roles individual countries ascribe to “experts” and “science” during UNSC negotiations. It examines how the authority of “experts” was exploited, which allowed certain countries to strike the issue of those islands from the UNSC agenda by calling for a more “scientific approach,” while others used “science” to widen the concept of security. The analysis of empirical data confirms the theory of Berling’s three modalities when referring to science. Those modalities can be further extended by Foucault’s conception of “will to truth” as a method of exclusion, and Chandler’s theory of “empire in denial” as a way of evading responsibility, while maintaining power.

0. Introduction

Kiribati, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, the Maldives and other small island developing states (“SIDS”) in the Pacific are often incorrectly called “sinking islands”, because their territory may disappear as a consequence of sea level rise (cf. Farbotko, 2010). These countries raised their plight to the United Nations Security Council in 2007 and 2011 and again in 2015. Although the Council neither adopted any resolution nor undertook any other action, it turned into a forum where the same scientific justifications were used to support totally different proposals. This paper determines what roles the references to “experts” and “science” played during these UNSC negotiations. Some countries used the references to science to strike the issue of SIDS from the UNSC agenda by calling for a more “scientific approach”. Whereas on the contrary, other countries employed “scientific arguments” to support their claim that the UNSC definitively should solve the situation. A group of European countries referred to science in order to avoid responsibility for possible solutions and outsource it on the scientists and experts, while still maintaining power to approve the final decision.

The paper tackles this puzzling situation, when different countries

used similar references to science or scientific arguments as methods to support their interest and allow them to achieve different desired outcomes.¹ The countries did not use references to science and scientific argumentation as the basic starting point for the formation of their position. Instead, they bent or shaped scientific argumentation to suit their interests. The scientific arguments themselves were not denied, refused or ignored. They were accepted, but used through different modalities to support particular outcomes desirable for different states.

Current securitization literature is unable to fully explain such phenomenon, i.e. to show how one argument may be used both to securitize and desecuritize an issue and also help the actors to achieve other goals, such as responsibility evasion. Therefore the paper proposes to widen the securitization approach, represented by Berling (2011), with insights based on writing of Foucault (1970) and Chandler (2006).

Data contained in the minutes from the three UNSC meetings offered a unique possibility for this type of discourse analysis examining how the states utilized references to science while negotiating about security. On a theoretical level, the analysis of this information contributes to earlier debates (Berling, 2011; Grundmann and Stehr,

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¹ I.e. the same scientific arguments were used for totally diverging purposes – to support different interests of the states.

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2012; Jasanoff, 2004; Krige and Kai-Henrik, 2006) and describes how individual actors in front of the UNSC used terms such as “science,” “experts,” and “knowledge” in order to manipulate negotiated outcomes and restore the favorable distribution of power within the discourse.² Interestingly, the state actors seldom referred to specific scientific facts, but more often resorted to generalizations such as “as studies say” or “because it requires a scientific approach.” Thus, we can observe how the actors employed and manipulated the role of science in an obvious, almost crystal-clear, form.

Apart from widening the analytical framework of Berling, the crucial contribution of the paper is empirical. The enhanced theoretical framework elucidates the dynamics of argumentation using science during UNSC negotiations about SIDS in particular and about environmental security in general. Similar negotiations will probably happen again in the future and will have serious impacts, not only on SIDS, but on other countries facing adverse effects of climate changes as well.

Climate change is not the only area where the UNSC was or is supposed to be guided by science. UNSC Resolution 1308/2000 on HIV and International Peace-keeping operations referred to the 13th International AIDS conference as “an important opportunity for leaders and scientists” to discuss the issue and solutions (for more on securitization of HIV see e.g. Elbe, 2006). During the 4172nd meeting on the 17th of July 2000, which led to adoption of this resolution, states quoted scientists and experts. Similarly the UNSC addressed the issue of the Ebola virus in 2015 (7502nd meeting on the 13th of August 2015) and the representatives again referred to “the best scientific minds” or “specialty knowledge and expertise.” The results of this research may be relevant also for those negotiations.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section describes theoretical approaches concerning the role of “science,” “scientists,” “experts,” and “expertize” in negotiations about security. Three modalities of science utilization in the securitization process described by Berling are taken as a basis and further complemented by the concepts of Foucault and Chandler, which are proposed, and used, as fourth and fifth modalities. The second section offers a brief introduction to the case of sinking islands and explains why it has been chosen for the analysis. The third part introduces the dataset and methodological approach. The fourth part of the paper interprets the results of the discourse analysis; using empirical material to demonstrate different mechanisms of influencing security discussions by scientific argument à la Berling, but also drawing on insights from Foucault and Chandler. It shows how rhetorical references to science in the security discussion of the UNSC served the interests of states during the processes of securitization, exclusion and responsibility evasion.

1. Science, securitization, power: putting the mosaic together

The fact that scientific argumentation appeared so frequently within the UNSC debates is hardly surprising. At the turn of millennium, Dalby (2002, xxv) noted that most discussions of environmental or security politics inevitably contained expert opinions as the rationalization for state or corporate activity. Scientists participate daily in political decision-making through knowledge production (Jasanoff, 1990). Their opinions express the interconnection between power and knowledge. Expertize is transformed by the lens through which we view the politics of knowledge, i.e., it begins to form and justify the politics itself (Osborne, 2015, 64). In other words, science and expertize are regarded as objective, unbiased and having a strict correspondence with reality, while the criteria of objectivity, neutrality and truthfulness are again defined by the science itself. Thanks to those qualities science and

² The purpose of the paper is to show different utilizations of references to “science” or “experts”. Further research focusing on the impact of geographical position on an actor’s attitude towards “science” and “experts is required.”

expertize³ are seen as the most valuable tools of knowledge production. They possess strong legitimizing potential.

Scientists producing knowledge⁴ are required to provide means for governing populations (cf. Foucault, 2010), as well as justification for such governance. Their importance for formulating policies grows in conjunction with the importance of scientific facts relative to security decisions and negotiations. Thus scientific knowledge serves the power interests of individual actors (cf. Jasanoff, 2004; Krige and Kai-Henrik, 2006; Grundmann and Stehr, 2012), especially in international relations, or particularly as it relates to the implications of climate change. Political actors may even create a demand for certain scientific theory and thus contribute to the success of such theory (Barnes and Bloor, 1996). Those insights match with the fact that the references to science appeared so frequently within the UNSC debates. However, they do not explain why the same argumentation by science was used to support diverging proposals for different actions.

The answer could be provided by the theory of securitization. As described by Wæver (1995, 50–57), securitization represents a process in which a certain issue is socially portrayed as an imminent danger and thus becomes constructed as a threat, allowing an actor to mobilize extraordinary resources to address it. Successful securitization requires articulation of threat from a specific place and by a legitimate speaker (Wæver, 1995, 57) and its acceptance by the audience (Buzan et al., 1998, 25). From this perspective, the attempts to persuade the UNSC to act may be seen as securitization moves, while the countries insisting that the UNSC should remain passive can be regarded as desecuritized actors.

1.1. Berling’s three modalities of science utilization in regard to securitization

Berling (2011)⁵ systematically dealt with the role of scientific information in the securitization process. She introduced three mechanisms through which scientific facts could intervene:

“First, science *objectifies* its object of study and plays an important role in the production of difference and hierarchies in society. This may lead to closing off debates on certain issues. Second, the social world can be conceived as being structured in fields, where the distribution of symbolic capital is important for determining the ‘authority of the speaker’ (the securitizing actor) or of an utterance (speech act). With a position of (symbolic) power and a ‘sense of the game,’ an actor gains ‘a place from where to speak’ in a specific field – for example, the scientific field or the field of security. These two mechanisms relate to the external dimension to securitization identified in the first part of this article. Finally, third, scientific facts – observations, products, methods (or theories) – can be mobilized strategically by agents in political struggles as a form of capital in securitizations.” Berling, 2011, 390

Within the first mechanism, science can “*prescribe* action and exercise a specific kind of symbolic violence on practice-practice” (Berling, 2011, 391). I.e. it may overwhelm the possible solutions discovered by routine practical activities, or simple observations. Instead, a scientifically objectivized approach is imposed as the new practice. This mechanism has the power to introduce certain solutions as being the best possible means of addressing a situation, while bypassing the processes of politicalization and securitization, and

³ From this perspective there is no difference between science as an academic discipline and science as a means of technical wisdom. For a detailed explanation of what constituted reference to science, for the purposes of this article, see Section 3.

⁴ This knowledge is presented as objective, yet it may well serve the interests of individual actors, e.g. states and scientists may be asked to produce “knowledge on demand” or the results may be manipulated.

⁵ Berling (2011, 388–389) also provided a further detailed overview of literature connecting science and security, together with Berling and Bueger (2015, 1–18).

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