**Testing Troubled Waters: Maritime Security Force Responses to Climate Change**

**Topic and Hypothesis**

This research will answer the following question: *how have maritime security forces (MSFs) conceptualised climate change and what actions are they undertaking to prepare for a climactically-altered future?* It proposes to do this by examining the efforts in these areas by the US Navy (USN), the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), and the United Kingdom’s Royal Navy (RN). It arose in response to a curious silence: for much of the early 21st century, institutional, academic, and policymaking circles have linked a changing climate to the potential for increased global conflict.[[1]](#footnote-1) There has been little research on countermeasures to address this issue, however.

This research topic is important for several reasons. Individual MSFs might face some combination of rising sea levels, a warming Arctic, an increase in humanitarian crises requiring maritime response, and the potential for mass seaborne migration, among others. Understanding how MSFs envision these risks and in some cases act on them will offer a window into potential military responses. This study will also boost understandings of bureaucratic and institutional adaptation to climate change.

This study’s primary aim is not to determine whether climate change and its potential second-order effects pose a security problem. Rather, its aim is to outline the discourse surrounding climate change from a maritime-security perspective, and to determine how this informs real-world capacity-building and planning efforts.

Based on preliminary readings of the source material, a key assumption of this project is that MSFs *are* concerned by climactic developments and the potential for conflictual fallout. This proposal hypothesises that MSFs are indeed preparing, planning, and securitising in recognition of the impacts of climate change and environmental issues. However, I posit that the case-study MSFs’ appraisal of and preparation for climate change is occurring in ad-hoc and uncoordinated fashion, with strategic commitment dependent on political willingness to regard climate change as a threat. Furthermore, the same level of urgency is not present across the three case studies: the USN has devoted much more effort to understanding and proactively meeting the challenges of climate change and the environment than the other two services.

**Theory and literature**

There are at least two of bodies of literature that will inform this research. The first is a large *securitisation* literature which has a number of distinct subdivisions.[[2]](#footnote-2) More recent scholarship has attempted to reconcile the disputes.[[3]](#footnote-3) Balzacq et al. argue that “it is more productive to integrate [speech act and routine-based understandings] into a coherent framework…” and that a focus on “regimes of practice” incorporating both verbal and non-verbal securitisation cues is the best method forward.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This research seeks to fill a gap in the securitisation literature. Analyses of climate securitisation typically focus on the political aspect of climate securitisation, rather than the actions of national-security actors like MSFs. This research’s focus on MSFs – national-security institutions and therefore archetypal ‘professionals of unease’ – ensures that it will fix on the internal discourses, practices, and articulated worldviews of these national security institutions. The study will firstly probe *how* MSFs conceptualise the links between climate and security, and, once this has been determined, *what* they are doing or recommend doing. Accordingly, this study draws more from the ‘integrated’ approach to securitisation described by Balzacq et al. above.

The climate-securitisation discourse is linked to the ongoing climate-security debate that has been an episodic focus of national and international attention since at least the 1970s.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although the latter literature precedes the securitisation debate, it is relevant to this research because a securitising actor will, in effect, take a position on the relevance of climate change to security. Broadly speaking, this climate-security debate is split into two camps, the first arguing that the changing climate has a direct and plausible impact on security. Led by scholars like Thomas Homer-Dixon, these authors foresee a future where climate change exacerbates – and in some cases causes – conflicts and political instability around the globe.[[6]](#footnote-6) This idea is applied with varying degrees of subtlety: some authors argue that there is a fairly linear, causal link between climate change and armed conflict, while others argue that climate change offers a more systemic contribution to the conditions of conflict.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Significance and relevance**

*Significance of research*

This study will address a crucial gap in the literature: much of the scholarship focuses on high-level political statements, diplomatic efforts, and international calls-to-arms. I have been unable to identify any comprehensive studies adopting a methodical, holistic, and comparative approach to ascertain the pace and scale of climate change-adaptation processes among the world’s leading MSFs.

The case studies themselves are worthwhile objects of analysis for three reasons. Firstly, they offer large volumes of research material, thanks to their respective countries’ large national-security establishments and concomitantly robust security-analysis cultures. Their navies are highly-advanced and are constantly seeking to operate at a strategic cutting edge, and therefore act as role models and trend-setters for other maritime forces. Finally, they are all English-language countries and thus offer accessible bodies of research material.

This study also has policy relevance. It will explore how MSFs are *practically* proceeding in their approach to climate change, and I hope will contribute to broader understandings of some of the policy settings available to governments and institutions in the face of a pressing global concern. Additionally, it will explore how these MSFs use the language of security in pursuit of institutional budgetary goals, seen through the prism of climate change.

Temporally, this research will be restricted to climate-change discourse among maritime national security establishments from 2003 onwards, aligning with the release of that year’s Schwartz Report, catapulting an abrupt climate change scenario into security consciousness.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, the early-to-mid 2000s coincide with a discernible uptick in interest in climate change among national security establishments and major international organisations.[[9]](#footnote-9) This approach will also ensure that the study’s focus will remain on contemporary issues, attitudes, and perspectives.

**Sources and Methodology**

*Sources*

*Interviews*

This project has scope for the use of interviews as a primary source. Interviews with current and former serving members of the three respective MSFs could serve several purposes: firstly, they could elicit understandings shared by key individuals within each MSF to the role they see climate change playing in their service’s future. Secondly, de-identified interviews provide ‘off-the-record’ opportunities for individuals to give their frank opinions, and to demonstrate how a particular service may ‘really feel.’ Finally, interview transcripts provide a rich source of textual-analysis material, particularly in terms of term-frequency analysis.

*Artefacts and documents*

There are a range of written documents that will form an excellent basis for primary source research. Firstly, in accordance with Paris-School emphasis on routine institutional practices, the project will examine public documents including white papers, reports, studies, and military journals that might serve as useful indicators of policy concern and strategic intent. Examples of this high-level, strategic information in the American context includesuccessive US Quadrennial Defense Reviews, a 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and the US Department of Defense Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap, among others.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Methodology*

*Case studies*

Case study research methodology is integral to this project: the broad nature of the research question ensures that case studies will help focus and direct the research. I envision using case studies in both a ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ sense: horizontally, to outline the three specific services; and vertically, to probe different topic areas within and across the three case studies. These vertical case-studies will form three different ‘levels’ of analysis within each MSF, and will permit a comprehensive overview of how the case-study MSFs conceptualise climate change.

The first vertical case study stream will comprehensively assess the extent to which climate and environmental issues interact with naval strategic thinking, and will also probe the ways that MSFs interact with government strategic agenda-setting. Areas examined in this stream will include emergent threat identification and mitigation strategies, changing strategic geography, the impact of the climate on operational doctrine, and capability purchasing. Interviews, military journal debates, and strategic doctrine documents will form the basis for this research component.

The second stream will focus on how MSFs perceive and conceptualise the physical interaction between climactic effects and their physical bases and hardware. Key aspects of this stream will include the effects of rising sea levels and increasingly harsh weather events on naval hardware and infrastructure. It will examine how MSFs plan to mitigate this and the degree of urgency with which they are approaching this issue. Although these are not ‘traditional’ security issues, they are important to investigate because they impact MSFs’ *delivery* of security, and mitigation effects will absorb public money.

The third stream will focus on the degree to which navies regard themselves responsible for helping to mitigate the impact of their operations on the environment. It will examine the extent to which MSFs are ‘going green’ and considering the adaptation of renewable-energy technology. It will seek to determine the importance for each service of a developed understanding of the impact of its operations on the environment.

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