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Authoritarian environmentalism in Vietnam: The construction of climate change as a security threat

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the construction of climate change as a security threat under authoritarian political structures. Based on 55 Vietnamese government policies, strategies, laws, and action plans and building on the theoretical framework of authoritarian environmentalism, the article demonstrates that climate change is increasingly being taken seriously by the Vietnamese policymakers and that security framings play a significant role in this debate. Although the authoritarian state in Vietnam appears to be relatively independent of public preferences and is argued to rely primarily on top-down, non-participatory environmental management, it nonetheless strives to construct narratives that support its public legitimacy. Through the use of various frames such as natural resource security, water resource security, food security, and energy security, Vietnamese discourse presumes that climate change policies should bring economic benefits, which in turn provides the basis for the public security agenda and ultimately serves regime security, strengthening the legitimacy and resilience of the Communist Party of Vietnam. These findings indicate that development and security discourses in the area of climate policy actively interact and perpetuate each other, highlighting an important feature of emerging state environmentalism in Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Linking climate change to security issues has gained much traction in mainstream policy discourse during the past decades (Boas and Rothe, 2016; Hartmann, 2010; Nyman, 2018). This framing is practiced by various state and non-state actors, especially from Western democracies, often to predict the security implications of environmental hazards and construct an alarmist discourse aimed at attracting the attention of a broader public or high-level decision-makers. The trend can be seen as a continuation of the one that began in the 1990s when the concept of security was broadened to include unconventional threats and extended to the economic, social, and environmental domains (Buzan et al., 1997). The policy framings, which link climate change to, for example, armed conflict or the threat of “climate refugees” (Bettini, 2013; Hartmann, 2010), are grounded in particular forms of knowledge that policymakers subsequently rely on to find plausible policy solutions (Vink et al., 2013). As climate change is also increasingly on the agenda of policymakers in non-Western countries, they are beginning to embrace the security narrative when shaping their national climate policies (Nyman and Zeng, 2016; Oramah et al., 2021; Sahu, 2021). To date,

however, there has been limited research on the perspectives as well as motivations behind climate-security nexus in authoritarian contexts, particularly with regard to how such knowledge frames construct specific realities in authoritarian politics. In particular, portraying climate change as a security threat in authoritarian political discourse can lead to the prioritization of emergency measures that result in, and may even legitimize, further centralization of power (Mittiga, 2022; Nyman and Zeng, 2016; Sahu, 2021; Trombetta, 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that publicly perceived emergencies can be exploited to justify undemocratic behavior and even ensure obedience, even when tough measures do not lead to better policy outcomes (Edgell et al., 2021).

This article aims at advancing the debate on the rise of climate-security thinking by delving into and unpacking authoritarian knowledge-production regarding climate change-related risk perceptions in Vietnam. By applying the theoretical frame of authoritarian environmentalism (AE) and drawing on a discourse analysis of 55 official state documents, this article aims to answer the following questions: how has climate change been conceptualized in Vietnamese policy discourse? What kind of threats are being highlighted and how is

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security understood? And what policy implications may such conceptualizations have?

Vietnam, a country under decades-long rule by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), represents a typical or exemplary case of one-party communist regimes in Asia. Vietnam is highly vulnerable to the impacts of transboundary climate change while facing domestic environmental challenges related to the rapid industrialization process and biodiversity degradation (Schirmbeck, 2017). As a result, the Vietnamese central government has issued a wide range of environmental and climate strategies, energy efficiency programs, and initiatives on green growth. This comprehensive policy framework relies on top-down implementation and corresponds with the notion of AE, which is conceptualized as a non-participatory approach to environmental policymaking mainly based on strict command-and-control measures (Bruun, 2020; Eaton and Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012). This article shows that the discourse on security has become an important facet of the emerging AE in Vietnam. Based on the policy discourse analysis, this article suggests that even if the discourse takes place under the dimensions of climate policies, the focus remains on the security of continued economic growth. As will be explained in more detail below, the discursive framing links climate change to natural resource security, water resource security, food security, energy supply security, and assumes that climate change policies shall yield economic benefits, which in turn is the basis for the public security agenda and ultimately regime security, i.e., the legitimacy of the CPV. For the CPV, therefore, there is more at stake in climate change-related policy debates than finding a proper response to specific environmental challenges.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework of AE will be presented focusing on authoritarian legitimacy and regime security. Subsequently, the methodological section will present the case and materials used for the qualitative policy discourse analysis. The analytical section then outlines how Vietnam constructs the threat of climate change, and the main frames and narratives used in the policy discourse. The goal here is to understand how these frames feed into an emerging form of state environmentalism. The conclusion summarizes key findings and discusses the policy implications.

2. Theoretical framework: authoritarian environmentalism

Authoritarian environmentalism (AE) is a debate on environmental policy that has emerged as a critique of environmental practices in Western democracies, which focus on public participation and public perception of threats in the policy-making process. According to Dryzek et al. (2002), the emergence of environmental protection as a central area of state action in Western democracies may be related to social movements, as modern states respond to rising demands to maintain public trust and legitimacy. The definition of legitimacy here is informed by Max Weber's understanding of state power and is linked to the state's need for self-preservation (Eckersley, 2021). Since public discontent expressed through the mobilization of environmental social movements was perceived as an urgent legitimation threat, Western states responded by establishing policy initiatives, government agencies, laws, and specific bureaucracies (Dryzek et al., 2002; Meadowcroft, 2005). It is argued that civil society participation and freedom of expression have contributed to greater environmental awareness among the public and a change in policy preferences, prompting greater concern for the environment on the part of Western governments. When coupled with well-functioning, non-corrupt democratic institutions that can check political leadership, responsiveness to citizens gives democracies distinct advantages in environmental governance (Niemeyer, 2013; Povitkina, 2018; Povitkina and Jagers, 2022).

However, the ambivalent performance of Western democracies in the recent decades in addressing the climate crisis has challenged the perceived virtues of democratic regimes. Increasingly, it has been argued that structural barriers within liberal democracies impeded the states' ecological transformation (Blühdorn, 2020) and created a "glass

ceiling" (Hausknost, 2020). In democracies, policies are fundamentally constrained by public interests, values, and popular perceptions of risks (Douglas, 2020; Wells, 2007), and citizens cannot be assumed to comprehend expert knowledge about changing climate without understanding the basis of these facts themselves. Against the background of these challenges, the AE debate initially focused on the search for an alternative policy model – "good" authoritarianism, which was seen as critical to the long-term sustainability of the planet (Beeson, 2010; Shearman and Smith, 2007). The AE model proposes a non-participatory approach to public policymaking (Gilley, 2012), which manifests itself in a limited, state-dominated policy process and strict command-and-control measures that leads to the restriction of freedoms of individuals and businesses (Beeson, 2010; Eaton and Kostka, 2014). Generally, the policy model relies on expert knowledge and risk perception for policymaking and concentrates responsibility in a few executive agencies staffed by so-called eco-elites (Gilley, 2012). It is therefore emphasized that an AE model would be successful in addressing environmental challenges because it would be able to ignore immediate political impacts, solve the public awareness problem and impose radical solutions in a short time frame.

Although there is no "authentic" AE, there has been increasing scrutiny of various authoritarian or post-authoritarian regimes in recent years to understand the specific dynamics and political incentives of environmentalism in these states (Ahlers and Shen, 2018; Bruun, 2020; Eaton and Kostka, 2014; Han, 2015; Lo, 2015; Mao and Zhang, 2018). Based on these critical authors, this article considers authoritarian legitimation and regime security as a key feature of emerging state environmentalism in Vietnam.

2.1. Authoritarian legitimacy

There is a wide variety of authoritarian regimes, from military dictatorships to personalist authoritarian regimes (Geddes, 2003). The AE debate is mainly preoccupied with a distinct sub-form of authoritarianism, namely one-party autocracy, in which a small cadre of political elite dominates the centralized and non-participatory policy-making process. Nevertheless, the party-state must monitor public opinions and relies heavily on state propaganda to influence societal views and individuals' perceptions of government leadership (Chia, 2014). This is necessary because the ruling elite needs to secure its political legitimacy to ensure its continued existence (Kailitz and Stockemer, 2017). Being one of the facets of authoritarianism, environmental politics is profoundly shaped by how the authoritarian state solves the problem of authoritarian control, which means "the conflict between the authoritarian elites in power and the masses that are excluded from power" (Svolik, 2012, p. 9). In addition to the problem of authoritarian power-sharing, which refers to the internal conflicts within ruling elites and regime insiders (Svolik, 2012, p. 5), the problem of authoritarian control can affect regime security, that is, the legitimacy and resilience of regimes and leaders.

In highly centralized authoritarian states that govern through one-party rule, such as China and Vietnam, the formal political institutions, i.e., parties and legislatures, can mitigate some of the difficulties associated with authoritarian power-sharing. Formal rules related to consultation, division of labor, and consensus governance provide greater transparency, ensure compliance by members of a ruling elite and secure regime stability (Boix and Svolik, 2013; Svolik, 2012, p. 7). Yet, the ruling regime may face significant discontent from wider groups in society, be it economic elites, religious leaders or organized social movements (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007, p. 1281). To neutralize these threats, autocrats usually resort to either repression, or co-optation (Svolik, 2012).

The theoretical literature on AE has primarily focused on repressive, coercive governance. Yet, autocrats cannot always use violence to win popular support. Using force can be expensive and ineffective (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007, p. 1281), but more importantly, repression can

become a double-edged sword. As Svoblik (2012, p. 11) argues “[t]he very resources that enable a regime’s repressive agents to suppress its opposition also empower it to act against the regime itself.” For this reason, authoritarian governments often attempt to co-opt, especially when the regime relies on and benefits from the well-functioning economy. Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) and Gandhi (2008) argue that the threat of popular resistance pressures non-democratic rulers to provide incentives for people to cooperate with the regime by offering them policy concessions and distribution of spoils. They are further compelled to establish political institutions to formalize such rent-sharing as a legal norm.

Kailitz and Stockemer (2017, p. 341) find that the most resilient autocracies in the world have consistently achieved exceptional economic growth. Socio-economic performance have typically been used as an indicator of the proper exercise of power by the government (Hiep, 2012). The question of performance here refers not only to the regime’s pursuit of continued economic growth to maintain its legitimacy, but also, to the extent to which regime consciously invokes performance-based narratives, such as “material prosperity” and “security” (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017, p. 291), thereby justifying claims to the rule via discourse.

2.2. Environmental management and regime security

Alongside economic growth and public safety, and given the changing expectations of citizens as living standards rise, the performance-based legitimacy of one-party autocracies can now be challenged by the emerging environmental concerns. Rather than taking coercive measures to address these problems, authoritarian regimes may rely on rhetorical frames and narratives about performance as tools of co-optation to deal with public discontent.

Focusing on China as a model for an authoritarian party-state, a growing number of AE critics attribute emerging state environmentalism in part to growing public discontent and government’s attempts to maintain its political legitimacy (see Ahlers and Shen, 2018; Huang et al., 2020; Kostka and Zhang, 2018). Studies have also shown that the authorities have even used urgently perceived environmental problems as a pretext for implementing some of the more controversial measures (Ahlers and Shen, 2018; Chien et al., 2017). Arguably, popular perceptions of risk can indeed influence authoritarian policies, and the regime can use specific problem framings to legitimize policy action and facilitate compliance.

In this sense, it is vital to interrogate public and policy discourse on environmental and climate governance. Several scholars have demonstrated how climate change is increasingly presented as a security threat in authoritarian political discourse. For example, Sahu (2021) examines how Chinese policymakers began to portray climate change as a security threat to economic development and argues that the use of the security frame in political discourse can lead to a centralization of power and discursive change as more emergency measures are emphasized. However, climate and energy security policies consistently underscore issues important to the party-state, such as the need to secure access to energy, relegating the environmental dimension to the background (Trombetta, 2018). Similarly, in Vietnam, environmental protection is often linked to economic benefits and resource exploitation, both discursively and in terms of key legal provisions, while business interests often take precedence, hindering the effective implementation of environmental protection measures (Bruun, 2020; Carlitz and Povitkina, 2021). Hence, security frames and narratives have political dynamics and can play an important role in legitimizing and prioritizing policy issues within an authoritarian political system (Nyman and Zeng, 2016).

The security framework addresses a critical dimension of AE. Namely, it reveals that authoritarian governments may indeed address energy supply and economic development problems through climate policies. In this respect, the central government may face the dilemma of having to decide whether to make environmental management more

authoritarian to increase its effectiveness, while this step may restrict rapid economic growth (Lo, 2015). To address this dilemma, as Bruun (2020, p. 174) points out, the AE model “consistently pledges ecological improvements as a means of continued economic growth” and uses this discourse to secure regime legitimacy. Beeson (2010) has suggested that given environmental degradation and lower expectations for the trajectory of economic development, the likely outcome of AE would be an intensification of authoritarian rule. As Li and Shapiro (2020) note in the case of China, the state-led environmentalism has already had implications in areas other than the environment, leading to a centralization of political power and further suppression of rights and participation. Like China, the Vietnamese approach to environmentalism has also involved top-down socio-environmental management, in which the state has extended its control over society to prevent any spontaneous grassroots movement and to defend its main economic interests (Bruun, 2020; Bruun and Rubin, 2022). The environmental interventions may even be seen by the party-state as an “opportunity, or even a mandate for the state to consolidate control” (Li and Shapiro, 2020, pp. 37–38). Thus, faced with looming environmental problems, authoritarian leaders increasingly face a legitimacy crisis that leads them to embrace specific knowledge frames related to “security” and “economic growth” to ensure regime security and strengthen control over society. Against this backdrop, studying policy documents is critical to understanding how this knowledge informs specific authoritarian policies and practices.

3. Methods and materials

3.1. Case selection

There are several reasons for choosing Vietnam as a case study for this article. First, Vietnam represents a typical case for the analysis of one-party regimes in Asia (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Like Vietnam, the one-party communist regimes in China and Laos implemented economic and political reforms and shown resilience. However, the findings cannot simply be generalized.

Second, Vietnam has increasingly relied on comprehensive top-down social-ecological management to address its multiple environmental problems (Bruun, 2020). While the Chinese case has been well studied in the literature, Vietnam has received far less scholarly attention. Hence, this study makes an important contribution to the study of AE by systematically examining how the threat of climate change is articulated in Vietnamese policy discourse and how these discursive frames shape emerging state environmentalism.

3.2. Data and analysis

To understand how climate change is constructed as a security threat in the Vietnamese context, it is necessary to interrogate the policy discourse that produces such understanding. Policy discourse is conceptualized here as a particularly well-institutionalized set of knowledge structures produced through routinized practices through which certain realities are continuously reaffirmed (Hajer, 1995). Documents can have an important role to play in creating and maintaining a specific understanding of a policy problem such as climate change. Policy documents reveal organized forms of knowledge (Vink et al., 2013) that have emerged through complex administrative processes and at the intersection of international and local politics, policy, and science. Even if strategies do not make new policy proposals, they can still maintain “the specific idea of reality” being supported by key stakeholders or endorsed by the key actors (Hajer, 1995, pp. 55–56). Thus, they are central to understanding how security discourse is constructed and reproduced in Vietnamese climate policies.

The qualitative data material for this article draws on policy documents collected through online sources. The documents were gathered from official government websites (www.chinhphu.vn) and legal document platforms, such as LuatVietnam (www.luatvietnam.vn), Van Ban

Phap Luat (www.vanbanphapluat.co), and Thu Vien Phap Luat (www.thuvienvanbanphapluat.vn). Most of the papers analyzed are available both in Vietnamese and English, but the analysis was carried out in English using the official English translations of the documents.

The selected texts include documents that Vietnam detailed in *the updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)*, which form a policy framework for implementing greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets and adaptation to climate change (see Anon, 2020, pp. 4–5, 17–18). In total, 50 different documents were listed, most of which were adopted between 2008 and 2020, with just four documents adopted between 2006 and 2007. Several important overarching state-level policies were also included, namely *the 2006 Viet Nam's Present Foreign Policy, the 2012 National Strategy on Environment Protection, the 2012 Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy, the 2014 Industrial Development Strategy, the 2016–2020 and 2021–2025 Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plans*. A total of 55 primary texts, including government resolutions, laws, strategies, action plans, schemes, and programs, were analyzed. Because the texts differed in their structure and objectives, the degree of their technicality and the number of references to climate change also varied. Nonetheless, each text was examined, with particular attention paid to the national strategies and action plans, as they comprehensively represent the government's visions and ambitions.

The data analysis was performed using NVivo software (version 12 Pro) and followed a three-step coding strategy (Elliott, 2018; Richards, 2015). First, qualitative coding was conducted paragraph by paragraph to assign descriptive codes to the text, such as “climate change mitigation” or “water resource management.” Second, the codes were categorized into themes that emerged from descriptive coding and analytical reflection guided by the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). These included, for example, topics related to the security frame, such as “energy security” and “food security.” Finally, the coded texts were re-coded to identify further analytical detail by focusing on how the threat of climate change was understood, how security was constructed, and what policy priorities were emphasized. The next section presents the results of this analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Contextualizing climate change as a policy problem

The knowledge production on climate change as a policy problem and as a “threat” in Vietnam is deeply embedded in the country's broader socio-economic and political context. Over the past 30 years, Vietnam has experienced rapid economic growth accompanied by demographic and social change. The Doi Moi (renovation) economic reforms in the late 1980s, followed by Vietnam's integration into the world economy, have resulted in one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world (World Bank, 2016). Consequently, the country has been proclaimed “a major development success story” internationally (World Bank, 2016, p. 4). These reforms significantly strengthened the domestic legitimacy of the CPV, which in the late 1980s had fallen into a severe crisis due in part to difficult economic conditions (Hiep, 2012). In post-reform Vietnam, policymaking was guided primarily by economic considerations rather than ideology (Gainsborough, 2013). Accordingly, effective economic performance was established as a cornerstone of the government's moral authority (Hiep, 2012). The reforms also opened new avenues for Vietnamese scientists to network internationally, which the state strongly supported, as international cooperation in science and technology was considered critical for achieving industrialized nation status and development (Zink, 2013, pp. 45–55).

However, rapid industrialization and energy-intensive economic growth have had a detrimental effect on the natural environment. While it meant improved health, social services, and income for the population, industrialization caused unprecedented water, soil and air pollution, waste management problems, and ecosystem degradation (Schirmbeck, 2017). Moreover, as one of the countries most affected by

global climate change, Vietnam faces challenges related to increases in annual average temperature, changes in precipitation, increases in strong typhoons, frequent droughts, and sea level rise. According to national monitoring data for the last 60 years, climate extremes are recorded with higher intensity and frequency in Vietnam (Anon, 2020). The two main river deltas, the country's most populous economic and industrial centers, are particularly affected by these developments (Schirmbeck, 2017). Against this background, the international community and donor countries have shown great interest in Vietnam, putting pressure on the government to take climate risks seriously (Zink, 2013). These developments have contributed to climate change being placed on the political agenda in Vietnam.

Over the past fifteen years, Vietnamese policymakers have consistently declared climate change to be one of the greatest challenges facing humanity and a major threat to economic growth. International science-based predictions have been taken seriously, and the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have been frequently cited in policy papers to underscore the scientific basis of the problem. Findings about global climate change have been backed up by local experiences of changing temperatures, precipitation patterns, sea-level rise, and natural disasters. In 2007, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung initiated a process to develop the country's first climate policy – *the National Target Program to Respond to Climate Change* – by assigning it to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), which comprises Vietnam's leading climate scientists and meteorologists (Zink, 2013, p. 124). The target program, approved later in 2008, then assessed the potential impacts of climate change on Vietnam and identified specific vulnerabilities, noting that climate change would jeopardize economic development and have a dramatic impact on Vietnam's poverty reduction efforts. *Decision 158/2008/QĐ-TTg on approval of the National Target Program* clearly states that investment in climate change response is an important factor in ensuring sustainable development.

One of the main goals of the program was to produce local scientific knowledge for the development of action plans for specific ministries, sectors, and municipalities to respond to climate change in the short, and long term, and to integrate climate change response into strategies, development plans, normative documents, and laws. Vietnam has subsequently adopted and published numerous climate change mitigation and adaptation policies. These policy documents focus on strengthening the response to climate change, natural resource management, energy, transport, urban development, forestry, agriculture and other land use, and green growth.

4.2. Building legitimacy through climate policies

Environmental policymaking in Vietnam is considered highly hierarchical, with policies made at the central government level, often without adequate input or participation from lower-level governments or civil society organizations (Bruun, 2020; Karpouzoglou et al., 2019; Luu et al., 2022). Nevertheless, as the theoretical framework suggests, regime security may be affected by how authoritarian policies are perceived. In this regard, the discourse on climate change in Vietnam has a dual audience – international and local – with the international dimension also feeding into legitimacy discourses “at home.”

By adopting measures on climate change, Vietnam aimed to join the international community in efforts to mitigate global climate change. Policy papers present Vietnam as a responsible member of the global community, sharing its concerns and showing goodwill to contribute to addressing global challenges, including climate change. In the 2006 strategy paper *Viet Nam's Present Foreign Policy*, environmental pollution was presented as a common challenge and a global problem that cannot be solved by individual countries. The document notes that Vietnam's efforts clearly demonstrated its sense of responsibility “towards regional and international friends” and showed its support for the common aspiration of humankind, “peace, stability and development.” The country regularly participates in key international fora and conventions

on climate change. The MONRE is Vietnam's national focal point for the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement, and other related international commitments (MONRE, 2020). Vietnam submitted its *Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC)* to the UNFCCC Secretariat in 2015 and signed and approved the Paris Agreement in 2016. Since 2016, Vietnam also has had the *Plan for Implementation of the Paris Agreement*. In 2020, Vietnam was one of the first countries to submit the *updated NDC*. Vietnamese policymakers frequently refer to international agreements and emphasize that national policies perpetuate global climate and environmental governance goals, as in the case of the *2017 National Action Program REDD+*.

Vietnamese discourse not only defines the country's willingness to contribute to addressing global challenges, but also presents international cooperation on climate change as an opportunity to engage with key international actors and donors. As the country has achieved middle-income status, international cooperation is gradually turning towards "win-win" solutions. Vietnamese climate policy discourse seems to be preoccupied with strengthening international ties so that the Vietnamese economy can benefit from any international support for effectively responding to climate change. *The 2011 National Strategy on Climate Change* states that global, multilateral, and bilateral cooperation on climate change provides Vietnam with more opportunities to access emerging arrangements for financial assistance and technology transfer from developed countries at a time when aid is declining. According to the strategy, it further provides a political link to other states and organizations, which in turn can improve Vietnam's international and regional status.

In this sense, Vietnam generally embraces the climate-related frame and narratives that exist at the international level, particularly in the global aid and development community. The policy discourse strictly follows the UNFCCC's principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" and interprets it to mean that developing countries in general, and Vietnam in particular, should ensure a balance between climate change mitigation and socio-economic development. Vietnam guarantees effective implementation of climate change mitigation programs if it receives sufficient support in the form of funding and technology transfer from developed countries and other international sources. For example, the *2012 National Action Plan on Climate Change* states that climate change mitigation projects will be implemented in accordance with Vietnam's specific circumstances and appropriately with international support. Therefore, the classification of climate change as a policy problem is closely linked to its potential to mobilize international financial resources. As Zink (2013, p. 144) reports, policy authors in Vietnam regularly publish English translations of policy documents with the aim of engaging in dialogue with foreign actors. The international donor community has applauded Vietnam in the past for establishing a comprehensive climate policy framework (e.g., Schirmbeck, 2017). However, in the context of Vietnam's authoritarian governance, the policy content may matter less than its mere existence, as it can be easily discarded or modified depending on the circumstances required to generate new income streams from foreign actors and donors (Gainsborough, 2013, p. 151; Zink, 2013, p. 141).

The narrative of international engagement is also frequently used in the domestic media, reporting that Vietnam actively participates in international negotiations and meetings in which Vietnamese leaders address international bodies to discuss global challenges (e.g., Vietnam Law and Legal Forum Magazine, 2021a). This is to strengthen the state's position at both the international and national levels, possibly to avert an emerging environmental movement (Bruun, 2020). Although it can be difficult to strike this balance (see Koch and Weingart, 2016), the Vietnamese government manages to retain ownership of policymaking and accepts aid only after it is assured that donor actions are consistent with government policy (Bony-Cisternes, 2019). Cooperation with international actors is therefore exploited to strengthen national legitimacy.

The CPV often uses state policies and laws to construct the socialist state in Vietnam. These documents are seen as expressions of "agency of people's power" and are routinely communicated to the Vietnamese population through the state media (Thi Thuy Hang and Duy Anh, 2017, p. 309). These policies demonstrate that the CPV promotes people's collective interests and are ultimately evidence of effective performance, which forms the basis for the performance-based legitimacy of the authoritarian regime in Vietnam. Since the implementation of economic reforms, the CPV has shown great resilience, implying the authorities' success in controlling public discontent (Nguyen, 2016). The regime's stability now depends on maintaining public confidence through continued economic growth while addressing the new challenges posed by development, such as increasing energy demand, destruction of the natural environment, and pollution, potentially creating a dilemma for policymakers. All these challenges can be identified in climate policy discourses, with the most salient frames related to climate change as a security threat being safeguarding economic growth, natural resource security, water resource security, food security, energy supply security, and national security and defense. It can be argued that these frames represent an important position of the Vietnamese government.

4.3. Security discourse in climate policies

Security discourse in Vietnamese climate policies is primarily used to prioritize specific policy actions and construct a narrative on "effective management." According to the *2014 Law on Environmental Protection*, environmental security means ensuring that political and social stability and economic growth are not threatened by environmental events and trends. Such framing, establishes a strong connection between climate change, social security, and development, making climate change an inherent development and security problem. Active responses to climate change, natural resource management, and environmental protection are considered backgrounds for "planning the directions and policies of socio-economic development, ensuring national defense, security and social security", declares *2013 Resolution No.: 24-NQ/TW*. The *2012 Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy* stresses the need to "closely combine national defense and security with socio-economic development and environmental protection" to ensure security, social order, and stability for national construction and development. It emphasizes that people are at the center of sustainable development, and therefore it requires a "closely, properly and harmoniously" linking of economic growth with social development, natural resources and environmental protection, national security and defense, as well as social order and safety. The *2016 Plan for Implementation of the Paris Agreement* states that the goal of adaptation measures is to "reduce the adverse impact of climate change on the economy, maintain normal production activities, avoid risks caused by natural disasters and ensure food security, water security for communities."

Vietnam's emerging state environmentalism and its means of addressing climate change are closely tied to natural resource security. According to the *2013 Resolution No.: 24-NQ/TW*, natural resources are "national assets, the resources and natural capital particularly important for development of the country." This is especially true for the country's forestry sector, which has long been the target of various afforestation programs (see McElwee, 2016). These measures aim to reduce GHG emissions by increasing forest cover while safeguarding timber production and consumption, states the *2012 Viet Nam Green Growth Strategy*. Policymakers often conceptualize forests in terms of their economic and technical value (e.g., the *2017 Forestry Law*). Utilitarian views of forests are not uncommon and are deeply rooted in the socio-ecological management tradition of CPV (Bruun, 2020).

Moreover, sea level rise and climate-related natural disasters prompted policymakers in Vietnam to frame climate change as a threat to the country's water security. Water resources are seen as critical to Vietnam's development, especially as water management involves the construction of environmental and disaster management infrastructure,

irrigation and drainage systems, and hydropower plants. Vietnam's densely populated large river basins play a crucial role in securing the livelihoods of millions of citizens. According to *the 2012 Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy*, the government sees ensuring the safety of the dikes and reservoirs as a guarantee for the socio-economic development of many Vietnamese. In this context, flood response includes modernizing the observation system and forecasting technologies to secure timely warnings and forecast of climate extremes, as well as increasing search, rescue, recovery, and disease prevention capacities, as declared, for example, in *the 2011 National Strategy on Climate Change*.

Water security by default also impacts agriculture, which is an important foundation of the Vietnamese economy, especially in rural areas. About 80% of surface water in Vietnam is currently used for agriculture (ADB, 2020). In 2020, about 1/3 of the country's employed labor force aged 15 and over still worked in the agriculture, forestry, and fishery sector (General Statistics Office, 2021). The policymakers recognize that climate change threatens food security, interpreted as a reduction in cultivated land, especially rice fields, which is the most important food security crop in Vietnam. In 2021, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh affirmed in his speech at COP26 in Glasgow that food and water security and sustainable development are seriously affected by climate change and even threaten "the survival of many countries and communities" (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum Magazine, 2021a).

As discussed in the theoretical section, when important political-economic dynamics come into play, policymakers tend to engage in security discourse to legitimize and prioritize policy measures (Ahlers and Shen, 2018; Nyman and Zeng, 2016). Fortier and Tran (2013, p. 82) argue that climate change has been perceived as a threat to the CPV's core interest of "maintaining the globally integrated, neoliberal modernization," and has led authorities to focus on technical fixes. To meet growing population demand and ensure food and water security, Vietnam continues to rely heavily on modernization approaches in agriculture by committing to secure water sources for irrigation, seawall protection, increase in income per hectare of cultivated land, and spread of biotechnology application in the development of new crop varieties. Numerous policies, including *the 2012 Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy* and *the 2016–2020 and 2021–2025 Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plans*, aim to maintain agricultural land funds in all localities and rice paddy fields. Accordingly, improving the efficiency of agricultural production and reducing the proportion of the total labor force employed in agriculture has been a major priority of the government over the past decade.

Another vital feature of water security is the development of hydropower, which has long been the most important aspect of water management in Vietnam (Bruun and Rubin, 2022). The Vietnamese government considers dams as multipurpose projects that contribute to flood control, water supply for irrigation purposes, and power generation. At the same time, hydropower is considered a renewable energy source that can provide electricity for the country's socio-economic development, strengthen national energy security, and simultaneously contribute to climate change mitigation (Dao and Phuong, 2015; Lamb and Dao, 2017). Nevertheless, in maximizing hydropower production, negative environmental and social impacts have often not been adequately considered. According to Le (2015), the central authorities were forced to reconsider some 400 projects and readjust hydropower development plans when faced with public pressure and dissatisfaction expressed by scientists and the media. The government's move is noteworthy in that the authorities decided to co-opt even though the policy analysis shows that energy security has been identified as a top policy priority for Vietnam.

The energy security framework is well integrated into the climate-development-security discourse. Given Vietnam's development path, rising energy demand is increasingly the biggest domestic challenge. With a growing population and economic development, energy consumption has increased by 147% between 2010 and 2019 (IEA, 2022).

In *the 2020 orientation for the National Energy Development Strategy*, the rapid development of the energy sector is considered a crucial element for the achievement of the national industrialization and modernization goals. According to *the Viet Nam Green Growth Strategy (2012)*, Vietnam should develop various energy sources simultaneously to ensure national energy security. Currently, coal still accounts for about 50% of Vietnam's electricity generation, and coal power plant capacity is expected to double by 2030 (Climate Action Tracker, 2020). New coal power plants are planned as the government of Vietnam aims to strengthen domestic power generation and reduce dependence on energy imports (Anon, 2020).

However, according to *the 2016 National Power Development Plan*, renewable power generation is to be promoted to reduce dependence on imported coal-fired electricity, thereby contributing to national energy security, climate change mitigation, environmental protection, and sustainable socio-economic development. At COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, Vietnam sent a strong signal to global community when it joined a 190-strong coalition of countries and organizations committed to phasing out coal by 2040. It is not yet clear, however, how this will be accomplished; although local news coverage of the announcement included a comment by Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh stating that "[t]here will be a specific plan on reducing the use of fossil energy sources and hardly developing new coal-fired power plants" (VnExpress, 2021). Instead, Vietnam will focus on developing renewable and clean energy from wind, solar, biomass and waste.

The policy papers emphasize that the development of renewable energy in Vietnam should be in synergy with the achievement of the country's economic, social, and environmental goals. For example, *the 2015 Viet Nam Renewable Energy Development Strategy* stipulates that the development of renewable energy in primary energy supply should contribute to a better energy supply for rural areas. In *the 2012 Viet Nam Green Growth Strategy*, the development of the market for renewable energy technologies is seen as beneficial for promoting domestic production, which could manufacture the equipment needed for the renewable industry and provides related services in the country. Other documents, such as *the 2016 National Power Development Plan* and *the 2020 orientation for the National Energy Development Strategy*, identify the development of a competitive and transparent energy market in line with a socialist-oriented market economy as an important energy security priority. The Vietnamese authorities are thus committed to providing stable and affordable energy and are seeking strong investment in the development of power supply infrastructure. To achieve these objectives, the state aims to maintain its monopoly on electricity transmission networks.

Therefore, the government has linked climate change mitigation with the pursuit of energy independence under the term "energy security," which is most prevalent in climate-related policy documents. Pahl-Wostl (2019) shows how security has been defined and operationalized from the perspective of the water-energy-food nexus at the international level, and that the development of these concepts has integrated environmental concerns over time. In the case of Vietnam, while climate policy discussions include energy considerations, the energy security narrative has focused largely on securing energy supplies and paid little consideration to reducing carbon emissions. For example, the energy intensity of renewable energy technology manufacturing is not considered in policy documents. Thus, measures taken in the name of energy security mainly contribute to economic benefits and are an expression of the securing-the-development mindset of Vietnamese authorities.

Finally, the complex interrelationship between climate, development, and security is also linked to Vietnam's national defense. Ensuring national defense and security is a goal of almost every other climate policy, but this issue is particularly evident in *the 2018 Strategy for Sustainable Development of Viet Nam's Marine Economy*, where "disputes and disagreements" are mentioned with reference to the South China Sea. Although it is never explicitly stated where the threat might come

from, the assumption is that national climate policies benefit the nation's defense. In general, the defense of national sovereignty has always been used by the CPV to gain popular support. Although nationalist rhetoric has tended to be muted in the post-Doi Moi period, it still has been used as a source from which the CPV can draw additional legitimacy (Hiep, 2012). However, to avoid straining foreign relations authorities are cautious about sending explicit signals (Hiep, 2012). Still, at the international level, Vietnam strongly supports the UN Security Council's initiative to link climate change to security and has even given special priority to this issue for Vietnam (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum Magazine, 2021b). Thus, an important characteristic of Vietnam's discourse on climate, development, and security at the national level is ensuring that national policy narratives interact with international discourses in a meaningful way. The objective is to ensure that existing plans and policies are aligned with international climate policy goals while evoking certain narratives to strengthen the CPV's domestic position.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

This article explored authoritarian knowledge production regarding climate change risk perception in Vietnam. The analysis revealed that the CPV employs specific knowledge frames to overcome the problem of authoritarian control. With burgeoning environmental issues and growing concerns at the national and international levels putting pressure on the Vietnamese government to address climate change, security-related rhetorical frames are employed to construct an effective governance narrative. This narrative is at the heart of Vietnam's emerging AE, serving as a tool of co-optation that ultimately aims to ensure regime security by building performance-based legitimacy through discourse.

Previous research has found little "environmentalism" in real-world AE (Bruun, 2020). Instead, the utilitarian approach to nature and efforts to limit popular discontent is cited as the primary drivers of environmental policymaking. Similarly, this article has demonstrated that the CPV demands that all investments in climate change policy measures strictly pay off in economic benefits and repeatedly promises that environmental improvements further economic growth. The policies also portray the CPV as a crisis manager and an active member of international efforts against climate change, which gives the government more credibility and, thus, legitimacy. There are reasons to believe that increased pressure on the state has not yet resulted in comprehensive policy implementation in Vietnam (Ortmann, 2017; Schirmbeck, 2017). Regardless, it is unclear to what extent these policies reflect genuine environmental concern and to what extent their sole purpose is to create a narrative about the state's ability to cope with emergencies, avoid discontent among the international partners and prevent grassroots environmental movements.

From a broader perspective, the question is whether AE has the potential to be an alternative to environmentalism in democratic contexts. The AE literature suggests that authoritarian governments have an advantage in policy development. Admittedly, Vietnam's comprehensive policy framework is also evidence of this. The present analysis, within the methodological limits of a single country, shows that a closer look at climate policies reveals a somewhat different picture. If the only incentive for developing a climate policy is regime security and the priority remains economic growth, authoritarianism is unlikely to provide a solution to democracy's shortcomings. While stringent measures may be legitimized through discourse, the extent to which these policies solve climate-related emergencies remains doubtful.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Gvantsa Gverdtseteli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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