

# Effects of explicit atmospheric convection at high CO<sub>2</sub>

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**The effect of clouds on climate remains the largest uncertainty in climate change predictions, due to the inability of global climate models (GCMs) to resolve essential small-scale cloud and convection processes. We compare preindustrial and quadrupled CO<sub>2</sub> simulations between a conventional GCM in which convection is parameterized and a “superparameterized” model in which convection is explicitly simulated with a cloud-permitting model in each grid cell. We find that the global responses of the two models to increased CO<sub>2</sub> are broadly similar: both simulate ice-free Arctic summers, wintertime Arctic convection, and enhanced Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO) activity. Superparameterization produces significant differences at both CO<sub>2</sub> levels, including greater Arctic cloud cover, further reduced sea ice area at high CO<sub>2</sub>, and a stronger increase with CO<sub>2</sub> of the MJO.**

global warming | climate sensitivity | climate projections

Clouds play an important role in the climate system by reflecting incoming shortwave solar radiation (cooling), intercepting outgoing longwave radiation from the surface (warming), and influencing temperature and circulation. Their net radiative impact at the surface is about  $-20 \text{ W/m}^2$  cooling in the global mean, and regional impacts can approach  $\sim 40 \text{ W/m}^2$ . Understanding how clouds will respond to rising CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations is thus a critical issue in climate science. Progress has been complicated by the hundred-kilometer horizontal grid spacing of most global circulation models (GCMs), which remain unable to directly resolve the much smaller-scale turbulent motions involved in atmospheric moist convection, the corresponding cloud-formation processes, and their radiative effects (1, 2).

Current treatment of convection in global climate models relies on parameterizations and therefore suffers significant uncertainties, particularly relating to the representation of convection and clouds in a changing climate. Model results are sensitive to formulation and parameter choices in parameterized convection schemes. As a result, the magnitude of cloud feedbacks remains uncertain and inconsistently predicted by different models (2). An alternative approach, “superparameterization,” attempts to reduce the uncertainties of parameterized convection by running a higher resolution cloud-permitting model in a small domain within each grid cell of the atmospheric GCM, simulating the convection and cloud motions more explicitly (3, 4). Superparameterized GCMs have been shown to have a more realistic representation of convective variability, including the diurnal cycle (5) and intraseasonal variability such as the Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO) (6) and the Australian and Indian monsoons. They are beginning to be used to project future climate changes (7), although such work has been limited due to computational costs of about 100 times that of a standard GCM.

Here we present the results of running a global coupled ocean-atmosphere model [the Community Earth System Model (CESM; ref. 8)], and its superparameterized variant (SP-CESM; refs. 3, 4, 9) at a preindustrial CO<sub>2</sub> concentration, as well as at 4 times higher concentration. We run CESM to near steady state for both preindustrial CO<sub>2</sub> concentration and 4 times this value ( $\times 1\text{CO}_2$  and  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ ), and then run shorter simulations of SP-CESM starting from these steady states (*Materials and Methods*). We choose to

examine a rather significant (although not necessarily unrealistic)  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$  increase scenario because the equilibrium climate sensitivity of CESM to CO<sub>2</sub> doubling is on the low side of the warming range of 2.1–4.7 K seen in a recent model intercomparison (10), and to maximize the signal-to-noise ratio in the model response to superparameterization.

CESM and SP-CESM are nearly identical except for their convection and cloud representation and related physics (*Materials and Methods*), but they show significant differences in their simulations at  $\times 1$  and  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ . Concerns have been raised that convection and cloud parameterizations may lead to either artificial amplification or weakening of the response to CO<sub>2</sub> increase. We find the global climate responses of CESM and SP-CESM to be broadly similar, a reassuring result in terms of present projections that are based on parameterized models. However, we find significant regional differences for Arctic sea ice and the tropical Madden-Julian oscillation on which we focus in this paper. Specifically, we find that SP-CESM shows (i) significantly less sea ice at  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$  and a larger area reduction at  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ , and (ii) a stronger MJO at  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$  and a larger increase at  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ . We analyze these differences and discuss the implications for uncertainties in climate change projections.

The Arctic, and Arctic sea ice melting in particular, is strongly affected by the presence of low clouds that reduce solar heating in summer and by high clouds that induce warming in winter. Arctic sea ice has undergone rapid recent changes (11, 12), and is believed to have played a major role in past abrupt climate changes (13). Sea ice has a major impact on climate due to its high albedo and ability to insulate the atmosphere from the

## Significance

**The representation of clouds and convection has an enormous impact on simulation of the climate system. This study addresses concerns that conventional parameterizations may bias the response of climate models to increased greenhouse gases. The broadly similar response of two models with parameterized and nonparameterized convection and clouds suggests that state-of-the-art predictions, based on parameterized climate models, may not necessarily be strongly biased in either direction (too strong or too weak warming). At the same time, large differences in simulated tropical variability and Arctic sea ice area suggest that improvement in convection and cloud representations remains essential.**

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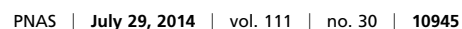
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Both models show increases in downward LW radiation at the surface at  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ , and the increases are particularly large during winter in regions of reduced sea ice fraction (Fig. 2 *B* and *F*). These ice-free regions also develop increased evaporation, water







Although the mechanism of the MJO is still not well understood, it is generally believed to be a “moisture mode” owing its existence to the interaction of convection with variations in humidity (41). A moist static energy (MSE) budget is therefore a useful diagnostic tool (42), and we apply it here to understand the mechanism behind MJO intensification. The column-integrated budget terms, including large-scale MSE advection, surface fluxes, and radiative heating, are calculated by averaging intraseasonal anomalies within active MJO periods identified by the EOF-based index cited above. The contribution  $F_\phi$  from each budget term to the growth of MSE anomalies is estimated from the vector projection of the composite budget term  $\phi(x, y)$  on the composite MSE anomaly  $h(x, y)$  given by (43)  $F_\phi = \iint \phi \cdot h \, dA / \iint h \cdot h \, dA$ . Changes in these contributions with warming suggest changes in physical processes that may explain the stronger MJO activity.

In SP-CESM, the composite MSE budgets show that the MJO at both  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$  and  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$  is principally supported by fluctuations in LW radiative heating, which covary with the MSE anomaly (Fig. S64). The budgets also indicate positive shifts in vertical advection and surface latent heat fluxes (LH) in response to the  $\text{CO}_2$  increase. A decomposition of the vertical advection term into climatological mean, intraseasonal, and residual components indicates that the shift is entirely due to a steeper mean MSE profile in the warmer climate (Fig. S6B). The vertical MSE profile is characterized by a midtropospheric minimum associated with the decrease in humidity away from the surface. The Clausius–Clapeyron relationship then implies that the MSE gradient between the midtroposphere and surface will increase with warming. This increase promotes MSE accumulation in regions of anomalous ascent, and MSE export in regions of descent. Because regions of ascent within the MJO are associated with high MSE, and descent with lower MSE, the change in vertical advection provides a positive feedback on MJO growth. This is consistent with the results of a previous study in which SP-community atmospheric model (CAM) was run in an aquaplanet configuration (27).

A similar decomposition of the contribution from surface latent heat flux shows that the flux increases approximately with Clausius–Clapeyron scaling, at 7%/K. However, because the MJO MSE anomalies increase faster than this, the projected forcing due to latent heat fluxes decreases in magnitude. Because the fluxes are out of phase with MSE at  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$ , ( $F_{LH} < 0$ ), the change in magnitude at  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$  appears as a positive shift, more favorable for MSE growth. We interpret this as a positive feedback on the stronger MJO rather than its primary cause, because the mechanism requires a greatly increased MSE anomaly to begin with.

Unfortunately, the significantly weaker MJO in CESM does not allow the construction of a composite MSE budget for that model, and therefore a direct comparison of budgets between the models is not possible. The amplification mechanism suggested above does not depend on the convection representation, and could account for the relative increase in MJO activity seen in CESM.

An interesting consequence of the stronger increase in MJO variability in SP-CESM is the development of a positive zonal wind anomaly at 100–300 mb in the tropics (Fig. S7, Center). This is consistent with a tendency toward superrotation (westerly wind at the Equator) due to enhanced wave excitation at the Equator, and was seen in previous simulations of warm climates (25, 27). Such a tendency was proposed as a possible explanation for the Pliocene (2–5 Mya) “permanent El Niño” state (44) as well as a possible response of a future climate (45, 46). These proposed consequences require a westerly response near the surface and not at high altitude as seen in Fig. S7, Center, but it is possible that the addition of convective momentum transport to SP-CESM would lead to some surface effect.

The models used here cannot reliably be used to study the stratospheric climate response due to insufficient resolution

there. However, we briefly note that SP-CESM shows a significant lack of wintertime cooling (i.e., warming relative to CESM; Fig. S7, Right) in the Arctic stratosphere, although such cooling is a robust expected consequence of greenhouse scenarios. This relative warming is consistent with changes in the eddy momentum flux [ $\Delta(u'v')$ ; Fig. S7, Left] and stratospheric jet weakening (Fig. S7, Center). Future work will examine the robustness of this result and possible connections to momentum fluxes from the stronger tropical variability found above (47).

## Discussion

We have performed a focused comparison of two coupled climate models, nearly identical except that one uses an explicit representation of convection and related processes, rather than a convective parameterization. At  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$ , we find the superparameterization produces much greater Arctic cloud coverage and a warmer and wetter Arctic lower troposphere, resulting in stronger downward longwave radiation, and a reduced, closer to observations, sea ice thickness. In the tropics, SP-CESM simulates stronger and more realistic MJO activity, but both models struggle to reproduce observed patterns of precipitation.

Despite their differences and deficiencies, both models respond to increased  $\text{CO}_2$  in qualitatively similar ways. These include increases in MJO activity, similar patterns of Arctic sea ice loss, increases in Arctic cloudiness, and the appearance of wintertime convection over ice-free regions as part of a positive convective cloud feedback. The overall similar response of the superparameterized model is reassuring in terms of our understanding of global climate sensitivity based on parameterized models. However, at the same time we find significant sensitivity of important regional climate features in the Arctic and tropics to the treatment of clouds and convection. This sensitivity makes it clear that continued attention must be focused on convection dynamics and new ways of representing it in future climate change studies.

## Materials and Methods

We use CESM1\_0\_2, with CAM4 atmospheric physics. The CAM was configured to run with the finite-volume dynamical core run at  $1.9 \times 2.5$  degree horizontal resolution with 26 vertical levels. The community land model (CLM) used the same horizontal grid. The parallel ocean program 2 ocean model (48) and the sea ice model were run on the  $\text{gx1v6}$  grid, at a nominal resolution of  $1^\circ$ . The CAM and CLM were run using a 15-min time step while the cloud-permitting models are integrated with a 20-s time step. Each CAM grid cell contains a 2D cloud-permitting model (CRM) run in a two-dimension configuration aligned in an east–west direction, with a total of 32 grid points and horizontal grid spacing of 4 km. The CRM of the SP-CESM also replaces the stratiform cloud parameterization of the CESM. Another important difference between the two models is that the radiation and turbulence calculations are done on the CRM’s grid in SP-CESM. Finally, although we showed that convection representation can make a significant difference, other cloud-formation processes such as microphysics parameterizations are, of course, also critical, and ice clouds in particular are different with the two-moment microphysics that is included in the recently released CAM5. As another caveat, we note that the Antarctic effective cooling of SP-CESM seen in Fig. S7, Right at around 200 mb occurs in a region and altitude where SP-CESM at  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$  further deviates from the observed (reanalysis) temperature field and is therefore questionable.

CESM runs at increased  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration are started from a steady state at  $\times 1\text{CO}_2$ , specifying a 1% increase in  $\text{CO}_2$  a year until  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$  is reached and then integrating 170 additional years until the model equilibrates to a large degree. SP-CESM integrations of 16 and 13 y are then started from the  $\times 1$  and  $\times 4$  CESM steady states, correspondingly. The figures shown are based on 5-y means at the end of each model run. The main results reported are robust at 5-y mean, even considering interannual model variability.

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# Supporting Information

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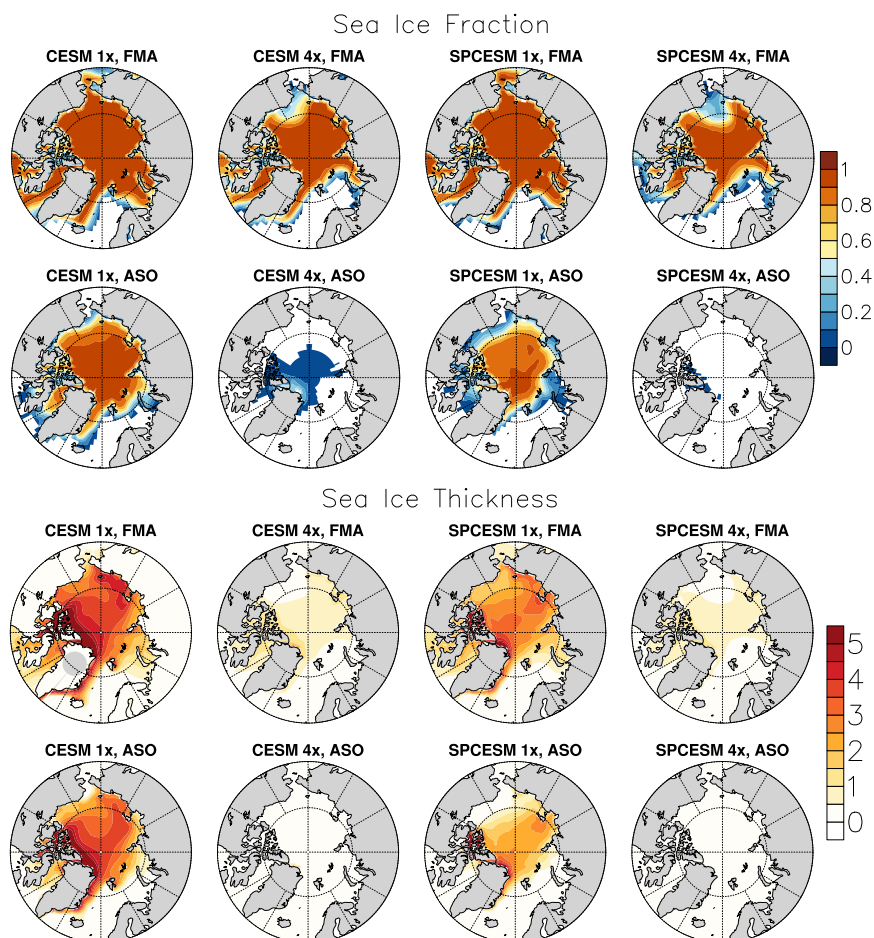


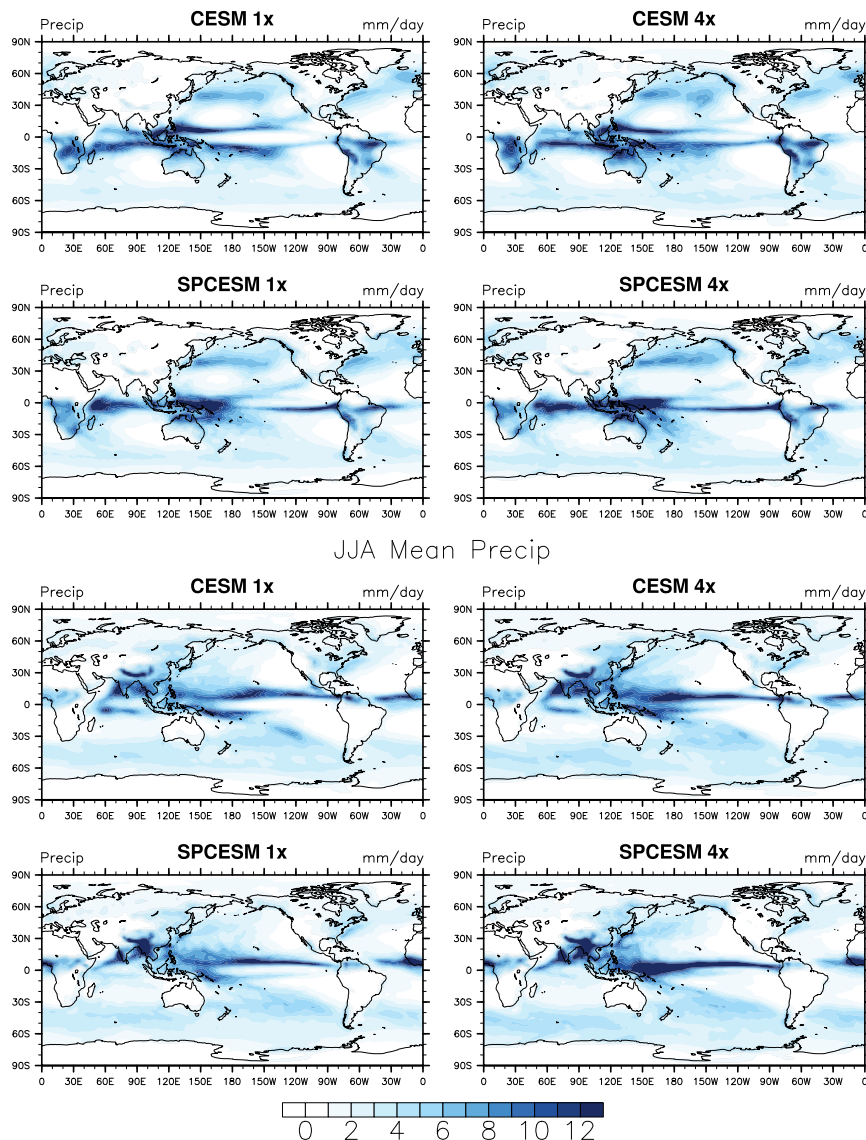
Fig. S1. Arctic sea ice fraction and thickness (in meters) for both models in winter (February–April) and summer (August–October) averaged over 5 y.







## DJF Mean Precip



**Fig. S5.** Mean precipitation in June–August and December–February, for CESM and SP-CESM at  $\times 1$  and  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ . CESM retains a double intertropical convergence zone pattern at  $\times 4\text{CO}_2$ , while SP-CESM shifts to a single rain band (1).

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