

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 1, No 2 (2020)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.26500](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.26500)

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To cite this article:

Fusiek, D. A. (2020). Rethinking Security: The Limits of the Traditional Concept of Security in a World of Non-Traditional Threats. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(2), 265–272. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.26500>

Rethinking Security: The Limits of the Traditional Concept of Security in a World of Non-Traditional Threats¹

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Abstract

This essay discusses the evolution of the modern conception of security and argues that there is a need for its expansion in order to tackle the rising non-traditional threats. Traditionally, the realist paradigm of national security has dominated the academic debate, while promoting a military and state-centric approach to “doing security”. Despite emergence of non-military and non-state security threats, the paradigm of national security is still figuring at the center of the modern state. However, the proliferation of non-traditional threats combined with the states’ inability to address them have troubled the academia and policymakers. This perception has been further reinforced by the latest Covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated not only the limitations of national security, but also the dangerous consequences of this new type of threat. As climate change effects become more tangible and destructive, it becomes evident that the coronavirus outbreak is another indication that the security landscape is not equipped to confront rising threats. Therefore, there is a need for the development of a more holistic security concept and the dismantlement of the preexisting strictly state-centric and military approaches.

Keywords: security; non-traditional threats.

Introduction

The sovereign state is a quintessential element of the theory and worldview of political scientists and the main source of political authority in the contemporary international system. Since its creation (there is no consensus when this occurred), it has dominated the field to such extent that it is practically impossible to perceive political order beyond or without it (Baumann et al. 1998). It has also been one of the most debated concepts in the last decades, particularly following the end of the Cold War when a series of new developments challenged the traditional perception of statehood and its boundaries. Forces such as globalization, cosmopolitanism, and the dramatic increase of multilateralism signaled the arrival of new forms of authority and political entities, which could transcend both statism and the “inherited” dualistic view of national and international (Bartelson,

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Fusiek, D. A. (2020). Rethinking Security: The Limits of the Traditional Concept of Security in a World of Non-Traditional Threats. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(2): 265-272. DOI: 10.12681/hapscpbs.26500

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2001). Not surprisingly scholars began to either refer to state and sovereignty as obsolete ideas (Jackson, 2003), talk about “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999), or even create utopian dreams of world society (Buzan, 2004).

Two decades after this initial “renaissance”, both scholar’s expectations and predictions have proven to “be way off” as the state has not only maintained but also further validated its authority and presence. During the last years, several states (mostly superpowers) have repeatedly shown the return of statism through the adoption of unilateral policies (e.g. Trump’s economic protectionism) and actions challenging the international order (e.g. Russian invasion of Crimea), even though the existence of limitations to sovereignty such as International Law or economic forces (Brown, 2010). This situation has created a paradox: whereas the modern political and academic discourse ceaselessly questions the authority of the state, it is still taken for granted and figures at the center of the political analysis.

As the century progresses, the new challenge to the concept of statehood has derived from the sector that has traditionally enjoyed the monopoly of power, security (Weber, 1945). The emergence of non-traditional security threats has revealed the weaknesses and limitations of state-centric security and the paradigm of national security. Both the intensification of these threats and the states’ inability to address them have troubled the academia and policymakers and highlighted the necessity of rethinking the concept of security. The latter has been further reinforced by the latest Covid-19 pandemic, where a microorganism demonstrated to be capable of spreading terror and “bringing governments to their knees”. This turn of events has validated the preexisting perception among scholars that the security landscape is not ready to absorb the rising threats.

However, as climate change effects become more tangible and destructive, it becomes evident that the Covid-19 is just an omen of similar future phenomena. The orthodox security frameworks have repeatedly failed to capture these types of threats, while the state has proved to have inadequate authority and force to tackle them, hence generating the question: Is there a need for a new conception of security? To answer the question, this brief analysis seeks to provide an overview of the evolution of the concept of security. Then, by using contemporary examples, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the paper investigates the limitations of the traditional concept of national security and concludes with some recommendations.

The emergence of state-centric security and the shift in the paradigm

The lack of a universal definition has made security “essentially a contested concept” (Buzan, 1983). In its more abstract form, it can be defined either as a negation of certain elements, such as the absence

of disease or external threats, or a conscious human process that leads to a secure state (Grizold, 1994: 39). The latter interpretation has set the foundations for both the traditional concept of security and its state-centric perception. The interconnection between the two notions was firstly distinguished by Thomas Hobbes, who attributed the creation of the state to the human attempt to achieve “security” by escaping the “state of nature” (Hobbes, 1929). Hobbes’s argument and the notion of “Leviathan” were then utilized by Max Weber to formulate a functioning definition of a state: a human community that has the absolute monopoly upon the legitimate use of physical force. To ensure its “right” and maintain its sovereignty the different human communities need to create a professional security bureaucracy (for example, border security, or military and law enforcement), which correspondingly leads to the creation of an organized political entity. In this manner, security does not only gain a territorial dimension (Diehl, 1996) but also becomes the “raison d’être” and the core responsibility of the state. This results in a “chicken and egg problem”: the sovereign state enjoys the monopoly to achieve security, while simultaneously security poses a prerequisite for its existence.

The state-legitimizing theories of Weber and Hobbes set the base for the realist construct of security and the political theory of Realism. In this approach, the state becomes the referent object and the sole actor in the international system. Due to the ongoing anarchy and the power dilemmas, security is instrumentalized to accomplish and preserve the nation’s interest within the context of a broad “balance of power” (Waltz, 1997). As security is almost tautological or interconnected with the notion of power, it takes a strictly national and military dimension (Keohane & Nye, 1977). The realist perception of “doing security” reached a peak during the Cold War, where the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, competed with each other and sought security through military build-ups and arms race, thus validating the premises of the realist theory (Mearsheimer, 2001). Furthermore, the creation of the field of Security Studies by two realists, Thomas Schelling and Henry Kissinger, and the dominance of Realism in International Relations resulted in the establishment of state-centric realist construct of security as the only theoretically acceptable framework (Rowley & Weldes, 2012).

The end of the Cold War brought new security threats, principally non-military, mostly posed by non-state actors that challenged both the role of the state and the traditional concept of security. In the case of the former, globalization, the technological revolution of the 1990s, and the growing global economic interdependence forced the state to yield some of its traditional powers to the collective political, economic, or security institutions (McFarlane, 2000). This shift combined with the increase of multilateral cooperation showed that the state was no longer the only unitary actor, hence “dealing a blow” to the preexisting traditional realist thinking (Morgan, 2007). As regards the latter, the emergence of non-military threats prompted the question of whether the state can deal with such

transnational security matters. The preexisting traditional concept of security and the practice of hierarchizing threats proved to be suffering from state-centrism and militarism (Lacy, 2005). Within this context, the realist construct of security became limited, while the parallel growth of political liberalism diminished its popularity.

The combination of these developments resulted in the deepening and widening of the construct of security (Lutterback, 2005) and the appearance of new theories and concepts. Scholars started to take greater interest either in the social construction of threats (Buzan, Waever & Wilde, 1998) or the context of conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1991), while policymakers began to acknowledge the limitations of the traditional view of security. For example, UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report induced the notion of human security to broaden the definition of global security. Therefore, all the signs were indicating that the end of the Cold War marked a shift in the study of security from a traditional paradigm to a broader and more comprehensive approach. However, the events of 9/11 put a halt to this positive momentum.

The rise of non-transnational threats and the coronavirus pandemic

The Twin Tower attack was a major event in the history of world politics with a tremendous impact on academia. The decision of the US to respond to the 9/11 attacks by physically eliminating the terrorist threat in Afghanistan and then Iraq proved that the traditional conception of national security was still the presiding one. It became apparent that the nation-state, although having some limitations, is the only societal organization that has both the capacity and the authority to ensure security (Buzan, 1984). Except for that, the failures of liberalism and intergovernmental organizations to tackle humanitarian crises (e.g. the Rwanda Civil War in 1994) further confirmed the perception that the nation-state is simply the best available institution (Fjader, 2014). As a result, scholars resumed the examination of serious threats through the scope of the state. Research in issues of "low politics" diminished and the academic debate on environmental or human security was marginalized. Yet, the recent multiplication and proliferation of "new security threats" has challenged this paradigm and caused the concern of policymakers and scholars.

Over the last decades, a combination of factors has shown that the state-centric security conception remains deeply problematic. The "US War on Terror" demonstrated "the inability of the national security paradigm to effectively deal with threats from non-state actors in a rapidly globalizing world" (Shani, Makoto & Pasha, 2007: 3). Despite the elimination of the visible sources of insurgencies like ISIS or Al-Qaeda, the persistence and adaptability of non-state actors have made it an extremely difficult issue to deal with. This complexity prompted different states to admit their limitations and

invest in intergovernmental structures (Argomaniz, 2011). Still, as the ISIS hits after 2015 has demonstrated, the centrality of the state in the intergovernmental solution contributes negatively to the efficiency of counterterrorism (Europol, 2019). The same applies to other transnational threats, such as organized crime or drug and human trafficking, which have instrumentalized “national gaps” or state corruption to continue their operation, regardless of the existence of global initiatives (Kemp, 2020).

Furthermore, the current threats to international security have no longer a military or national character, but instead, they are transnational and caused by primarily economic and social phenomena. The non-traditional security threats, such as climate change, irregular migration, and resource scarcity, pose a two-fold danger. While they directly lead to loss of life and violence, they also have downstream consequences and multiply existing vulnerabilities, leading indirectly to economic crises, social fragmentation, political instability, and conflict. Moreover, contrary to other threats, they cannot be tackled with organized military forces and other hard power resources as they cannot be visualized or personified to a visible, declared foe (Meijnders, Putten & Rood, 2017). An excellent example is climate change. Whereas it can impact the ecosystem and have a catastrophic dimension through natural disasters like the 2020 Australian wildfire, it can also facilitate violence by inducing other phenomena such as resource scarcity or drought (e.g. the case of the drought preceding the Syrian Civil War). Other examples are the European refugee crisis in 2015, which resulted in internal divisions in the EU and the rise of far-right violence, and the current Covid-19 pandemic. The latter has been especially interesting as it has been the biggest testament to the need of rethinking the conception of security and the hazard of rising non-traditional threats.

On the one hand, the divergent responses to Covid-19 from the state and the people have demonstrated the difficulties of upgrading a non-traditional and non-military threat to the status of a security matter. Despite the existence of direct losses, the referent object (the national population) could not portray an “invisible microorganism” as an existential threat that justifies the adoption of strict preventive policies such as the “lockdown measures”. This development can be attributed either to the long-established military character of traditional security, the restrictive framing of the national security paradigm, or the lack of preexisting experience of the audience with a similar issue (Resende & Budryte, 2013). To tackle this problem, the securitizing actors, such as state officials and presidents, attempted to personify the virus and elevate it to the level of an existential threat by using specific rhetoric. For example, Donald Trump compared Covid-19 with Pearl Harbor and September 11 attacks (BBC, 2020), while the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis chose a war analogy to mobilize people to stay home (Kathimerini, 2020). Nonetheless, as the experiences of the first wave

have shown, the speech act by itself is not enough to convince the audience and characterize the danger as a threat (Sears, 2020).

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic showed that the downstream consequences of non-traditional threats are not only extremely dangerous but also very difficult to tackle by the state. Although having adopted protective measures to lessen the virus fatalities, the state did not manage to confront the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic and ensure both the health safety and economic well-being of its referent object (IPSOS, 2020). This hierarchization of threats, characteristic of national and realist conception of security, resulted not only in a collision of interests and values between the referent object and securitizing actor but also in the deterioration of the preexisting issues. Specifically, a recent UN report has found out that the COVID-19 is reversing decades of progress on poverty, healthcare, and education (UN, 2020), while the rising number of demonstrations all over Europe against the lockdown measures are great manifestations of the growing population's unrest. Apart from that, another byproduct of the pandemic was also the worsening of human rights all over the world as numerous politicians exploited the "state of emergency" to seize more power and promote their political agendas (The Economist, 2020).

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the evolution of the modern conception of security and argued that there is a need for its expansion. Traditionally, the realist paradigm of national security has dominated the academic debate and pushed the agenda towards a military and state-centric approach to "doing security". However, the proliferation and multiplication of non-traditional threats, such as economic collapses, climate change, and terrorism have revealed that the preexisting traditional conception of security is gravely flawed and self-restrictive. This perception has been further validated by the current pandemic that showed not only the limitations of national security but also the dangers of this new type of threat. The national governments were not always able to securitize efficiently an invisible microorganism and address all the security concerns of its referent object, hence leading to social unrest and the deterioration of already existing problems.

For this reason, there is a need for the development of a more holistic concept. The expansion of the scope of security convoys its own set of problems, but the nature of the contemporary threats has demonstrated that is no longer enough to define security as the absence of conflict. On the contrary, it could prove more beneficial to view it as a public good in a similar manner to Richard Ullman (1983). On top of that, the application of a strictly national and military lens to the management and analysis of non-traditional threats should be dismantled as it has no merit for both political governance

and research. In lieu, researchers should encompass human wellbeing factors into their analytical doctrines, while policymakers should be open and promote more preventive and non-conventional security policies on the domestic and international level. Moreover, global cooperation is also crucial in addressing and administering non-traditional threats, since their effects transcend the authority and capacity of the state. In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic manifested the economic and political benefits of multilateral endeavors in the handling of transnational crises (e.g. EU recovery fund). Finally, it is important to view the current pandemic as a cautionary tale on the hazards of non-traditional threats to avoid similar future scenarios.

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