**International Security**

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### Whilst security is the most fundamental of all political goals and personal desires it is a condition that, in practise, is difficult to attain or advance, in large part because it is inherently relative, subjective and multi-faceted. The idea of ‘international security’ in political parlance and practise, reflects this in assuming that security at an individual, social or national level is, to some degree, determined by events and political interactions external to a given country. This ‘internationalization’ of security has advanced in line with the onset of globalization and the related changes that occurred to the international political landscape particularly after the ending of the Cold War. However, this internationalization has also come to be accompanied by much greater contestation over what the political pursuit of security actually means.

### From almost any ideological or analytical perspective, keeping people secure must be a primary political task, but precisely how this can best be achieved has become hugely contested. What is it that should be secured and who is it that should be responsible for seeking to do this? For most of us our instinctive response to these twin questions is: ‘our country’ and ‘our government’. This is a reflection of the dominance of the notion of ‘national security’ in the politics of a large swathe of the world. From the genesis of the concept of sovereignty in the 17th Century to the rise of ‘total wars’, pitting whole societies into combat with each other in the 20th Century, we have come to depend on our governments and consider their primary political task to be to protect us from danger and harm. We expect other things from our governments, like education and an expanding economy, but without being secure against invader or criminal attack these are not provisions we can fully enjoy. However, for many people around the world national security is not a route to personal security and may even be the primary source of their insecurity. The defence of ‘their’ country may undermine their own security and their government may be their chief source of threat, rather than protection. Desperate migrants stuck in limbo trying to cross the Mediterranean to flee conflict in Syria, Iraq or Eritrea to reach the security of the European Union are rendered insecure by the pursuit of national security by governments, in both their countries of emigration and potential immigration. Hence, for some ‘security’ is a political goal that needs to be re-thought in ways that move beyond the assumptions underpinning the concepts of sovereignty and the social contract of a government protecting its citizens and become more international and multi-faceted. For others, though, it is unnecessary, naïve and even dangerous to risk diluting the concepts of sovereignty and security since globalization is actually increasing our dependence on our governments to protect us from terrorists, international criminals and the varied consequences of wars fought in other parts of the world (such as mass migrant flows).

### Globalization has led to internal political issues being increasingly externalized and external political issues being increasingly internalized. Traditionally domestic policy concerns, like health and human rights, are more prominent than ever on the global political agenda and events occurring in other states, such as disasters or massacres, are more often than ever deemed to be of political significance for people not personally affected. In light of these changes, and also the reduced prevalence of inter-state war, it has become a matter of contention amongst theorists of International Relations whether the act of prioritizing certain issues as matter of security should maintain the traditional emphasis on military threats to the security of states or widen its focus. Alternative perspectives have argued increasingly that the discipline should either: i)***Widen*-** extend its reach to include non-military threats to states and, perhaps, other actors or, ii) ***Deepen*** (as well as widen)**-** go further and bring within its remit the security of all actors and people in relation to a range of threats, both military and non-military.

**Traditional approaches to International Security**

In the 1940s the twin concepts of ‘national interest’ and ‘national security’ took centre stage in both academic and real world international relations as the Realist approach emerged as a counter to the more multi-lateralist Liberal *Idealism* of the 1930s (epitomized by the open diplomacy and legalism of the League of Nations system). At the close of the Second World War Realism was in the ascendancy since the application of force had proved its worth in curbing aggression and restoring order in Europe and Asia after the League of Nations, international law and the appeasement of aggressors had comprehensively failed to keep the peace. In addition, the total war of World War Two and the ‘total phoney war’ of the Cold War, whereby whole populations were threatened by state quarrels in ways not seen before, bound individuals to the fates of their governments like never before. The scale of the threat posed by nuclear war in the second half of the twentieth century served to weld the security of individual people to that of their governments. The state would assume the responsibility for protecting its citizens and demand their loyalty in return in a strengthened version of the Social Contract relationship articulated by political philosophers such as Hobbes from the seventeenth century. Hobbes’ advocacy of the need for the *Leviathan* (meaning a strong state) to save individuals from the dangerous anarchy that would otherwise result from the pursuit of their own selfish interests was a major influence on Realists like Hans Morgenthau though, in the mid twentieth century, the anarchy was the international state system and the dangers came, to a greater extent than ever before, from other states. Traditional notions of national security can still take ‘internationalized’ dimensions, of course, if the national interest is considered to be served by taking part in an international war to expand influence or restore a balance of power, as has happened throughout history. Hence the Realist approach to International Relations represented a revival of the understanding that the state was crucial to securing the lives of its citizens in a different guise. This assumption is well-established and deeply embedded in most countries. If you took a course in Security Studies before the 1990s you would have studied matters of military defence and then and still today if you were about to listen to a security correspondent on the TV news you would anticipate a story relating to war, diplomacy, terrorism or arms control with relevance to your country.

**Widened approaches to International Security**

More internationalized approaches to conceptualizing security gained ground in the 1990s when the ending of the Cold War seemed, to many statesmen, academics and members of the general public, to herald a new era of international politics. In this ‘new world order’ the threat of global nuclear Armageddon apparently had subsided, allowing previously marginalized issues to emerge from the shadow of superpower rivalry and register on the international political agenda. Security ‘wideners’, including some Realists, came to accept that non-military issues could become ‘securitized’ and hence be privileged with ‘national security’ status. Indeed, many governments have come to take a widened approach to security since the 1990s. The US, for example, have led international wars against drugs (in Colombia and Panama) and wars for human rights (such as in Somalia or Kosovo) as well as those of the War Against Terror. President Bush Junior, hardly renowned as a multilateralist liberal, in 2004 launched the biggest ever international health programme to tackle AIDS in Africa, recognizing that this would be self-serving as well as altruistic given the transnational spread of the disease and its capacity to destabilize African states. Many other examples of security widening can also be found in the politics of international organizations. In 2000 the UN Security Council passed a Resolution on a non-military issue for the first time when it debated the global HIV/AIDS pandemic and, five years later, NATO led international relief operations after the Pakistan earthquakes, a scenario barely conceivable before the 1990s.

Widening security, then, is a conceptual exercise but often as a corollary, also a geographical one. Emergency domestic policy can be initiated on non-military threats like epidemics, crime syndicates and disasters but since such issues have become increasingly transnational this is unlikely to be a sufficient response. This more expansive interpretation of security has found many critics amongst traditional Realists, not shaken from their belief in maintaining a narrower focus by the ending of the Cold War. Traditionalists fear that widening the definition of security risks rendering the concept redundant by making it too all-encompassing and diluting the important task of appraising military threats and inter-state conflict. Underlying this fear is the belief of many Realists that military threats are actually more apparent in a post Cold War world devoid of that traditional guarantor of state security the military balance of power, seen to have kept a lid on many regional conflicts.

**Deepened approaches to International Security**

Whilst the notion of widening security divides Realists many in the rival Liberal, Critical Theory and Social Constructivist camps of IR have come to argue for an additional deepening of the concept through the embrace of the concept of ‘human security’. Human security reasons that the chief *referent objects* of security should not be states but the individual people of which they are comprised. For these ‘deepeners’ an issue can be deemed to be a matter of security even it is non-military in nature and not a threat at the state level. For human security advocates if people, be they government ministers or private individuals, perceive an issue to threaten their lives in some way and respond politically to this then that issue should be deemed to be a *security* issue. In this view security is considered to have lost its real meaning and come to be defined in International Relations solely as noun synonymous with ‘military defence’ rather than as an adjective or a value. The human part of a human condition had been lost and the term has become synonymous with *realpolitik*, the interests of the state. Military might and the application of the ‘national interest’, certainly, can secure lives but it can also imperil them if people are judged to be contrary to or expendable in the pursuit of those interests. Additionally, human lives can be imperilled by a range of issues other than military ones. Deepeners of security contend that military conflicts are not now and never have been the only threats that face states, people and the world as a whole. Throughout history people have been killed by things other than soldiers and weapons and states have been weakened or destroyed by things other than military conflict.

It should be noted, though, that human security itself is a contested concept with more and less expansive versions having come to be employed in both academic and political discourse. A narrow- ‘freedom from fear’- version of human security concentrating on direct and deliberate violent threats, excluding less directly human-caused forms of insecurity like diseases and disasters, has found favour with the Canadian government in recent years. In contrast, a wider- ‘freedom from want’ version, which considers any issue which is directly or indirectly life threatening to be a matter of security has been endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Japanese government.

**Contesting the nature of International Security**

The traditional, Realist way of framing security presupposes that military issues (and certain economic issues for Neo-realists) are security issues and as such must be prioritized by governments above other ‘low politics’ issues, important though these might be. In addition, for Realists, globalization and the end of the Cold War have not changed this reality. The absence of a mutually-deterring nuclear ‘balance of terror’ between the US and USSR has allowed previously-contained national rivalries to erupt in the Balkans, Caucuses and Ukraine and created dangerous power vacuums in failed states such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Libya. From the geographically and conceptually ‘narrow’ way of interpreting the concept the widening or deepening of security represents an unwelcome distraction from the still vital sovereign task of safeguarding the country against the perennial threat posed by expansionist statesmen and the growing threats associated with terror networks.

For human security deepeners it is an indication of how the study of security in International Relations has become skewed over time that the issue most associated with the discipline is actually a comparatively minor threat to most people in the world. Real world ir mirrors this and most governments do tend to be somewhat Realist in their foreign policies and this high-politics / low politics distinction is evident in the higher level of state expenditure typically allocated to the achievement of military security as opposed to other issue areas. The lives of far more people in today’s world, however, are imperilled by disease, disasters and human rights abuses than by terrorist and conventional military attacks. Throughout the total war era of the Twentieth century a case could be made that the security of individuals was inextricably tied up with that of their states’ (at least in some of the world) but deepeners contend that that era has now passed into history.

The security of governments does not equate with the security of the people they are meant to represent and protect. This has already been acknowledged by governments in sanctioning the development of global human rights law and is still evident in the existence of global systemic failings such as the widespread persistence of hunger and treatable diseases in a world with sufficient food and medical capability to counter them. It is perfectly natural to give priority to security over the other values since it is a precondition for realizing their allocation. If security is considered from the perspective of individual people, however, issues are less easily compartmentalized. Many issues of state economic gain, such as the altering the terms of international trade, are security matters for people in other states forced into poverty by the change. The state protection of food supplies in already food-secure Northern countries, for example, enriches some of their own people whilst rendering insecure millions in the Global South. State altruism exists in the world (such as in the provision of food aid in response to famines), as do some limitations to the pursuit of economic gain, but not to the same prominence as in the domestic politics of states where individual people are empowered with votes and / or rights of citizenship. Individual security is recognized in democratic states as overriding other values (at least most of the time) as is evidenced by health and safety laws restricting business activities and ‘social security’ laws. In global politics, though, issues of life and death frequently are not treated as priorities because they do not coincide with state gain or security.

Widening security is less utopian and more straightforward than deepening and has made a real world impact, but this does not mean that it represents a compromise position between national and human security approaches and it is criticized from either flank. For traditionalists widening national security is an unnecessary dilution (albeit less ‘watery’ than deepening). For deepeners the problematic logic of the national interest and the over-prioritization of high politics is not really challenged by widening. Military defence is still being prioritized and security still being defined as a very specific noun rather than as an adjective. The tendency has been, on the one hand, to select non-military issues which military forces can help deal with, such as fighting drugs barons abroad or assisting in civil emergency operations. On the other hand, non-military problems have sometimes been securitized on the basis that they have domestic military repercussions. Issues such as AIDS or environmental degradation in distant countries may de-stabilize regional balances of power and trigger military conflict into which the onlooking government may be drawn into or affected in some capacity. However, the political practice of widening security has sometimes proved counter to the interests of the people most affected by the issue due to a clumsy militarization of tasks previously performed by more appropriate personnel. Recent post-conflict ‘nation-building’ exercises in Afghanistan and Iraq have been notable for a militarization of development projects, with remaining armed forces being redeployed to reconstruction tasks and ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the locals. Such ‘humanitarian’ roles may have some beneficial results for local populations but are, of course, ultimately driven by military expediency rather than human security. In addition, as is evidenced by the evolution of domestic health, safety, environmental or crime policies in most developed countries, keeping people secure is often about the use of proactive, long-term measures to address vulnerability, rather than dramatic reactions after a crisis has unfolded. Widening security is more pragmatic and achievable than deepening in a sovereign state system but can still be argued often to be contrary to the attainment of either (or both) human and national security.

**Conclusions**

The notion that the pursuit of security has become more of an international concern over time is not really contentious but the centrality of the sovereign state in this pursuit has become far more controversial. This increased contention over the meaning of security mirrors the wider political debates that have arisen concerning the onset of globalization. For some the social and economic world is changing so profoundly that the political world needs to follow suit and evolve away from a sovereign state system we have inhabited since the middle of the 17th century no longer fit for purpose. For others, though, globalization should not herald a new post-sovereign era and, if anything, ought to reinforce our attachment to our sovereign protectors. Whilst academic debates on ontology (the meaning of concepts) can- often rightly- be viewed as arcane and irrelevant to most people’s lives, how security is conceptualized is important to all because it influences political practise and the prioritization of issues. Determining how people’s lives can best be secured is complex and contested but, nevertheless, from almost any perspective remains the most fundamental of all political concerns.

**Suggested Readings**

P.Hough (2013) *Understanding Global Security* (Abingdon: Routledge)

C. Hughes & Y.M. Lai (2011) *Security Studies. A Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge)