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Security Studies

An Introduction¹

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Security matters. It is impossible to make sense of world politics without reference to it. Every day, people somewhere in the world are killed, starved, tortured, raped, impoverished, imprisoned, displaced, or denied education in the name of security. The concept saturates contemporary societies all around the world: it litters the speeches of politicians and pundits; newspaper columns and radio waves are full of it; and images of security and insecurity flash across our television screens and the internet almost constantly. All this makes security a fascinating, often deadly, but always important topic.

But what does this word mean and how should it be studied? For some analysts, security is like beauty: a subjective and elastic term, meaning exactly what the subject in question says it means; neither more nor less. In the more technical language of social science, security is often referred to as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (see Gallie 1956), one for which, by definition, there can be no consensus as to its meaning. While in one sense this is certainly true – security undoubtedly means different things to different people – at an abstract level, most scholars within International Relations (IR) work with a definition of security that involves the alleviation of threats to cherished values.

Defined in this way, security is unavoidably political; that is, it plays a vital role in deciding who gets what, when, and how in world politics (Lasswell 1936). Security studies can thus never be solely an intellectual pursuit because it is stimulated in large part by the impulse to achieve security for ‘real people in real places’ (see Booth 2007). This involves interpreting the past (specifically how different groups thought about and practised security), understanding the present, and trying to influence the future. As such, the concept of security has been compared to a trump-card in the struggle over the allocation of resources.

Think, for example, of the often huge discrepancies in the size of budgets that governments around the world devote to ministries engaged in ‘security’ as opposed to, say, ‘development’ or ‘health’ or ‘education’. An extreme example of prioritizing regime security would be the case of Zaire during President Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule (1965–1997). For much of this period the only thing that the Zairean state provided its people with was an ill-disciplined and predatory military. In contrast, Mobutu’s government spent almost nothing on public health and education services. Security is therefore ‘a powerful political tool in claiming attention for priority items in the competition for government attention. It also helps establish a consciousness of the importance of the issues so labelled in the minds of the population at large’ (Buzan 1991: 370). Consequently, it matters a great deal who gets to decide what security means, what issues make it on to security agendas, how those issues should be dealt with, and, crucially, what happens when different visions of security collide. This is the stuff of security studies and the subject matter of this book.

Before moving to the substantive chapters in this volume, this introductory chapter does three things. First, it provides a brief overview of how the field of security studies has developed. Second, it discusses four central questions which help delineate the contours of the field as it exists today. Finally, it explains what follows in the rest of this book.

What is security studies? A very short overview

As you will see throughout this book, there are many different ways to think about security; and hence security studies. Rather than adopt and defend one of these positions, the aim of this textbook is to provide you with an overview of the different perspectives, concepts, institutions and challenges that exercise the contemporary field of security studies. Consequently, not everyone agrees that all of the issues discussed in this book should be classified as part of security studies. The approach adopted here, however, is not to place rigid boundaries around the field. Instead, security studies is understood as an area of inquiry focused around a set of basic but fundamental questions; the answers to which have changed, and will continue to change over time.

Not surprisingly, security has been studied and fought over for as long as there have been human societies. As any study of the word’s etymology will show, security has meant very different things to people depending on their time and place in human history (Rothschild 1995). But as the subject of professional academic inquiry security studies is usually thought of as a relatively recent and largely Anglo-American invention that came to prominence after the Second World War (see Booth 1997, McSweeney 1999: Part 1). In this version – and it is just one, albeit popular version – of the field’s history, security studies is understood as one of the most important subfields of academic IR, the other areas usually being defined as international history, international theory, international law, international political economy and area studies. Although it was given different labels in different places (National

Security Studies was preferred in the USA while Strategic Studies was a common epithet in the UK), there was general agreement that IR was the subfield's rightful disciplinary home.

According to some analysts, the field enjoyed its 'golden age' during the 1950s and 1960s when civilian strategists enjoyed relatively close connections with Western governments and their foreign and security policies (see Garnett 1970). 'During this golden age,' as Lawrence Freedman (1998: 51) noted, 'Western governments found that they could rely on academic institutions for conceptual innovation, hard research, practical proposals, and, eventually, willing recruits for the bureaucracy. Standards were set for relevance and influence that would prove difficult to sustain.' In particular, security analysts busied themselves devising theories of nuclear deterrence (and nuclear war-fighting), developing systems analysis related to the structure of armed forces and resource allocation, and refining the tools of crisis management.

Particularly as it appeared during the Cold War, the dominant approach within security studies may be crudely summarized as advocating political realism and being preoccupied with the four Ss of states, strategy, science and the status quo. It was focused on *states* inasmuch as they were considered (somewhat tautologically) to be both the most important agents and referents of security in international politics. It was about *strategy* inasmuch as the core intellectual and practical concerns revolved around devising the best means of employing the threat and use of military force. It aspired to be *scientific* inasmuch as to count as authentic, objective knowledge, as opposed to mere opinion, analysts were expected to adopt methods that aped the natural, harder sciences such as physics and chemistry. Only by approaching the study of security in a scientific manner could analysts hope to build a reliable bank of knowledge about international politics on which to base specific policies. Finally, traditional security studies reflected an implicit and conservative concern to preserve the *status quo* inasmuch as the great powers and the majority of academics who worked within them understood security policies as preventing radical and revolutionary change within international society.

Although dissenting voices had always been present they did not make a great deal of intellectual or practical headway during the Cold War. Arguably the most prominent among them came from scholars engaged in peace research and those who focused on the security predicament of peoples and states in the so-called 'third world' (for more detail see Thomas 1987, Barash 1999). However, a key development within the academic mainstream of security studies occurred in 1983 with the publication of Barry Buzan's book *People, States and Fear* (see also Ullman 1983). This book fundamentally undermined at least two of the four Ss of traditional security studies. In particular, Buzan argued persuasively that security was not just about states but related to all human collectivities; nor could it be confined to an 'inherently inadequate' focus on military force. Instead, Buzan developed a framework in which he argued that the security of human collectivities (not just states) was affected by factors in five major sectors, each of which had its own focal point and way of ordering priorities. The five sectors were:

- *Military*: concerned with the interplay between the armed offensive and defensive capabilities of states and states' perceptions of each other's intentions. Buzan's preference was that the study of military security should be seen as one subset of security studies and referred to as strategic studies in order to avoid unnecessary confusion (see Buzan 1987).
- *Political*: focused on the organizational stability of states, systems of government and the ideologies that give them their legitimacy.
- *Economic*: revolved around access to the resources, finance and markets necessary to sustain acceptable levels of welfare and state power.
- *Societal*: centred on the sustainability and evolution of traditional patterns of language, culture, and religious and national identity and custom.
- *Environmental*: concerned with the maintenance of the local and the planetary biosphere as the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend.

Of course, there were limitations to Buzan's framework, not least the lack of attention paid to the gendered dimensions of security and the philosophical foundations of the field, particularly its dominant epistemology. As a consequence, Buzan's book did far less to disrupt the traditional focus on scientific methods or concerns to preserve the international status quo. Nevertheless, the considerably revised and expanded second edition of *People, States and Fear*, published in 1991, provided a timely way of thinking about security after the Cold War that effectively challenged the field's preoccupation with military force and rightly attempted to place such issues within their political, social, economic and environmental context.

Despite such changes, from today's vantage point, there are several problems with continuing to think of security studies as a subfield of IR – even a vastly broadened one. First of all, it is clear that inter-state relations are just one, albeit an important, aspect of the security dynamics that characterize contemporary world politics. States are not the only important actors, nor are they the only important referent objects for security. Second, there are some good intellectual reasons why security studies can no longer afford to live in IR's disciplinary shadow. Not least is the fact that IR remains an enterprise dominated by Anglo-American men where the orthodoxy remains wedded to the tradition of political realism (see Hoffman 1977, Smith 2000). More specifically, and not surprisingly given its origins, traditional security studies stands accused of being written largely by Westerners and for Western governments (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). What this means is that the questions, issues and ways of thinking traditionally considered most important within the field were neither neutral nor natural but were, as Robert Cox famously put it, always 'for someone and for some purpose' (Cox 1981).

In addition, studying the traditional canons of IR may not be the best preparation for a student whose primary interest is understanding security dynamics in contemporary world politics. Today's security problems require

analysis and solutions that IR cannot provide alone. Students should therefore look for insights in a wide variety of disciplines, and not only those within the humanities or social sciences. For example, analysing issues related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) requires a degree of scientific and technical knowledge, understanding the causes of terrorism will involve a psychological dimension, assessing health risks requires some access to medical expertise, understanding environmental degradation involves engaging with biology and environmental history, while combating transnational crime will necessarily involve a close relationship with criminology. We therefore need to think very carefully about who the real ‘security’ experts are in world politics and where we might find them.

In sum, while security studies has its professional roots in the discipline of IR, today’s world poses challenges that will require students to engage with topics and sources of knowledge traditionally considered well beyond the IR pale. As a consequence, it is unhelpful to think of security studies as just a subfield of IR. Instead, this book begins from the assumption that security studies is better understood as an area of inquiry revolving around a set of core questions.

Defining a field of inquiry: four fundamental questions

If we think about security studies as a field of inquiry, arguably four basic yet fundamental questions stand out as forming its intellectual core:

- What is security?
- Whose security are we talking about?
- What counts as a security issue?
- How can security be achieved?

Let us briefly examine what is entailed by posing each of these questions.

What is security?

Asking what security means raises issues about the philosophy of knowledge, especially those concerning epistemology (how do we know things?), ontology (what phenomena do we think make up the social world?) and method (how we should study the social world). If we accept the notion that security is an essentially contested concept then, by definition, such debates cannot be definitively resolved in the abstract. Instead some positions will become dominant and be enforced through the application of power.

With this in mind, security is most commonly associated with the alleviation of threats to cherished values; especially those which, if left unchecked, threaten the survival of a particular referent object in the near future. To be clear, although security and survival are often related, they are not synonymous.

Whereas survival is an existential condition, security involves the ability to pursue cherished political and social ambitions. Security is therefore best understood as what Ken Booth (2007) has called, 'survival-plus,' 'the "plus" being some freedom from life-determining threats, and therefore some life choices'.

Put in rather stark terms, it is possible to identify two prevalent philosophies of security, each emerging from fundamentally different starting points. The first philosophy sees security as being virtually synonymous with the accumulation of power. From this perspective, security is understood as a commodity (i.e. to be secure, actors must possess certain things such as property, money, weapons, armies and so on). In particular, power is thought to be the route to security: the more power (especially military power) actors can accumulate, the more secure they will be.

The second philosophy challenges the idea that security flows from power. Instead, it sees security as being based on emancipation; that is, a concern with justice and the provision of human rights. From this perspective, security is understood as a relationship between different actors rather than a commodity. These relationships may be understood in either negative terms (i.e. security is about the absence of something threatening) or positive terms (i.e. involving phenomena that are enabling and make things possible). This distinction is commonly reflected in the ideas of 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. Understood in a relational sense, security involves gaining a degree of confidence about our relationships that comes through sharing certain commitments, which, in turn, provides a degree of reassurance and predictability. This view argues that it is not particular commodities (such as nuclear weapons) that are the crucial factor in understanding the security–insecurity equation but rather the relationship between the actors concerned. Thus while US decision-makers think Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would be a source of considerable insecurity, they do not feel the same way about the nuclear arsenals held by India or Pakistan. Consequently, in the second philosophy, true or stable security does not come from the ability to exercise power over others. Rather, it comes from cooperating to achieve security without depriving others of it. During the Cold War, such an approach was evident in Olaf Palme's call for 'common security', particularly his suggestion that protagonists 'must achieve security not against the adversary but together with him'. 'International security', Palme argued, 'must rest on a commitment to joint survival rather than on the threat of mutual destruction' (Palme 1982: ix). In practical terms, this means promoting emancipatory politics that take seriously issues about justice and human rights.

As the chapters in this book make clear, different perspectives and particular security policies subscribe to these philosophies to varying degrees. In practice, the differences are often stark with advocates of the former philosophy prioritizing military strength while supporters of the latter emphasize the importance of promoting human rights.

Whose security?

Asking whose security we are talking about is the next important and unavoidable step in the analytical process. Without a referent object there can be no threats and no discussion of security because the concept is meaningless without something to secure. As a result, we need to be clear about the referent objects of our analysis. In the long sweep of human history, the central focus of security has been people (Rothschild 1995). As noted above, however, within academic IR, security was fused with 'the state'. Even more specifically, it was fused with a particular conception of 'the national interest' as set out in the US National Security Act of 1947. This helped promote the rather confusing idea that security in international politics was synonymous with studying (and promoting) 'national security'. In fact, it is more accurate to say that what was being studied (and protected) was 'state security', not least because many states were often hostile to particular nationalities contained within their borders.

There are many plausible answers to the question 'Whose security should we be talking about?' Not surprisingly, therefore, debates continue to rage over who or what should constitute the ultimate referent object for security studies. For many decades, the dominant answer was that when thinking about security in international politics, states were the most important referents. Particularly after the end of the Cold War, this position has come under increasing challenge. In contrast, some analysts argued for priority to be given to human beings since without reference to individual humans, security makes no sense (e.g. Booth 1991a, McSweeney 1999). The problem, of course, is which humans to prioritize. This position has underpinned a large (and rapidly expanding) literature devoted to 'human security'. According to one popular definition, 'Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity. In the last analysis, it is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed' (Haq 1995: 116). A third approach has focused on the concept of 'society' as the most important referent object for security studies because humans do not always view group identities and collectivities in purely instrumental terms. Rather, to be fully human is to be part of specific social groups (Shaw 1994). Another perspective approached the question as a level of analysis problem; that is, it offered an analytical framework for thinking about possible referent objects from the lowest level (the individual) through various sources of collective identities (including bureaucracies, states, regions, civilizations), right up to the level of the international system. In this schema, the task of the analyst was to focus on the unavoidable relationships and tensions between the different levels of analysis (Buzan 1991, 1995).

In recent decades, a fifth approach has gained increasing prominence, calling for greater attention to be paid to planet Earth rather than this or that group of human beings who happen to live on it. This perspective argues that at a basic level, security policies must make ecological sense. In particular, they must recognize that humans are part of nature and dependent on ecosystems and the

environment (Hughes 2006). After all, as Buzan (1991) put it, the environment is the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend. Without an inhabitable environment, discussions of all other referents are moot.

What is a security issue?

Once an analyst has decided on the meaning of security and whose security they are focusing upon, it is important to ask what counts as a security issue for that particular referent. This involves analysing the processes through which threat agendas are constructed. In other words, who decides which of a referent object's cherished values are threatened, and by what or whom?

In one sense, every thinking individual on the planet operates with a unique set of security priorities shaped, in part, by factors such as their sex, gender, age, religious beliefs, class, race, nationality as well as where they are from, where they want to go, and what they want to see happen in the future. In spite of our individual concerns and anxieties, most of life's insecurities are shared by other individuals and groups. This means that when studying security it is important to pay attention to how representatives of particular groups and organizations construct threat agendas. It is also important to recognize that not all groups, and hence not all threat agendas, are of equal political significance. Clearly, what the US National Security Council considers a threat will have more significant and immediate political consequences for world politics than, say, the threat agendas constructed by Ghana's National Security Council, or, for instance, the concerns of HIV/AIDS sufferers living in one of Africa's many slums. The huge inequalities of power and influence that exist across individuals and groups in contemporary world politics raise significant methodological issues for students of security. Should we focus on the agendas of the powerful or the powerless or both? And where should an analyst's priorities lie if these agendas conflict with one another, as they almost always do?

One recent illustration of the politics of constructing threat agendas was the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004), comprising sixteen eminent international civil servants and former diplomats. After much debate, the Panel's report, *A More Secure World*, identified six clusters of threats exercising the world's governments: economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; inter-state conflict; internal conflict, including civil war, genocide and other large-scale atrocities; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational organized crime (UN High-level Panel 2004: 2). It quickly became apparent, however, that there was no consensus as to which of these clusters should receive priority: some, mainly developed Western states, considered threats from terrorism and WMD to be most pressing, while many states in the developing world thought that most resources should be devoted to tackling armed conflict and economic and social threats.

Arguments about what should count as a security issue also animate the academic field of security studies. One perspective argues that security analysts

should focus their efforts on matters related to armed conflict and the threat and use of military force (e.g. Walt 1991b, Brown 2007). From this point of view, not only is armed conflict in the nuclear age one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity but the potentially endless broadening of the field's focus will dilute the concept of security's coherence, thereby fundamentally limiting its explanatory power and analytical utility.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that if security is supposed to be about alleviating the most serious and immediate threats that prevent people from pursuing their cherished values, then for many of the planet's inhabitants, lack of effective systems of healthcare are at least as important as the threat of armed conflict (e.g. Thomas 1987, 2000). After all, the biggest three killers in the developing world are maternal death around childbirth, and paediatric respiratory and intestinal infections leading to death from pulmonary failure or uncontrolled diarrhoea. To combat these killers, the world's governments have been urged to focus on building local capacities to achieve two basic but fundamental goals: increased maternal survival and increased overall life expectancy (Garrett 2007). In a world in which a girl born in Japan in 2004 has a life expectancy of 86 years compared to 34 years for a girl born during the same year but in Zimbabwe, such issues are increasingly viewed as a legitimate part of the global security equation. Security analysts have traditionally focused on the challenges posed by war and the careers and needs of soldiers, who now number over 53 million globally (IISS 2005: 358). Perhaps in the future they should pay more attention to the challenges posed by sickness and the careers and needs of healthcare workers, which according to one estimate, the world needs at least four million more of (Garrett 2007: 15).

How can security be achieved?

In the final analysis, studying security is important because it may help people – as individuals and groups – to achieve it. Asking how security might be achieved implies not only that we know what security means and what it looks like in different parts of the world, but also that there are particular actors which, through their conscious efforts, can shape the future in desired ways. In this sense, how we think about security and what we think a secure environment would entail will unavoidably shape the security policies we advocate. Most analysts reject the idea of total or absolute security as a chimera: all human life involves insecurities and risks of one sort or another. The practical issue is thus: What level of threat are actors willing to tolerate before taking remedial action? As the US government's response to the 9/11 attacks demonstrates, tolerance levels can vary significantly in light of events and as circumstances change.

In contemporary world politics, the agents of security can come in many shapes and sizes. IR students are usually most familiar with the actions of states and the debates about how they formulate and implement their security policies. Similarly, the actions of international organizations have long been a staple of security studies courses. Less attention has been devoted to analysing a wide

range of non-state actors and the roles they can play as agents of both security and insecurity (but see Ekins 1992, Keck and Sikkink 1998, Evangelista 1999). Important examples might include social movements, humanitarian and development groups, private security contractors, insurgents, and criminal organizations. In addition, some individuals have the capacity to help provide security for particular referents in certain contexts. Sometimes this is because of the military power they may wield. On other occasions, however, their power may stem from their ability to disseminate a persuasive message; think, for example, of how Archbishop Desmond Tutu's ideas about reconciliation helped South Africans deal with apartheid's powerful legacies.

In sum, the world is full of actors engaged in the politics of security provision, whether or not they articulate their agendas in such terms. Understanding the environments in which these actors operate and how analysts should respond when their agendas conflict is a central theme of this book.

How to use this book

No textbook, even one as long as this, can be completely comprehensive in its coverage, not least because the field's focus will alter as political priorities and conceptions change. But, hopefully, the chapters that follow add up to more than just a snapshot of the field. They are intended to provide students with a clear yet sophisticated introduction to some of the enduring theories, concepts, institutions and challenges that animate security studies.

As we have seen, all security policies rest on assumptions, concepts and theories whether or not their proponents recognize it or make these assumptions explicit. Consequently, Part 1 of this book examines eight major theoretical approaches that lie beneath contemporary security policies. Although significant cracks have appeared in political realism's hegemonic hold over academic security studies, its various strands retain their powerful influence within most of the world's governments. As a result, some of the theoretical approaches examined in this book are reflected in the current security policies of powerful actors to a greater degree than others. But theories not only reflect political practices, they also help construct them. Like tinted lenses that illuminate certain features at the expense of others, each theoretical approach offers a different perspective on what security studies is, and should be, about. Whether these perspectives are mutually exclusive or whether some or all of them can be combined in some form of eclectic synthesis remains the subject of ongoing debate but is not discussed in great detail in this book. Instead, each chapter sets out what security studies looks like from the perspective concerned. Of course, students should decide their preferences for themselves but in making such judgements one should carefully assess what a particular theory has to say about the core questions identified above.

While this plurality of theoretical perspectives has inevitably encouraged debates about the terms in which security studies is discussed, some concepts have proved a more durable part of the lexicon than others. The chapters in

Part 2 therefore analyse ten concepts that appear at the centre of contemporary debates about security. Some of them, including war, coercion and the security dilemma, formed the traditional core of the field, while others, such as poverty, environmental change and health, are more recent, but important, arrivals.

Parts 1 and 2 of the book thus provide students with an introduction to the theoretical menu for choice in security studies and the central conceptual vocabulary used to debate the issues. Parts 3 and 4 of the book build on this foundation to explore the institutional framework and practical challenges currently exercising security analysts.

Part 3 surveys the current institutional architecture of world politics as it relates to security studies. It does so through three chapters which examine relevant institutions at the international, regional and global levels. For almost all of the theoretical perspectives analysed in Part 1, and as suggested by most of the conceptual discussions in Part 2, institutions can play significant roles in security policies, although the extent and nature of those roles remain hotly contested. Where there is greater consensus is that the significance of institutions (such as alliances, regional organizations or the United Nations) should be judged in large part on how well they help humanity cope with a variety of contemporary security challenges. The chapters in Part 4 therefore reflect upon ten key challenges related to armaments (nuclear and conventional), terrorism, insurgency, mass killing and armed conflict, privatization, population movements, organized crime and energy provision. As the authors make clear, overcoming these challenges will be far from easy and will require changes of attitude as well as behaviour.

As long as it is, reading this book alone is not enough. In particular, I would encourage you to combine this book with some area studies and also to look for insights in disciplines other than IR. Hopefully, you will relate what you read in this book to real places that interest you, and reflect upon which arguments resonate most with developments in specific parts of the world. Security studies without area studies encourages ethnocentric ways of thinking and is likely to exacerbate exactly the kinds of tensions that most people are trying to avoid. If we do not take the time to study areas of the world other than our own and understand why others may see us in very different ways than we see ourselves, negative political consequences and insecurity will undoubtedly follow.

Finally, as Stuart Croft's concluding chapter makes clear, security studies has not been entirely confined to IR; nor should it be. The next generation of security analysts should thus continue to resist one of the negative consequences of the professionalization of academia, namely the erection of rigid boundaries between disciplines. While a degree of specialization has its uses, it can degenerate into academic hair-splitting that loses sight of the bigger historical picture and the important links between different forms of human activity. Future students of security should thus happily dismantle disciplinary boundaries wherever they stifle innovative and critical thinking. In our current era, security is simply too important and too complex to be left to one group of specialists. This may make for longer and more complicated reading lists but

it might just help produce more sophisticated analysis of the fundamental issues that lie at the heart of this fascinating and important subject.

Note

- 1 Thanks go to Alex Bellamy, Stuart Croft and Matt McDonald for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.