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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.