

THE CONCEPT OF SECURITY

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Political units value their security above all else, for this reflects their ability to survive as distinctive entities. Hence 'national security' is presented as the prime responsibility of government. Yet the self-evident importance of this objective has not been matched by a reliable definition of the underlying concept. As a result, it is something to which politicians make regular appeals without being subjected to the rigorous tests of logic and evidence.

The status of security as a controversial political value and its habitual misuse as a rationale has discouraged academic investigation, implying a lack of any intrinsic value as a concept. As a result, security has become, in Barry Buzan's phrase, an 'underdeveloped concept', which deserves to be recognized as 'much more powerful and useful than its current status would suggest' (Buzan 1983: 2).

Buzan lists five possible explanations for its weak conceptual development. First, it defies simple definition and is 'essentially contested' (although as he notes this latter attribute does not prevent other contested concepts such as 'power' and 'the state' generating enormous literatures). Second, for those working within the realist school, which has been pre-eminent in international relations theory, power is the dominant concept and security merely a natural consequence of its effective accumulation and exertion. Third, because security as an (albeit weakly developed) concept is linked to the realist school it has suffered from guilt through association and has thus been neglected by those challenging this school. Fourth, as the critique of realism encouraged new approaches to international relations, of which one of the most significant is the 'interdependence' school, the military dimension with which 'security' is naturally associated has been seen to be increasingly marginal when compared with the economic. Meanwhile strategic studies, in which a military focus is maintained and where security is a central concept, allocates little time to conceptual development, with its energies taken up by new technologies or the latest policy debates. Lastly, Buzan suggests, policy makers are quite happy to

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keep the concept ambiguous and imprecise – it makes it easier to appeal to it in support of a great variety of objectives.

In one of the most thorough attempts prior to Buzan to analyse the concept, Arnold Wolfers described security as an 'ambiguous symbol' and also noted the potential for the ambiguity to be exploited by policy advocates (Wolfers 1962). Conceptual imprecision can thus have important policy consequences, for recourse to the requirements of 'security' can be used to justify exceptional measures – perhaps as an extension of patriotism as the 'last refuge of the scoundrel'. Censorship can be imposed, political rights suspended, young men conscripted and aliens deported all in the name of security.

Suspicion that security is too readily manipulated by the unscrupulous helps explain why academics have become wary of employing it for analytical purposes, yet the extent to which the concept can perform such a critical political role underlines its broad attraction. It is not necessary to endorse all dubious appeals to recognize that voters expect a government to provide security, and that its simplest meaning – a capacity to cope with threats – is widely understood.

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According to Wolfers, 'security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked' (Wolfers 1962: 150). This dual character is reflected in the dictionary definitions of being 'secure' which refer on the one hand to being 'safe against attack, impregnable, reliable, certain not to fail or give way' and on the other to being 'untroubled by danger or apprehension' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). It combines a physical condition with a state of mind. It is also negative in that it is achieved when bad things do not happen rather than when good things do. This means that it is often difficult to judge whether actions undertaken in the name of security have made any real difference to the situation.

Translating security as a physical condition into an objective for a state soon raises problems. One might have complete confidence in the ability of a bridge to withstand a certain weight and volume of traffic or of armour to resist specified projectiles. In this sense the bridge and the armour are secure. But the design problem undergoes a step change when the tests to which the bridge and the armour could be subjected are varied by an opponent determined to find their breaking point.

Such a dynamic interaction must be the core of any strategic concept. A key feature of strategy is the interdependence of decision making (Schelling 1963: 3). Thus any provisions for security must always be tested against the potential challenge of an intelligent opponent. There can never be an absolute

definition of security because it is an inherently relational concept. One can identify physical conditions that are more or less favourable to a secure existence, but these can only be properly assessed in relation to the capabilities and intentions of possible adversaries.

An analysis of security must therefore be outward in that it depends on an assessment of external threats. It must also be inward. It requires vulnerability before another's hostility can be turned into a threat. This hostility is irrelevant if there are no means through which it can be expressed. The ability to take advantage of another's areas of weakness is a reasonable indication of power. Power is also a relational concept. The production of intended effects (as power is commonly defined – see Russell 1938: 25) requires a match between the resources of one and the weaknesses of another.

A state anxious to resist another's will must therefore look not only to the potential enemy's capabilities but also to its own exploitable vulnerabilities. Much of the analysis of security is concerned with identifying those national weaknesses – from militant trade unions to open borders – which might be manipulated by an enemy. When this is done the next stage is to see how susceptible these vulnerabilities might be to corrective measures. No state can ever be completely invulnerable and so none can ever enjoy complete security. It is always a matter of degree. Security can therefore be defined as the extent of a state's confidence in its capacity to withstand another's power.

VULNERABILITIES

Countries can be vulnerable in a number of ways – for example, supplies of raw materials from distant sources, secessionist movements in a particular region, a long border which is hard to police or major cities within range of enemy missiles. Security policy revolves around judgements concerning the severity of known vulnerabilities and the measures necessary to reduce any risk to an acceptable level. There can, of course, also be *unknown* vulnerabilities which will only be revealed when a clever opponent is able to exploit them.

How does a state identify its vulnerabilities? This is much more than a question of where an enemy might inflict hurt. It involves fundamental values and interests. A revolutionary government will see the revolution itself as something to protect and may assume that it is at risk from those who fear that it will be copied in their own country. An imperial power will see any challenge to its rule in a single colony as a threat to its authority throughout the empire. A trading nation will be anxious with regard to interference with sea routes while one that imports all vital raw materials will be sensitive to possible manipulation by its suppliers.

There is not necessarily a close match between the judgements made within a state as to where an adversary might inflict the greatest harm and those

made within the adversary. They will both be working with different value systems and different understandings of political dynamics. Just as a householder may protect with great care a collection of rare books of no interest to a likely burglar while leaving a television unguarded, so a state may concentrate on defending territory that has great symbolic importance even though it is of no practical interest to any predator. This is one reason why the threat from others is often misperceived (Jervis 1978).

Although security is often discussed as solely a question of military policy, the above examples indicate that critical vulnerabilities can be in the economic, social and political spheres as much as the military. The political dimension is especially important because real threats will only arise out of conflicts of interest and not just because another state may see in some weakness a tempting opportunity. Why then the focus on the military? This is because there is often little that can be done, at least over the short term, with regard to patterns of trade, reserves of raw materials and social structure, and any adjustments will require the development of a range of policy instruments that are not normally available. It is fundamental in the sense that it is only through military means that one state can take direct control of another and also that the armed forces are directly under state control and are the only instruments primarily geared to conflict with another state.

A distinction is often drawn between internal and external security. The former is concerned with subversion and challenges from disaffected groups who fail to accept the state's authority, while the latter is concerned with the threats posed by other states. Each is often dealt with by distinct agencies. However, the distinction often breaks down in practice. For many states the key vulnerability that might be exploited by a hostile power relates to a flaw in its political structure. A persecuted minority, a regional uprising, a frustrated group of officers are all liable to make common cause with an outside power who may share their hostility to the ruling group and may be prepared to help subvert it. Few internal challenges may be externally generated and most will have no external links. None the less, the tie-up between internal and external threats is the most dangerous challenge for any state, and it is of note that a significant proportion of modern conflicts are largely concerned with the battle for power within a particular country rather than between countries.

In practice it is important to note the interaction between the various types of vulnerabilities. For example, in the mid-1970s there was an abrupt increase in the price of oil as a result of a successful producers' cartel, and at one point this was combined with an Arab oil embargo in order to put direct pressure on the West to end support for Israel. Over the long term it proved possible to adjust energy policies and develop new sources of supply to ease dependence on Arab oil. In the short term, if the crisis had been chronic the only alternative response would have been military action (supposing a realistic option existed).

POLICY MAKING AND POLICIES

Another form of pressure on the West has been terrorist attacks on international communications, especially aircraft. Again the long-term policy of adjustment has been to improve airport security, while in the short term there is a temptation to attack the bases of those believed responsible (as with the 1986 US attack on Tripoli in response to Libyan support for terrorist action).

As there are so many possible areas of vulnerability, a key question in security policy is the degree of risk to assign to each one, to be set against the cost and feasibility of attempts to ease them. As an example we can take a basic vulnerability which is universally shared – the destruction of centres of population by nuclear-tipped missiles. Most countries can do nothing about this vulnerability but do not concern themselves as they can think of no good reason why a nuclear power would attack them in this way. They assign the problem a low risk. Others may see some risk and accept that this means an adjustment in relations with the nuclear power. They must follow non-provocative policies in relation to the nuclear power, or develop their own nuclear power to act as a deterrent, or draw on the deterrent effect of another's nuclear power, or combine all these approaches.

The only additional option would be to seek to remove the threat. This could be done either by a surprise attack on the threatening weapons, or by constructing defence capable of intercepting the weapons before they reach their targets, or by providing shelter for the population if an attack is unstoppable. All these three options have at various times been discussed by the Soviet Union and the United States and, for a variety of reasons including the counter-measures available to the opponent, have been generally judged not to be feasible, although such judgements are always controversial.

An estimate concerning the risk of a particular vulnerability being exploited, which can depend on the sort of risks the opponent is deemed likely to take, can never be objective. The relevant information will always be imperfect and much will depend on calculations of probabilities. Individuals in exactly the same conditions can vary in their sense of security, according to whether they naturally tend to be paranoid or complacent. This is also the case with states. Security is therefore a function of personality as much as circumstance.

The political personality of a state when it comes to security will reflect cultural attributes developed over time (for example, the insularity of an island people, or religious convictions) and past experience of conflict. Neighbours of Germany are still anxious that it might return to its former aggressive ways, while the holocaust continues to influence Israeli policy. Countries regularly involved in wars have quite different expectations from those that have enjoyed periods of unbroken peace. Political personality will also be influenced by the distribution of power within the state. This will determine whether certain groups are able to insist that their interests are protected as a matter of priority, and also who is able to influence the allocation of resources to the various

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instruments of security policy. Perceptual biases in states reflect distortions in decision-making processes rather than personality defects (unless the decision making is so distorted as to depend solely on an authoritarian leader). A number of explanations can be put forward as to why states might come to exaggerate threats, such as a tendency by the military to indulge in worst-case assessments.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

A degree of insecurity is an unavoidable product of the nature of the international system. The anarchic nature of this system means that it is always possible that states will attempt to resolve their differences through force of arms. There will always be some doubt concerning the long-term intentions of others, for even if relations with one government are cordial those with a successor might be much cooler. Because intentions change more quickly than capabilities, states will gear their military policies to the tangible attributes of a potential adversary rather than to its proclaimed intentions. It is often suggested that arms races set in motion on this basis can aggravate political relations and in turn lead to war. History provides no examples of such a cause and effect, despite some of the explanations offered for the First World War (Rotberg and Rabb 1989). A more useful concept than the 'arms race' is that of the 'security dilemma'. According to this, the efforts of one state to render itself secure, which may have only defensive motives, may be interpreted by another as offensive in intent, so increasing its insecurity and leading it to take its own corrective measures and thereby generating a vicious cycle (Herz 1951; Jervis 1978).

These structural factors indicate that the ultimate answer to the problem of insecurity cannot be found at the state level. This leads to advocacy of an international approach to security able to put conflicts between particular states in perspective. In addition, this is the level at which any attempt to resolve differences can most readily be organized. Thus a wholly 'national' focus to security, providing an inevitably narrow focus, has been rejected in favour of a more holistic, systemic view (Booth 1979). This can also be seen as an attempt to reconcile realist with legalist/idealist approaches to international relations, by pointing to the realists' inability, in their own terms, to provide definitive answers to the problem of national security, and also pointing to the need for idealist approaches, with their stress of international rules and institutions, to address security interests.

Buzan notes that only great powers are in a position to carry out a national security strategy, drawn from within the threatened state. As states get smaller they come to look to other states as allies and protectors. Small, vulnerable states often place their hope in what Buzan calls an 'international security

strategy', which depends on the adjustment of relations between states. However, an international security strategy can take a variety of forms.

The 'balance of power' system, within which states build up their strength while making and unmaking tactical alliances, reflects a hope that independent states each pursuing national security strategies will produce a relatively stable equilibrium (in the same way that economists might hope that the 'magic hand' of the market would transform pursuit of individual self-interest into the common good). This was achieved for much of the nineteenth century following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. As Germany unified and gained in power, the system showed increasing signs of strain until it broke down completely in 1914. (On the 'balance of power' concept, see Wright 1989.)

The horror of the 1914-18 war encouraged not only attempts to prohibit war as a means of resolving disputes but also the establishment of a collective security system, by which all states would accept responsibility for each others' security and take common action against an aggressor.

The 1939-45 war is commonly seen as a failure of a collective security system as much as the previous war was seen as a failure of a balance-of-power system. The experience of the League of Nations suggested that in order to make a collective security system work it was necessary to ensure that all relevant states joined the system, that there were agreed means of determining aggression in particular instances and that collective action would follow almost automatically. The League, however, was weakened by the failure of the United States to join it, out of a desire to avoid further entanglement in European squabbles, and by the League's failure to respond to the challenges posed by Japan, Italy and Germany.

The lack of a supernational authority means that states maintain an independence of action which allows them to respond to particular crises according to their own perceived national interests rather than in terms of the collective interest. The political conditions which make the state so special undermine efforts towards a collective security regime. Even an alliance, which is a form of partial collective security system, can be seen as second-best to a national strategy. Overdependence upon the protection of another creates the risk of being abandoned at the last minute.

On the other hand, the balance-of-power approach can get caught by the shifts of power that result from the rise and fall of states according to their economic prowess, or their ability to cope with purely domestic challenges, or the opportunities for expanding their influence which may arise from the processes of change in neighbouring states. Both the national and the international security strategies thus appear flawed.

SECURITY POLICIES IN THE MODERN WORLD

Following the Second World War there was a drift back towards realist approaches. The previous decades were seen to have provided sobering examples of the dangers of optimism with regard to another's intentions and of allowing aggressive states to go unchallenged, as well as of the limits of international institutions. This tendency was reinforced by suspicion of Soviet totalitarianism and its intentions *vis-à-vis* Europe and the consequent deterioration in relations among the wartime allies. But the potentially catastrophic consequences of total war were now even greater than before and so there were considerable incentives for potential enemies to work together to prevent any conflict getting out of hand. The security policies of the major powers since 1945 have therefore tended to involve a mixture of national and international elements, including both military preparedness and alliances and pursuit of *détente* and measures of arms control. The resulting mixture can be said to have worked, given the absence of a third world war.

One critical feature of the post-war security environment was its bipolarity. Theorists of international relations argued that bipolarity is stable because it leads naturally to a stalemate, while more multipolar systems are always in an unsettling state of flux.

After the Second World War Europe was divided according to the path of liberation from Nazi rule into East and West. The former became socialist states dominated by the Soviet Union, eventually to be gathered together in the Warsaw Pact, while the second remained capitalist and drew closer to the United States, forming the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Gradually other regions of the world began to reflect this East-West conflict. In Asia, the success of the communist revolution in China, followed by the attack by communist North Korea on the South, encouraged the view that here too local politics could be understood in terms of bipolarity. The processes of decolonization brought many new states to the fore and there was a degree of competition to encourage them to follow a capitalist or a socialist road. This too reinforced the notion of bipolarity, although many of these states sought to escape from this presumption - under the banner of non-alignment - and in practice most regions other than Europe did not lend themselves to such simplistic interpretations.

Another factor which fortified the sense of a durable stand-off was the arrival of nuclear weapons coincident with the start of the Cold War. By the early 1950s, these weapons were coming to dominate security calculations, yet from the start they had provided clear reason why another war was best avoided. Their enormous destructive power, which underwent a step change as 'city-busting' thermonuclear bombs superseded the first fission 'atomic' bombs, provided an unambiguous warning of the consequences of any repli-

cation of the strategic bombing campaigns of the Second World War. During the 1950s the range of these weapons was also extended and by the end of the decade both superpowers were introducing intercontinental ballistic missiles. By the mid-1960s the situation could be described as one of 'mutual assured destruction' (Freedman: 1989).

Although the United States had the lead in nuclear capability for much of this period, the significance of any superiority declined given the devastating impact of only a few Soviet weapons reaching American soil. To the United States, which had long felt protected by the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, long-range Soviet power undermined this presumption of invulnerability (Brodie 1959), although it remained far less vulnerable than others to occupation by a hostile power.

There were two important questions with regard to this nuclear balance. The first related to its delicacy. Might technological breakthroughs allow one side to neutralize the nuclear power of the other? This would involve catching forces on the ground prior to launch in a disarming attack (first strike) or intercepting them before they could reach their targets (active defence). Despite substantial investments in advanced systems the balance remained stable. The increasing use of relatively invulnerable submarines as launch platforms meant that it would be difficult to destroy all means of retaliation in a surprise attack while centres of population remained hopelessly vulnerable. As late as the mid-1980s President Reagan, in his Strategic Defence Initiative, was still toying with the idea of finding a means of defence against ballistic missile attack, but it was evident that such a grand objective was not feasible (Lakoff and York 1989).

The second question raised by the nuclear balance concerned the extent of its deterrent effect. There was good reason to believe that nuclear arsenals deterred each other. But if neither side would gain from initiating nuclear hostilities, what credibility should be attached to a threat to do just that in the face of overwhelming conventional military strength? This was the position adopted by NATO in an effort to deter the superior conventional strength of the Warsaw Pact without the expense of attempting to match this strength. As the immediate risk of war subsided, Western countries sought to reduce their defence burdens to a few per cent of gross domestic product. Reliance on nuclear deterrence allowed this to happen. While it was never wholly credible that NATO would escalate to the nuclear level, in practice the mere possibility that it might come to be seen to have sufficient deterrent effect. This was a bluff that would be extremely risky to call.

Another aspect of the range of the deterrent effect was geographical. By locating nuclear weapons in areas of vital interest, such as West Germany or South Korea, the United States ensured that any aggressor faced a nuclear threat. Where interests became less vital the relevance of nuclear threats

became ambiguous. The record of the nuclear age is of an evident unwillingness to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, even when engaged in combat (as in Vietnam), and an equally evident reluctance to get into even non-nuclear combat with other nuclear states. In Europe, at least, stable political bipolarity reinforced by elemental fears of war meant that the tensions and harsh rhetoric of the Cold War never came close to a truly hot war.

However, while bipolarity and nuclear deterrence contrived to produce stability at the systemic level, especially as it related to Europe, more basic changes were underway at the level of the state.

Although the state remains the basic unit in international politics, the 'society' of states is in a process of continual development. This is a question not just of individual states rising or subsiding but of changes in the character of states and the relations between them. For example, since 1945 the expansion of the international economy and advances in international communications have increased the interdependence of states and also led to a growing role of non-state actors (such as multinational companies) in international affairs. The relations among Western capitalist states have thus matured to a point where it becomes extremely difficult to envisage hostilities breaking out among them. This is especially true of members of the European Community. Given the role of Franco-German hostility in generating war in the past this was no mean achievement. Common security arrangements such as NATO survive in part because they serve a socially and economically coherent group and are not simply a product of tactical convenience. This is the sort of virtuous development envisaged by theorists of interdependence.

However, despite the fact that the rhetoric of interdependence was also embraced in the communist world, integration there was far less marked and economic development much more limited. The consequences of economic failure in the countries of the Warsaw Pact were substantial, in that the communist governments lacked any legitimacy and the close relationship with the Soviet Union was deeply resented. When the point was reached at which economic reform was impossible within the existing political framework, it was the framework which gave way with remarkable speed.

This led to the end of the bipolar system in Europe but without any clarity as to what might take its place. There has been a recent revival of discussion on new collective security structures, now to be based on the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). However, the limited achievements of CSCE to date have been based on forging a consensus over a prolonged period, hampered by an insistence on unanimity (thirty-three European states plus the United States and Canada) and the lack of a permanent base and secretariat. It can be strengthened, but not necessarily sufficiently to cope with the great variety of challenges that Europe is now likely to face.

These challenges fall far short of the set-piece confrontation which has

dominated Western security debates over the past few decades. Rather they may be more typical of those that are found in the Third World. The most striking feature of the Europe that is emerging from communism, in addition to its poor economic state, is the strength of nationalist feeling and the divisions among ethnic groups. These are proving to be particularly intense within the former Soviet Union.

As Western countries address a transformed Europe they must develop a new security policy. As the broad thrust of this article would indicate, the starting point for this effort must be a judgement on vulnerabilities. Even without a strong, hostile power threatening hegemony in Europe, the Western countries might still wish to protect themselves from the consequences of disorder. If the part of Europe which previously knew a rough order imposed by Moscow poses any real security problem to the West, it may be as a result of population movements or economic dislocation. Exactly how that might be done without becoming embroiled in a series of complex and intractable conflicts remains to be seen.

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FURTHER READING

The number of books with security in the title is massive, although few do more than discuss national defence policies. In addition to the titles mentioned above, readers wishing to explore this subject further could consult two substantial collections of essays: J. Baylis, K. Booth, J. Garnett and P. Williams (1987) *Contemporary Strategy*, 2

vols, London: Croom Helm; and E. Kolodziej and P. Morgan (1989) *Security and Arms Control*, New York: Greenwood Press. For discussions of contemporary issues see F. Heisbourg (ed.) (1989) *The Changing Strategic Landscape*, London: Macmillan.