(Re)Conceptualizing Security

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Abstract: Security is one of the most ambiguous, contested, and debated ideas in the conceptual framework of international relations. The "traditional" perspective has been severely contested as new approaches develop. The concept of security has been reworked in all its fundamental components and dimensions, from object and reference to range and security measures. Starting from these debates, and in the light of the current international situation, we propose an operational concept of security.

Introduction

Security continues to be a top concern, a major issue of debate in national, regional, and global agendas. Likewise, it continues to require major resources and the sacrifice of many lives. However, as societies and international relations change, the concept of security also evolves. For that reason, security continues to be a main focus of discussion, and to be redesigned in all its components and major dimensions, from object and reference to range and security instruments. Starting from these debates, and in the light of the current

international situation, what we propose in this paper is an operational concept of security.

1. From "traditional security" to “new approaches”

A significant part of debates over security concerns the object it refers to and the range it covers: What is the object of security and what entity must be protected (whose security)? What is the nature and type of threats, risks, and challenges (security in face of whom, or what)? What is the agent of security (security by whom) and with what means (security instruments)? The respective concepts of security depend on how one answers these questions.

In the realist perspective,¹ according to which the international system is anarchical and in a permanent state of competition and conflict, the State is not only the major agent, but also the almost exclusive reference of security. In other words, it means security of the State and by the State. In this light, the concepts of security focused, for quite some time, around topics that James Wirtz (2007) describes as high politics: war and peace, diplomatic summits, nuclear dissuasion, weapons control, military alliances, defence of "national interests" or, in other words, “national security” and “international security” always perceived from the exclusive stance of the State. In contrast, the topics of low politics (environment, energy, migratory flows, overpopulation, health, underdevelopment, etc.), despite being regarded as sources of problems, were seldom perceived as risks or threats to national or international security.

On the other hand, security was always associated with the military dimension, often to the exclusion of all others. There are even some authors who, like Richard Ullman, have reversed their position, after initially advocating a more inclusive perspective. He, who early on stated that "defining national security merely (or even primarily) in military terms conveys a profoundly false image of reality [which] is doubly misleading and therefore doubly dangerous" (Ullman, 1983: 129), later defended that “if national security encompasses all

¹ Whenever, in this paper, we make reference to concept/approach/school/paradigm/perspective/"realist" vision, we consider its essence or fundamental and defining traits, without tending to the great diversity and wealth of analysis it entails.
serious and urgent threats to a nation-state and its citizens, we will eventually find ourselves using a different term when we wish to make clear that our subject is the threats that might be posed by the military force of other states. The “war problem” is conceptually distinct from, say, problems like environmental degradation or urban violence, which are better characterized as threats to well-being (…) Labeling a set of circumstances as a problem of national security when it has no likelihood of involving as part of the solution a state’s organs of violence accomplishes nothing except obfuscation» (Ullman, 1995: 3-12). In fact, for a certain school of thought, the relationship between security and the non-military dimensions is only relevant when such elements are at the root of international conflict or have an impact on war.

However, this traditional approach to security highly centred on the State, on the topics of high politics and on the military instrument, has been severely contested. From the start, the incapacity of the State in face of pressures it encounters "from above", "from below", and "from within" (Tomé, 2003 e 2004), becomes an issue. Other opinions suggest that the State is about to become irrelevant as a deciding entity or, simply, that it no longer is an adequate entity to deal with the challenges facing humanity.

Likewise, many believe that it is inadequate to apply conventional logic of "state security" to non-consolidated state entities, or in cases when the "State" itself is perceived as the main source of insecurity for its people. In fact, in many instances, the internal environment is far more unstable, or Hobbesian, than the international one, reducing some States to the condition of "non-States": the expression "Failed State, Fragile and in Collapse", describes that type of situation.

This implies, naturally, a substantive alteration of the reference of security: «When human rights and the environment are protected, the lives and identities of people tend to be safe; when they are not protected, people are not safe, independently of the military capability of the state where they live» (Klare e Thomas 1994: 3-4). Thus, the State is no longer viewed as the only, or even the major reference of security, as other levels, and the security of individuals and communities gain relevance. Ken Booth (1991), who calls himself an ex-realist, anti-realist, and post-realist and advocates an "utopian realism", admits
the possibility of a redesign of security around a global civil society and a community of global communities, with both local and universal issues: that is, “populations”, more so than States, must be the reference of security. Variations of this perspective point to human collectivities (Buzan, 1991), society (Waever, 1997), the community (Alagappa, 1998), individuals (Alkire, 2003), or Humanity (Commission on Human Security) as the reference of security.

Furthermore, the traditional differentiation between “internal” and “external” security dimensions is clearly diluted. Even authors of the "realist school", like B. Buzan (1991: 363), wisely recognize the limits of that traditional dichotomy: «Though the term ‘national security’ suggests an occurrence at State level, the connection between that level and the individual, regional, and systemic levels are too numerous and powerful to be denied...the concept of security so strictly connects those levels and sectors that it demands to be treated through an integrated perspective». In fact, it seems evident that «security threats are not confined to national borders, they are interrelated and must be dealt with at the national, intra-State, regional, and international levels» (Tomé, 2007: 18).

On the other hand, it became clear that security, economic development, and human freedom are inseparable. Along these lines, Dietrich Fisher (1993), for example, distinguishes between object of danger (survival, health, economic well-being, liveable environment, and political rights), geographic source of dangers (internal, external, and global), and human sources or natural sources of dangers (intentional threat, non-intentional dangers of human nature, natural risks) to arrive at the conclusion that the main non-military dangers are environmental decline, underdevelopment, overpopulation, violation of political rights, and ideological nationalism. Likewise, B. Buzan (1991: 19-20) highlights five domains that are intricately related: military security, political security, economic security, societal security, and environmental security.

Economic security was the first of those non-military domains to deserve the attention of researchers, strategists, and politicians, in particular, following the 1973 oil crisis. In spite of that, it was not until the end of the Cold War that the idea that the highest stakes were moving to the economic arena gained momentum and became generalized: in face of the increase in economic
interdependence and the need to guarantee conditions for economic development and access to supply and outflow markets and their routes, economic and energy security became crucial dimensions of security.

More recently, the environment has equally become associated with security. «The process of environmental decline», Al Gore (1990:60) stated more than two decades ago, «threatens not only the quality of life, but life itself. The global environment became, then, a matter of national security». A sign of the times, Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climatic Change of the UN, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

There are many other aspects that have been included in the security agenda, albeit with different degrees of controversy and/or acceptance. For instance, while the inclusion of human rights, natural disasters, and infectious diseases is relatively controversial, terrorism is mentioned in virtually all contemporary literature on security, as do maritime piracy, transnational organized crime, cyber attacks, and biologic, bacteriologic, and radiological issues. No wonder, then, that Simon Dalby (2006) made more reference to the "geopolitics of global dangers" than to the competition among superpowers or territorial disputes, while Hartmann et al. (2005) highlighted a new agenda for security in the "era of terror" and "bio-anxiety."

The fact is that, ever more frequently, we come across proposals that invert the hierarchy of high and low politics and place non-conventional issues at the top of the security agenda. This gives rise to the additional problem of the danger of militarization of non-military dimensions of security: in other words, the securitization of certain issues traditionally associated with low politics (that is, the discursive assumption that certain problems threaten "national and/or international security", elevating and giving them a relevance never before achieved) could fuel a tendency to address and resolve them through traditional means of high politics, giving priority to military intervention and raising (in)security at other levels (Dannreuther, 2007: 42-44). In the same way, the non-securitization of some "traditional" threats (discounting or downplaying their significance) may lead to a breach between reality and the magnitude of the threat, by underestimating it.

The enlargement of the security agenda and the multiplication of "new dimensions" give rise to a much greater assortment in terms of security
instruments, well beyond those of military nature, ranging from help to development to new judicial and financial regimens, from diplomacy to the advancement of human rights or the strengthening of the Rule of Law. Besides, other than the government, there are clearly many more players involved, who may either be threats (terrorist groups or criminal associations) or promoters of security (from international organizations to NGOs).

This means that the realistic vision and the "traditional" approach to security have been questioned in their fundamental aspects: the State as exclusive actor and single security reference; threats, primarily external, intentional, and military; almost exclusive military instruments; the clear distinction between internal and external aspects (Brandão, 1999: 173). As a result, the debate around the broadening and deepening of the concept of security has intensified and we have witnessed its "expansion" in four fundamental directions, as stressed by Emma Rothchild (1995: 55): "downward extension", that is, from the security of the States to that of groups and individuals; "upward extension", from national security to security at much broader levels, such as the environment/biosphere or Humanity; "horizontal extension", switching from military security to political, economic, social, environmental or human security; and "multi-directional security", from the States to the international institutions, local and regional governments, non-governmental organizations, as well as public opinion, the media, and abstract forces of nature or markets.

This has resulted in broader security concepts and measures, of which comprehensive security, world/global security, and human security stand out. The concept of comprehensive security appeared in the late 70s and early 80s, initially developed by Japan - as part of the redesign of the "Yoshida Doctrine" and the concept of economic security. Later, other countries and organizations, such as Canada, the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and even the United Nations, adopted it. "Comprehensive security" underlines the multi-dimensional and multi-instrumental character of security, and shifts the focus from political-military disputes to a myriad of economic, social, and environmental concerns. At the same time, it concentrates on non-military
instruments, such as development assistance, economic cooperation, or international institutions. Besides, according to promoters of "comprehensive security", the recognition of multiple dimensions and the cooperative development of multiple instruments may contribute to minimize tensions between traditional antagonists and to increase the security of all. G. Evans (1993), however, contends the greatest weakness in this concept is that it is so inclusive and ambiguous that it loses much of its descriptive capacity and, on the other hand, it becomes hostage of the overestimation of international cooperation.

Other concepts that are currently gaining support include global security and world security, both of which mean more or less the same. In its report "Our Global Neighbourhood" the Commission on Global Governance expressly prefers the term "global security: «Global security must be broadened from its traditional focus on the security of states to include the security of people and the planet» (1995: Chapt.III. Promoting Security). Similarly, Gwyn Prins (1994: 7) supports the urgency of a "global security" because Humanity is connected through a new "community of vulnerabilities". Along the same lines, Seymon Brown (1994) invokes the concept of "world interests" to reconcile national, international, and sub-national interests.

The most controversial approach, however, is that of human security. This concept often appears associated with the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, though its ground-concept was developed much earlier: In June of 1945, in reference to the results of the San Francisco conference, the USA Secretary of State already reported that «The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace…. » (cit. in UNDP, 1994: 3). Therefore, the presumption of human security is to free all Humanity from fear and violence (freedom from fear) and poverty, and deprivation (fear from want): «Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity» (ibid.: 22).
This concept has been recurrently used, albeit with different characteristics and definitions. Its own proponents differ regarding what threats, or fundamental threats, individuals must be protected against: the more strict concept focuses on internal violence exercised by governments or politically organized groups against communities or individuals; a more inclusive concept, however, considers that hunger, disease, and natural disasters must also be included. In turn, its critics point to an excessively vague nature, its ambiguity and incoherence, and even its arbitrary nature and inadequacy. Roland Paris (2001: 93-96) is particularly fierce in his criticism: «if human security means almost everything, then, in effect, it means nothing (...) the ambiguity of the term serves one particular purpose: it unites a diverse, and often divided, coalition of States and organizations which "seek an opportunity to achieve some more substantial political interest and greater financial means" (...) Human security does not appear to offer a particularly useful analytical framework, either in academic or in political terms».

Independently of this controversy, countries like Canada, Norway, and Japan, incorporated this approach in their security and foreign policy, in an attempt to implement it. International institutions such as the World Bank, the OECD, the ASEAN, and the UN also adopted it as a reference to their activities. In reality, the idea that the first goal of security is the protection of individuals and communities is enough to cause reasonable changes: indeed, the traditional framework which explains and tries to avoid war, or promote peace, among States is clearly insufficient and irrelevant to deal with the new dangers and transnational concerns, violent conflicts within States, or to protect individuals or groups from certain attacks or tragedies (Tomé, 2007: 18). Therefore, human security is associated with controversial principles that emerged in the international security panorama over the last years, such as "humanitarian intervention" or the "Responsibility to Protect", the latter formally adopted at the UN World Summit, in September 2005, as part of that Organization's reform.

One of the most influential is that of the Commission on Human Security (2003: 4): «Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms — freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity». 
Another perspective that has gained recognition in theoretical-conceptual debates and political thought is the so-called critical security, which shares and impacts the vision of human security with an anti-State and anti-realist theory. This approach is also particularly sceptical regarding the impact of international liberalism in the security agenda, going as far as to call it "subversive" or "subservient." Karlos Pérez de Armiño (2009: 8), for instance, states that «it has been noticed a certain co-optation and distortion of the concept of human security by western countries, with the purpose of placing it at the service of their foreign policies». Additionally, José Manuel Pureza (2009), stresses «the ambition to bring the fight against fear and deprivation into security priorities did not result in substantial changes in international power relations, and has served fundamentally as a point of support (one more) to the discipline of the turbulent periphery by the restless centre». The roots of neo-Marxist tradition in the critical theory of security are clear, but the fact is that, like all other main areas, the field of Critical Security Studies is wide and heterogeneous, and encompasses diverse tendencies, from Feminism, to Marxism-Leninism, and to Anarchism. The uniting factor in such originally distinct theories is their vision and common commitment to a «“critical” rather than a “problem-solving” approach to IR» (Danneuther, 2007: 49). In other words, the “critical vision” seeks to differ in the way it identifies the root of security problems, and how it proposes to substantially alter the situation it condemns. It attempts to "undo" conventional discourses and, in some cases, "invalidate" them to re(focus) attention on human condition and its emancipation. It employs an approach that relegates the interests of States, of the "centre" and the “powerful”, to second place, in favor of individuals, "peripheries", and the “underprivileged”.

2. An operational concept of Security

Clearly, Security is one of the most ambiguous, debated, and contested ideas in the overall conceptual framework of international relations. Concepts evolve with time and change according to circumstances, which, in effect, make it imperative to redefine the concept of security. The effort to conceptualise security and to accommodate the great complexity and diversity of its fundamental elements with impartiality, while preserving its analytical and
operational usefulness, is a complex and delicate exercise. Nevertheless, we attempt to do it, based on six major premises:

1) Communities are the references of security;
2) Well being and political survival, considered from a relatively broad but discerning perspective, are the fundamental interests and values of security;
3) Threats and concerns relative to the security of communities do not come only from other States. They may also originate within the States and non-state actors;
4) Competition, cooperation, and the building of communities are equally relevant and may coexist concurrently;
5) The emphasis or priority granted to each dimension/concern/threat, and to each instrument of security, may vary from community to community;
6) The generic concept of security must be abstract, inclusive, and cautious to reconcile complexity, diversity, and change and to allow different levels.

Thus, security means the protection and promotion of values and interests considered as vital for the political survival and well being of the community. The closer the community is to the absence of concerns of political, economic, and military nature, the more safeguarded its security is.

Having the community as reference means that the object of security may be a State, an ethnic group, a transnational group, or even an international organization or association, while accommodating the problematic nature of States and the existence of other security references “within” the States and/or “above” the States. At the same time, assuming political survival and well being as vital values and interests, allows the broadening and deepening of security beyond traditional dimensions, in a sufficiently inclusive and flexible manner, in terms of its content, threats/risks, and instruments.

Concerns over political survival or well being may, independently or simultaneously, be the fundamental interests communities can ensure, though not necessarily with the same priority, in the same manner, at the same level, or in face of the same concerns: North Korea, Tibetans, China, Palestinians,
Israel, Iceland, Angola, or the EU, will certainly consider both their survival and their well being in very different ways. Again, if the State is for some the greatest reference of security, for others it constitutes the major source of insecurity, while for others the major reference is not the State, but rather their ethnic or religious group, or the political elite.

Moreover, if there is a crucial problematic of political survival or of well being, it may not simply result from the conflict of material interests (such as territory, resources, etc.) but arise, primarily or equally, from considerations and perceptions of identity, either of ideological nature of historical and cultural heritage. Such problems and perceptions occur also in very distinct contexts of rivalry, conflict, involvement, and cooperation, which are dynamic and evolving. Similarly, the safeguard and/or promotion of political survival and well being may imply the orchestration of military panoply but, complementary or independently, may favour internal or international normative/legal frameworks, diplomacy, politics, commerce and economy, or social-cultural aspects and others. Again, it depends on the specific community and circumstances. Accordingly, in the concept we propose, at the same time that political survival and well being limit the spectrum of security (in order to pose a security problem, a concern must, somehow, question values and interests considered to be vital) they are also sufficiently inclusive and flexible to allow a great variety of potential real situations.

In similar fashion, the idea of community that emerges in our concept of security not only allows encompassing several levels (infra-state, state, and multinational), but also selecting those communities which may be more relevant and pertinent in terms of the security agenda and of the system under analysis. The same may be said regarding military, political, and economic concerns, since they can only be included in the operational concept of security depending on their relevance to the protection and promotion of interests and values considered vital to the political survival and well-being of the communities in question: of course, there are security concerns that do not threaten basic levels of security of populations, States, or regions; otherwise, we would be inviting a tremendous array of potential communities and concerns that, in fact, are not of equal relevance.
Conclusion

The concept of security proposed in this paper - meaning the protection and promotion of values and interests considered to be vital to the well-being and political survival of the community, and considering that the closer the community is to the absence of concerns of political, economic, and military nature, the more safeguarded its security is - may, admittedly, be the focus of criticisms and objections: open to abuses; subjective and ambiguous; problematic in terms of "theoretical placement" and identity of research agenda. However, any concept of security slightly more inclusive is virtually exposed to criticism, and we cannot allow that to dissuade us from introducing what we consider to be an operational concept. On the other hand, restricting a concept for the sake of great simplification would risk making it less adequate to reality, as we would be forced, a priori, to consider exclusions independently of specific situations. Consequently, and in the face of the need to make an option, we decided to pursue a more open, inclusive, and flexible approach, in order to consider all the possibilities of the highly complex and contested concept of security.

Moreover, the purpose of defining a concept is to indicate its essence and its fundamental limits, and it must be the measured according to its applicability to solve problems. In our view, the approach we propose expands and deepens the concept of security without making it excessively inclusive, as it establishes important parameters in terms of reference (community) and core values (political survival and well-being); It does not restrict, a priori, the range of possibilities of interconnections and the multiplicity of its vital parts: It permits to involve/ characterize different types of concepts, divided in function of the reference and nature of threats, of instruments and concerns; and it simplifies comparative analysis among different theoretical-conceptual hypotheses, and between the latter the specific reality of security; at the same time, it permits evaluating the most significant aspects and, if necessary, establish new interconnections.
References


