

A Theoretical Conceptualization of Human Security

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One of the primary roles of the state is to provide peace and security for its citizens both within the nation-state and to ensure their protection against threats from outside.¹

Introduction

A major source of military conflict that provided focus for the Western world's perception of the threat to human security was removed when the Cold War came to an end. Another more local source of insecurity was eradicated in Southern Africa with the abolition of apartheid. However, the threat of military force is not the only security challenge faced by states in the new millennium.

This paper offers an appraisal of recent literature on threats to human security that do not derive from military confrontation.

In fact, as early as the 1970s, the United States expanded its definition of national security to include international economics, when it became 'clear that the US economy was no longer the independent force it had once been, but affected by economic policies in a dozen other countries'.² But 'a fully fledged debate about the meaning and reconceptualization of security did not begin until the early 1980s'.³

Theoretical frameworks behind the new security

discourse

Various attempts have been made to provide an adequate conceptualization of human security. There are two main contemporary theories of international relations. At one end of the continuum is an approach based on a neo-realist theoretical framework, which maintains a continued emphasis on the primacy of the state within a broadened conceptualization of (human) security. Some call this approach the 'new security thinking'.⁴ A postmodernist or 'critical human security' approach that is rooted within the pluralist theory of international politics represents the other end in this security discourse. This approach is based on a set of assumptions that essentially attempt to dislodge the state as the primary referent of security, while placing greater emphasis on the interdependency and transnationalization of non-state actors.

The neo-realist approach to human security has been advocated by 'structural' or neo-realists such as Barry Buzan in his seminal work *People, States and Fear*.⁵ Buzan argued that the 'straitjacket' militaristic approach to security that dominated the discourse during the Cold War was 'simple-minded' and led to the underdevelopment of the concept.⁶ He subsequently broadened it to include political, economic, social and environmental threats, in addition to those that are militaristic.⁷ Although Buzan examines security from the three perspectives of the international system, the state, and the individual, he concludes that the most important and effective provider of security should remain the sovereign state. His analysis provides the most extensive contemporary examination available of human security from a state-combined perspective (as originally proposed in a similar form by Clausewitz).

The 'critical' or postmodernist approach to human security, reflected in the work of Ken Booth, also advocates a broadened conceptualization of security that goes beyond a military determination of threats.⁸ Booth advocates of the postmodernist approach stress quite explicitly that the state must be dislodged as the primary referent of (human) security, and encompass instead a wide range of non-state actors, such as individuals, ethnic and cultural groups, regional economic blocs, multinational corporations (MNCs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and just about all humankind. In expanding the concept of security horizontally and vertically, Booth argues that human security is ultimately more important than state security.⁹ Put differently, the postmodernist

conceptualization of security does not equate state security with human security.

In Booth's view, states and implicitly governments must no longer be the primary referents of security because governments which are supposed to be 'the guardians of "their peoples' security", have instead become the primary source of insecurity for the many people who live under their sovereignty, rather than the armed forces of a neighbouring country'.¹⁰ This approach challenges the idea of a state as an effective and adequate provider of security to its people. Evaluation of the two approaches

Both approaches attempt to address the non-military threats to human security. Their fundamental difference lies in the way these analyses point to action. The broadening of security to conceive of more than just military threats raises the contentious question: 'What is it that is to be made secure?'¹¹ As a result, the ongoing (security) debate centres on the identification of a primary referent or unit of security has been central to an ongoing (security) debate.

Arguments for the state to remain the primary referent of security should not mean maintaining the state as the sole or unitary referent of security. But rather it means that the security of the state, in particular a state that is weak, should continue to remain primary, since the 'main aim is to build the capacity of the state to provide and maintain security for its citizens'.¹² In other words, although the conceptualization of security must make the security of people and human beings its end, the state, as the means, cannot be dislodged as the primary referent. After all if the state is to provide and maintain security, it has to be secure itself or to use Buzan's words, 'it has to be or become a strong state'.¹³

This explanation, of course, needs clarification. What constitutes a state? Using the conventional interpretation, a state is made up of a government, people and territory. In other words the whole (that is the state), comprising all its constituent parts, has a reciprocal relationship with the individual parts. The state cannot be secure if its constituent parts are insecure or unstable. At the same time, if the state as the institution representing its constituent parts is weak or insecure in relation to other states, its elements will also be affected by such weakness or insecurity.

Booth has argued that state security was used by 'governments that posed as guardians of their peoples' security, to cloak reality and hide what essentially was the security of their regime and its

supporters and should therefore be dislodged as a primary referent of security'.¹⁴ This argument need not mean the termination of the state per se as a referent of security, but rather that the type of state that has been unable to deliver security to its people should be questioned. It is such governments that do not allow the state to fulfil their functions of statehood that need to be eradicated and 'dislodged'.

The neo-realist approach to security places human security 'alongside state security as a twin referent in the theory and practice of security'.¹⁵ In equating state and human security, Buzan makes reference to 'the fate of human collectivities' as being the primary object or referent of security.¹⁶ 'Human collectivities' are the citizens of a state. The state becomes the referent of security as the representative institution of human collectivities.

In discussing the state as a source of both threats to, and security for, individuals, Buzan maintains that citizens ultimately have to decide on the lesser of two evils, that is either to accept the threats that come from the state, or accept the threats that arise in the absence of the state.¹⁷ The assumption that whatever threats emanate from the state are likely to be of a lower magnitude than those arising in its absence, 'grows as society develops around the state, becoming increasingly dependent on it as a linchpin for social and economic structures of security. In seeking human security, state and society are sometimes in harmony with each other, sometimes opposed. Its bottom line is about survival'.¹⁸

Critique of the two approaches

Buzan's state-centric approach within a broadened framework of security is useful in so far as it argues that the state is a vital vehicle for the security of its citizens. However, he introduces the concepts of 'strong' and 'weak' states to show that 'the creation of strong states is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for improved individual and national security'.¹⁹ In other words, the existence of strong states would not, by itself, guarantee security, but weakness in states would certainly encourage and sustain insecurity for their citizens. In this regard, Buzan draws a distinction between weak and strong states on one hand, and weak and strong powers on the other.²⁰ He explains that the strength of a state is determined by the degree of its socio-political cohesion, while the strength of its powers refers to the traditional distinction among states in respect of their

comparative military and economic capabilities. This distinction sits very awkwardly in argument championing the state as the case of human security, since the attainment of human security requires both a strong state and a strong power. To avoid any confusion as to the unit or referent of security, it is preferable to lump together attributes (i.e. socio-political cohesion and military and economic capability) and the characteristic distinction between weak and strong states.²¹

Buzan acknowledges that almost all weak states are found in the South or developing world, where they find themselves trapped by historical patterns of economic development and political power which leave them underdeveloped and therefore unable to muster the economic and political resources necessary to build a stronger state.

What Buzan does not make clear is how weak powers and states can become strong. Instead he argues that integration into an 'increasingly interdependent international market economy would contribute to a mature anarchy with its promise of greater international security'.²² This would be problematic for peripheral states such as those in Africa, which are not only trapped by historical patterns of underdevelopment, but more crucially, are weak rendering their economic security vulnerable to market forces in an integrated or globalized world economy.

According to Richard Falk, while the new threats to security which defy boundaries cannot be solved by one state alone, the uneven development fostered by a hierarchical international system of states and a global capitalist economy has contributed to an intolerable situation. The security of the rich seems to be increasingly diminishing the security of the poor.²³ Accepting Falk's argument, it is clear that Buzan assumes that an integrated world economy would offer mutual gains for weak and strong states and powers alike.

Robert Gilpin argues that the placement of a state in the international division of labour, defined by the Modern World-System theory as lying between core, semi-periphery and periphery, determines whether a state is 'hard' or 'soft'.²⁴ Whereas a hard state is able to resist the potential negative effects of external market forces, channelling them to its own advantage and managing its economy effectively, a soft state is pliable, at the mercy of external market forces and unable to control its own economic affairs.²⁵ States in the developing South and in Africa in particular, being soft and peripheral, in terms of Gilpin's definition, would not find an integrated world economy beneficial to either their economic

development or their security. In other words, uneven development within the world's capitalist economy sets structural constraints on the achievement of economic security for the poorest states and their inhabitants. In this sense, African states are likely to experience great difficulty in becoming strong or 'hard', to form part of what Buzan calls a 'mature' anarchy. Nevertheless, Buzan has moved beyond the traditional realist fixation on security associated with military power.

The problem with the postmodernist approach is that it regards as proven the assumptions made by the pluralist theoretical framework of international relations. It accordingly asserts that national sovereignty is unravelling, and that states are proving less and less capable of performing their traditional tasks. For example, Xavier Carim argues that global factors increasingly impinge on government decisions and undermine their capacity to control either external or domestic politics. He concludes that 'if state sovereignty has not actually ended, it is under severe challenge'.²⁶ For Booth, the logical alternative to the modern state as the unit of analysis is the diffusion of power from states to local or regional communities so as to cater for cultural diversity. For example, the wider problems of economics could be dealt with effectively at the regional level.²⁷

There can be no denying that regional integration or cooperation, as a current trend within the international system, aims not only to address the political and economic interests of member states, but also the security needs of their people. A critical concern is whether regional security structures necessitate a redefinition of state sovereignty. Threats to human security that compel a review of the traditional conceptualization of state sovereignty are especially noticeable at a regional level. For example, the insecurity that arises from illegal immigration has complex causes and effects, all of them relating to humanitarian issues, for example people fleeing from poverty, civil war, drought or economic decline, that must be addressed by regional mechanisms or structures. After all, 'when people face famine or war, no fence, army or government policy, will keep them from seeking even marginally better conditions'.²⁸ Therefore, regional mechanisms that are created to address such threats are ultimately the building blocks for greater regional, national and individual security.²⁹

Postmodernists have very often stressed the power of non-state actors such as MNCs, crime syndicates and NGOs to operate beyond the control of the state. This however, should not be taken to be generally

applicable to all states; nor should it be construed as meaning an end to state sovereignty. Clearly, non-state actors can more easily overpower weak states than strong states. But throughout history non-state actors have coexisted with states. At times the power of non-state actors has been predominant while at other times the power of the state has been superior. The existence of powerful non-state actors does not mean the death of a state.

It has, likewise, been argued that MNCs have no state attachment and operate beyond the control of any state, including their home country. But, as Howard Perlmutter argues, 'the degree of multinationality of an enterprise is positively related to the firm's long-term viability'.³⁰ In other words, an MNC will retain its home-country identity because of its need to be protected from outside interference. For example, an MNC would rely on its home country or state to impose trade or other sanctions on another country, if the latter endangers its operations. The example comes to mind of the United States suspending the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status of China in 1997 because of violation of copyrights and patents. Similarly, the United Kingdom was protecting the interests of Royal Dutch Shell when its government failed to impose sanctions on the Nigerian military junta for the execution of the Ogoniland activists.

The assumption that MNCs increasingly operate beyond the control of national governments and the state also ignores the process of liberalization in the world economy, and the new rules that govern world trade and the integration of states into the world economy. The addition of new rules such as the Multilateral Agreement on Investment will grant MNCs access to any economic sector of the host country, ensure the removal of any discriminatory legislation against foreign firms, and guarantee full profit repatriation by the MNCs.³¹ The power and mobility of MNCs are not only derived from advances in technology, but, of an economic liberalization process that is driven by states. Martin Wolf argues that the revolutionary advance in technology 'makes globalization feasible, but it is liberalization that makes it happen'.³² As a result, the MNCs of the advanced industrialized countries are able to operate beyond the control of soft, dependent and weak peripheral states, precisely because of the rules advanced by the former to guarantee uninhibited access to the latter's economies.

For the postmodernists, the apparent lack of order in the international system should no longer dominate security policies, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. East-West

confrontation was diminished but the world is far from stable. Advances in military technology have profoundly transformed the dynamics of the world security landscape with the beginning the new millennium. 'A new round of military expansion is in progress among major powers, notably the US with its Missile Defense System, thereby aggravating imbalances in the world military strategic configuration. This undoubtedly poses new challenges to world peace and development'.³³

Conclusion

An adequate conceptualization of human security for African states would 'link human security with human development'.³⁴ Economic development will have to be at the top of the institutional agenda, since development and security are 'two sides of the same coin'.³⁵ Non-state actors do not have the power to bring about large-scale development or to resolve the new security threats alone, without any state assistance. Surely, 'it is only academic to conceive of rudimentary security and development without strong, legitimate states'.³⁶ Consequently, in the context of Africa's soft states, strengthening the state is a necessary precondition for the institutionalization of peace and security. African states will have to remain interventionist to build the institutional capacity to manage the non-traditional security threats that affect the people of the continent.

Notes

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- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 5.
- ¹¹ Buzan, *op. cit.*, p. 435.
- ¹² Van Aardt, M. 1997. 'The emerging security framework for Southern Africa: Regime or Community'. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*. XIX.
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- ¹⁵ Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Buzan, B. 1992. *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ²² Tickner, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
- ²³ *Ibid.* p. 189.
- ²⁴ Gilpin, R. 1987. *The Political Economy of International Relations*. New Jersey: Princeton.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
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