The Changing Nature of “International Security”:

*The Need for an Integrated Definition*

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1. Introduction

In international relations, words play an important role in determining how academics and policy makers view the world and make decisions on issues of great concern. The term “international security” is perhaps the most salient phrase in demonstrating the importance of semantics, as it is imbued with a sense of urgency and significance. As Adrian Hyde-Price points out, securitizing an issue means removing it from the regular political discourse and “signal[ling] a need for it to be addressed urgently and with exceptional means.”¹ For much of contemporary history, and certainly since World War Two, the concept of international security has been equated with the use of force between nations, with a particular focus on the role of great powers. This reflected the view that international security involved territorial integrity of nations and the greatest threat to such territorial integrity was posed by wars between states, and particularly great powers.²

During and since the 1980s this description became increasingly questioned in terms of who or what should be secured, the nature of international threats and the type of responses that were subsequently warranted to control these threats. New conceptions of international security arose to incorporate, *inter alia*, different actors (such as human security), different forms of threats (such as environmental security), and different responses (such as non-military collective action). Analysts, activists and policy makers promoted these new definitions due to the perceived shortcomings of traditional notions of international security. The new formulations of international security seemingly rectified the problems raised by the narrow conception of the traditional definition. However, as this paper will demonstrate, these new security definitions are still plagued by their own difficulties and challenges. As a result, there has been somewhat of a vindication of the traditional notion that international security should be primarily concerned with violence towards states, as it demonstrates merit when contrasted against the problems of the new forms of international security.

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This essay will contrast the benefits and drawbacks of both the traditional and modern views in order to illustrate that neither provides a sufficient conception of international security on its own. Rather, the paper will put forward an integrated definition that incorporates the benefits and reject the drawbacks of both traditional and modern conceptions of international security. The essay will begin by first examining the fundamentals of the phrase “international security.” The analysis will then describe how the new definitions arose in response to the problems posed by the old conception. Following this, the essay will turn to a discussion of the subsequent problems with the new definitions and the corresponding benefits that traditional notions of international security bring to bear. The essay will conclude by arguing that although these new understandings of international security present advantages, they raise issues that are not always equivalent to international security. It is necessary to form a new conceptualization that neither subsumes all environmental or human problems under an international security rubric, nor limits international security to warfare alone. Instead, as they essay will argue, an integrated definition focuses on the impact of threats and referent objects and therefore incorporates all forms of responses, depending on the nature of the impact rather than the nature or the source of the threat.

II. Fundamentals of the phrase “international security”

Security is an elusive subject for study, as some argue it cannot be defined in any ‘objective’ way and that any problem can become a security issue once it has been securitized by policymakers. Security, then, manifests itself tautologically: any problem that is labelled security is in fact a security concern. However, as Adrian Hyde-Price points out, this makes the security field entirely reactive to what policy makers deem a security threat and removes any independent analytical value. Such definitions of international security, therefore cannot help guide or inform policy, and although it may be of theoretical interest, this paper will instead focus on the more objective definitions of security that can be used for academic and policy analysis.

In his article “Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?” Roland Paris provides a basic but nevertheless useful definition: “a ’security threat’ connotes some type of menace to survival.” The dilemma lies in interpretation, as there are three major aspects to the definition. First, there is a “menace to survival”; security is about threats and even threat perception. Second, security involves a referent object, or unit of analysis in that the “menace” poses a threat to someone or something and is also posed by someone or something; for instance, an attack by one state against another is a classic international security threat. Finally, discussions about security often include the means to secure the referent object from the threat, so a third area of debate is over the best response to a security threat.

Accordingly, the expansion of “international security” is characterized by a shift in thinking with respect to the referent object, the threat to security, or the means to provide security and is achieved by adding adjectives to the term ‘security.’ For instance and as will be explained below, environmental security shifts focus from military to environmental threats; human security shifts focus from the state to individuals as the referent object; collective security shifts focus from unilateral to cooperative responses. Traditional definitions can thus be viewed as the base from which modernists expanded the concept of international security. The first two areas of debate – threat and referent object – form the crux of much of the international security debate, although the third aspect – response – also has a role.

The first debate focuses on the ‘threat’ itself. Proponents of new conceptions of security maintain that the security definition must be broadened to incorporate new threats,
environmental degradation for instance, that were previously relegated to other fields for analysis. Richard H. Ullman provides one broad definition, that a threat is an “action or sequence of events that… threatens drastically and over a relatively brief span of time to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state.”\(^3\) Mohammed Ayoob brings up the issue of vulnerabilities and threats, maintaining that there exists a continuum of “vulnerability,” and problems then become vulnerabilities when they “threaten to have political outcomes that affect the survivability of states.”\(^4\) Human security likewise moves the discourse beyond traditional threats facing the state towards human or individual-centric threats. Although the exact definition of human security is contested, it was born out of 1994 United Nations Development Program report and contained seven security elements: economic, food, health, environmental, physical harm, community, and political. Traditionalists disagree with these broad notions of threats, arguing that military force is the primary threat, and other issues, such as the environment and poverty, should only be considered as potential secondary causes of insecurity but not an international security issue per se.

In addition to disagreement over the proper threat, referent objects often have vague definitions and are the focus of the second debate. Individuals, societal groups, and states all appear as focal referent objects in contemporary writings on international security. Traditional notions of security, though they come in various guises, can be generally understood as “military defense of state interests and territory.”\(^5\) It became the norm to view the state as the primary unit of analysis, and as a result, the notion of protecting the territorial integrity of the state became the end in and of itself. Thus, as Nicholas Thomas and Willian T. Tow point out, the state is the primary focus of analysis and action; a state faces a threat from another state, and it is the state that primarily responds. Yet the purpose of state security is, at its basic level, intended to protect the people within that state. Alternatively, new conceptions of security – human security in particular – have considered the individual to be the unit of analysis. The consequence is that there is no agreement over what constitutes the proper referent object for international security.

Beyond the referent object and the threat, there is also a third disagreement, which exists over the proper response to any given threat. According to one Hyde-Price, in terms of responses, “security has two dimensions: avoiding war (its negative dimension) and building peace (its positive dimension).”\(^6\) In essence, when the referent object can reduce its vulnerability to a threat, its security is thereby increased. This can be achieved in two ways. First, the object can concentrate on eliminating the threat directly, through political, economic, military or other means. The second method is by reducing its vulnerability to the threat by increasing its capacity to deter or defend against the threat that is posed. Deciding which to pursue is in some ways tied to the threat under consideration. In his review article “The Security Problematic of the Third World,” Mohammed Ayoob describes how traditionalists have placed the emphasis largely on using military capacity to reduce vulnerability, whereas many advocates of new formulations of security instead focus on non-military responses. In 2003, for instance, there was a debate among academics and policymakers whether invasion or diplomatic and other pressures was the best response to the potential threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Furthermore, new security definitions often promote a cooperative response to threats. And as J. Ann Tickner

\(^6\) Hyde-Price, 28.
argues in “Re-visioning Security,” there are some threats to the global system that cannot be solved by territorial protection.

III. The shift from traditional to new forms of “international security”

Because traditional notions of security focused on the use of force between great powers, the focus of international security studied during the Cold War was naturally on superpower conflict and nuclear war. With the end of the Cold War, analysts began to argue that the subject of international security “had to be recast to reflect the changing nature of conflict.”7 As Mats Berdal notes in “International Security After the Cold War,” internal conflicts came to dominate the security agenda for two reasons. The main reason is simply because of the increase in incidence of internal conflict; few conflicts today are international in the sense that all the combatants are state actors. However, he also points out that the international community is becoming more involved in intrastate conflict. Indeed, as evidenced by interventions in Somalia and ex post facto acceptance of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, the Security Council itself has adopted a broader understanding of the international peace and security agenda.

Simultaneously, a view arose that “the new security agenda is increasingly composed of more intangible and diffuse risks and challenges.”8 With this shift in focus, there has been a concurrent shift towards analysing the social conditions that cause these new conflicts. Lawrence Freedman expands on this in “International Security: Changing Targets,” pointing out that this shift towards the analysis of root causes of conflict is in fact sensible even to traditionalists, because there will always be a wider context to the use of force. In “International Security Studies: A Report of a Conference on the State of the Field” Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Sean M. Lynn-Jones describe how interdisciplinary approaches are a key aspect of international security studies. However, traditionalists limit psychological, economic, sociological and other fields to analysing aspects of threats. Thus, for traditionalists, economics is only important insofar as it affects the likelihood of war, and typically that between great powers.

Analysts and advocates further appealed for the expansion of international security to consider the large number of individuals trapped in suffering as “the end of the Cold War generated a major re-evaluation of normative and policy assumptions… [of] what made people ‘secure’.”9 This resulted in part from the fact that with the end of the Cold War, there seemed to be space in the academic as well as policy arena to consider non-military problems facing the world. The result was that issues such as access to food, a clean environment, and economic welfare increasingly became issues of concern for international security studies. They first became important as state security threats in their own right, as analysts pointed out that they could exacerbate existing tensions sparking conflict. Further, there was a growing sense of a global consciousness and that the international community, and the West in particular, was morally compelled to assist those individuals suffering in other nations. However, this expansion gave rise questions relating to where limitations would be drawn between those problems that belong under domestic policy, and those threats that require attention in terms of international security policy.

IV. Wherefore transformation? Out with the Old, in with the New

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8 Hyde-Price, 27.
The shift towards new ways of thinking about security arose due to the problems associated with the traditional concept of security. There are four problems with the old notion of security and five merits to the new definition in response to these problems.

The first problem with the old definition is that in focusing on the state as the unit of analysis, it did not allow for an analysis of threats posed by the state itself to individuals within that state. The problem with this is that citizens are often directly threatened by the state they reside within as well as other neighbouring states. Thus, the first benefit of the broader definitions is that human security allows for an analysis of the harm that a state can do to its own citizens. Moreover, Barry Blechman highlights the fact that although protection of the state is important for human welfare, it is not a sufficient guarantor of individual well-being. Indeed, as Tickner discusses in the context of the Cold War, traditional notions of security were at odds with the insecurity of those citizens who firstly lived with the threat of nuclear destruction and secondly felt adverse impact from the amount of resources expended on nuclear weaponry. By focusing on the individual, human security thus incorporates territorial protection while likewise paying heed to other threats to individuals. Human security thus points out that even though states may be ‘secure,’ individuals that reside within them are not always similarly secure.

The second problem with conventional understandings is the focus on the external nature of the threat. Because they use states as their unit of analysis, traditionalists look at the threat constituted by other states. They thus fail to consider insecurity that emanates from within a state, such as political repression. Moreover, although traditionalists point to external threats from other states, most of the world is not immediately threatened by such concerns. The rest of the world is instead more concerned with internal conflicts and threats to society such as “indiscriminate violence, illegal immigration, drug dealing, and organized crime.” These have been, however, largely considered domestic issues by the traditionalists. As a second merit, then, the new definitions of security endorse considerations of all threats, whether they originate from within the threatened state’s borders, such as refugee flows or trans-national terrorism, or transcend borders themselves, such as environmental concerns. Indeed, much of the human security analysis has been focused on the detrimental role that human insecurity can have in states neighbouring the host of the problem. Similarly, the third merit to new definitions is that they are not limited to interstate violence. Paris points out that the notion of human security emerged from the criticism that the traditional notion of security was too narrow for contemporary considerations. As Tickner explains, in the developing world, many threats originate from within the state, and not externally from another state. Furthermore, proponents of environmental security argue that not only can its decline at times lead to conflict, but the more general impact is a “downward pull on economic performance and, therefore, on political stability.”

A third drawback to traditional definitions is its lack of focus on longer term, or potential threats, such as HIV/AIDS and health security. New definitions, particularly human security, incorporate such threats, thus providing a fourth merit in that they allow for an appreciation of threats that do not immediately pose acute distress. Paris explains that although some threats, such as environmental ones, are only projected, advocates maintain that they require immediate attention in order to prevent them from becoming actual threats. Further, analysts such as Jessica

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11 Thomas and Tow, 179.
Tuchman-Mathews and Laurie Garrett have demonstrated that non-military threats, such as environmental and health issues, can post threats and produce enormous costs. Likewise important in terms of understanding the origins of future threats, particularly for Western states, is the fact that threats “are now more likely to emanate from some distant turbulence.”\(^\text{13}\) The subsequent argument, then, is that it is important for Western states to pay more attention to sub-state problems in other countries as they could give rise to serious threats in the future. Directing attention to these non-military issues via a security label is thus important, given that often such considerations are ignored unless they present an immediate and apparent danger.

Traditional definitions retain a fourth problem in their considerations of proper responses, where they have tended to focus on enhancing unilateral military capabilities. This is most well known in terms of the policy of mutually assured destruction whereby the two superpowers strove to attain enough nuclear armaments to ensure that in the event of an attack by the other power, they would retain sufficient nuclear weapons to destroy the other. The result of an attack by one would therefore be total annihilation of both. Another merit to focusing on individuals and non-military threats, then, is the fact the analysis of proper response usually includes alternative responses. Indeed, as Hyde-Price points out, many have argued that given globalization and the ‘new’ threats, states alone are no longer best able to deal with threats.

V. Problems with the new definition

Despite the variety of benefits that these new definitions of security bring, they have also presented a new set of challenges and problems. This has resulted in the re-emergence of advocates for traditional notions of security who provide five critiques of modernist definitions and thereby support a return to traditional thought.

The first accusation levelled at proponents of the new versions of international security focuses on human security and the fact that the term is often vaguely defined. The lack of clear definition is partly due to the fact that human security proponents cannot agree as to whether all problems facing individuals should be included or whether there should be some cut off between “development” and “security,” both of which are also not well-defined. The vague definition is due to the fact that the phrase has brought together activists of varying issues, and a narrowing of the definition would likely make it difficult for such a diverse coalition to function as a whole.\(^\text{14}\) However, the resulting definition can conceptually encompass virtually anything that can be construed as discomforting to an individual, and “if human security means almost anything, then it effectively means nothing.”\(^\text{15}\) It is difficult for policymakers to assess the relative importance of each aspect of human security, and as a field of study, the concept loses analytical value once it has broadened to such a point of inclusiveness. Without “clear criteria for specifying what is, and what is not, a security problem… an expanded definition of security will lose its intellectual coherence.”\(^\text{16}\) Some proponents have thus taken on traditional notions that use a narrower concept, where violence is the key threat. A common consequence has thus been the narrowing of the human security field to encompass only violent threats to individuals.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{13}\) Freedman, 57.
\(^{14}\) Paris, 87.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 93.
The narrowing of human security has in fact been taken one step further, whereby human security is defined as when threats to individuals result in threats that transcend borders. For instance, a refugee flow that destabilizes a region, such as the Great Lakes region in the mid-1990s would constitute a human security threat. However, this gave rise to the second critique of the new understanding of security. This problem originated as a complaint by some human security proponents, who claim that such a definition has returned to the focus on the state as the referent object. A third problem with the new understanding of security is that the majority of the new threats are difficult to measure in terms of their actual impact. Hyde-Price emphasizes how such problems are largely potential threats rather than actual threats. Both environment and health threats constitute prime examples, as it is difficult to prove that they can be the exclusive, or even primary, causes of conflict.

A fourth critique arose because the new versions of international security were often borne out of a belief that the world had become a relatively safer place, which allowed for the focus to shift towards non-military threats. Yet it is difficult to argue that military threats facing states have disappeared from the international scene. Freedman further points out that if analysts have too much of a focus on non-military threats facing non-state actors, there is the potential to develop complacency towards analysing the aggressive nature of states under anarchy. As aggressiveness and anarchy are still features of the current international order, conventional military threats are still relevant to security studies. This is particularly the case considering that although the external threat of territorial integrity may not be an imminent threat to the West, it continues to be a very real threat in many other parts of the world. Moreover, the time span has been short since the end of the Cold War, and given the recent war in Iraq and regional tensions, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, it seems rather short-sighted to assume that external threats of international aggression have disappeared entirely.

Finally, as Thomas and Tow discuss, another problem with the new threats is that they have no originating enemy. In other words, the value to traditional conceptions of security was that the threat was pre-mediated, originating from a specific source. How can non-traditional threats, such as the environment, be neutralized without an ‘enemy”? This speaks to the larger problem that once such problems are placed in a threat context, military solutions are immediately considered, given that for much of modern history, security threats had a military aspect, requiring a military response. Consequently, when problems are ‘securitized,’ policymakers will tend to reach for a military solution. Freedman further argues that this is the result of forcing non-military problems into an analytical framework that was constructed to deal with military threats.

VI. Conclusion: an integrated definition

The debate between the two concepts in fact raises serious questions regarding what and how we conceptualize international security. One extreme offers the view that international security is threatened when any human being suffers; the other extreme is that international security is only affected by the inter-relationships between states. With the numerous benefits and drawbacks displayed by both traditional and modern definitions, there is a need for an integrated definition of international security. The essay will now establish that the term “international security” should be focused on the impact rather than attempt to classify which threats and referent objects should be included.

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18 Thomas and Tow, 179.
Concentrating on the impact of threats recognizes that not all human, environmental and other security problems are necessarily of concern to international security. To illustrate, few would argue that gang warfare in the United States or the low human development indicators in some Canadian Aboriginal communities constitute international security concerns. They do, however, represent human security concerns, as defined by proponents of the narrow and broad schools respectively. We thus require a definition that encompasses some of the aspects of the new threats without losing sight of the importance of the security of nations.

Indeed, military concerns will clearly occupy an important space in the international security discourse so long as anarchy prevails, even though one might argue, as Hyde-Price does, that we are witnessing limited anarchy through self-imposed measures, such as international laws and norms. Heinz Gärtner and Adrian Hyde-Price go further in their introduction to Europe's New Security Challenges, maintaining that there is conceptual space for considering non-military threats to the international order. Yet as Hyde-Price later states, international security studies “cannot and should not encompass all human distress; as an analytical approach to conflict, it must only deal with such issues when they threaten to provoke conflict and insecurity.” That is, although problems such as poverty should be considered as a potential cause of conflict, poverty in and of itself should not be considered a security threat.

Yet despite the traditional view of security, threats to international security are brought about by more than military threats. This is because while traditional conceptions have focused on interrelationships between states, the international system is likewise affected by unstable states, and particularly state implosion.

State instability and implosions are brought about by internal issues, which can be traced back to non-military causes, even if the destruction is through military means. In essence, it is important to consider structural violence, the indirect violence facing individuals within a state. Structural violence reduces life expectancy because of “deeply embedded socioeconomic inequalities… [resulting in a] lack of access to basic material needs.” Thus, expanded notions of security, such as human security, are directly relevant to structural violence, which in turn affects a state and thus constitutes an international security issue. Yet international security is only affected by human security when the threat to human security is of such magnitude to threaten the state in question. To return to the example mentioned above, current human security problems within the U.S. and Canada are not considered international security issues because they do not threaten the stability of either state. Warring factions and low human development indicators in Iraq, however, constitute a direct threat to the Iraqi state and are thus threats to international security. The key aspect of an integrated definition asserts that it is the impact of a threat that defines whether it is an international security issue. Thus, threats facing international security include direct violence between states, but also involve threats that bring about state instability.

The secondary characteristic of international security when defined by impact is that it can involve any referent object. Indeed, the essay maintains that the concept of international security has moved beyond interstate events. Even contemporary traditionalists have acknowledged that international security involves the protection of states from threats originating

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19 Hyde-Price, 28.
20 Here it is also important to note that principles will often come into conflict with security; for instance, as Freedman explains, a state will often find itself choosing between security and civil liberties. This was evident in the U.S. and other Western states following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as measures were implemented to better discover and contain terrorist groups.
within their own or other states. Thus, the notion of human security certainly resonates with this understanding of international security. Therefore, it may be useful to turn to a point made by Diego Rojas Coronel: “the idea of an *international order* as a specific, protected object.”

Taking this one step further, we can use Barry Buzan’s notion of “units of security” whereby states, individuals and societal groups can each be a referent object, so long as their actions – regardless of whether they cause or are affected by the threat – have an impact on the international system. This complements the above definition, as it also focuses on consequences rather than attempting to pre-identify the referent objects in international security.

Finally, turning to the nature of response, the traditional definition tended to focus on unilateral and often military reactions to security threats. This, however, was a function of interpretation and not the definition itself. According to the UN Charter, the Security Council is afforded the right to interfere in any issue it deems a threat to international peace and security. When the international community decides to impose its will in order to mitigate a rising problem, it is because it views it as an international security issue, regardless of whether it originated as an internal problem. Moreover, individuals are frequently vulnerable to events and processes at the international level. This is compounded by the fact that states are often unable or unwilling to address vulnerabilities at the sub-state and individual level and therefore require assistance from the international community. The focus on the impact of a threat therefore allows for both international and unilateral responses, depending on the nature of the threat’s actual or potential impact.

Human security and other expanded notions of security thus seem to be better considered, as Paris argued, as labels for categories of research, not frameworks of analysis. In order to broaden the nature of international security studies without narrowing it to the point of inadequacy, it is important to recognize that this field is concerned first and foremost with organized violence that affects the international system. There are times when international security will be primarily concerned with conventional military threats; however, there will also be occasions where the conditions for peace, insofar as they affect state stability, will be of primary salience. Hyde-Price asserts, “security involves preventing war through military preparations to deter armed aggression from within and without and, more positively, fostering conditions conducive to building a legitimate and enduring peace order.” This can be demonstrated by considering two questions. First, what does it matter if immediate inter- or intra-state violence is prevented but a global environmental catastrophe fails to be averted? Conversely, what does soil erosion matter if the earth has been destroyed in a nuclear holocaust? While extreme, these two examples demonstrate that neither military nor non-military threats are unimportant, and one cannot be forgotten at the expense of the other.

An integrated definition should therefore include those challenges that could threaten the international system either through direct violence between states or by means of state instability, particularly state implosion. This recognizes that international security can be affected by non-military threats as well as state and/or non-state groups. Further, an integrated definition acknowledges that although unilateral responses may be in order at times, many issues affecting current international security involve – and indeed require – an international response. Thus, in

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22 Ibid., 9.
24 Hyde-Price., 40.
this integrated definition, threats are defined by their *impact* (international violence or state instability) rather than their type (such as environmental) or origin (such as refugee flow). This provides a starting point for an integrated analysis of international security that allows for the inclusion of any threat, referent object, or response, so long as it affects the international system or involves the international community.
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