

## THE SOCIETAL DIMENSION OF GLOBAL SECURITY

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### Summary

This chapter looks at how the relationship between collective identity and security has been conceptualized and applied primarily in the field of International Relations. In doing so, it looks in particular at the concept of ‘societal security’.

### 1. Introduction

Writing in the early 1980s, Richard Ullman (1983: 129) noted that ever since the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s ‘Washington has defined American national security in excessively narrow and excessively military terms’. Ullman’s remark was predicated on the assumption that for the duration of the period of superpower competition with the Soviet Union, subsequent US administrations had found it easier to focus the attention of public opinion on military dangers than on non-military ones, and that between political leaders and policy makers it was simpler to build a consensus on military responses to foreign policy problems than to get agreement on the use of other potential means. Ullman’s article, called simply *Redefining Security*, not only sought to draw attention to the overly military-centric nature of security as it had been manifest in policy-making terms, but also to highlight the concomitant conceptual difficulties that had been faced by academics in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and Security Studies: ‘Just as politicians have

not found it electorally rewarding to put forward conceptions of security that take into account nonmilitary dangers, analysts have not found it intellectually easy' (Ullman, 1983: 129). And, while by no means trying to downplay the present primacy of its nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, Ullman argued that the coming decades were likely to be defined by new kinds of threats; not defined so much by ideology and the competition for territory, but more by the dangers of overpopulation, environmental degradation and massive migration flows.

Drawing on the self-same concerns, in a later article of the same name (*Redefining Security*), Jessica Tuchman Mathews noted that although the definition of American national security was indeed expanded in the 1970s to include economic challenges to US autonomy, worldwide changes in the 1980s had ushered in the need for another, yet more profound change to the concept of security: 'Global developments now suggest the need for another analogous, broadening definition of national security to include resource, environmental and demographic issues' (Tuchman Mathews, 1989: 153). Similarly, Ken Booth (1991) also came to identify the greatest threats as including economic collapse, political oppression, resource scarcity, over-population, the destruction of nature and disease. Clearly these were not new threats in the sense that their impacts had been felt by states and their populations in many parts of the globe well before the late 1980s. But with the winding down and eventual end of the Cold War, such non-military threats were allowed to clearly emerge as important issues areas for scholars and practitioners alike as part of a widened security agenda.

'Societal Security', which is the particular subject of this chapter, was first introduced by Barry Buzan in his book *People, States and Fear*. In the book, societal security was just one dimension in Buzan's five-dimensional approach, alongside military, political, economic, and environmental challenges. In this context, societal security referred to the sustainable development of traditional patterns of language, culture, religious and national identities and customs of states (Buzan, 1991a: 122-123). In this way, although seeking to push an understanding of security beyond its more traditional, Cold War expression, each one of the five dimensions remained as sectors of national (state) security; society just being one sector where the security of the state could be undermined. Besides, for Buzan at least, military threats to the state remained primary as part of an expanded international security agenda. As the priorities given to each dimension depended on their relative urgency and intensity, Buzan maintained that the military sector of security was still the most expensive, politically influential, and visible aspect of state behaviour: 'A state and society can be, in their own terms, secure in the political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions, and yet all of these accomplishments can be undone by military failure' (Buzan, 1991b: 37).

Although cognizant of Buzan's considerable contribution to the so-called 'wideners' approach; those scholars and practitioners seeking to take the meaning of security and its agenda further than just purely military concerns, others argued that nonetheless it was not enough to just introduce more sectors of national security; for sure, international security was losing its preoccupation with solely military issues, but not as yet its sole concentration on the state. Other referent objects of security, from the global to the individual, were also surely needed. The concept of societal security, as it was to be reformulated, was designed to mark out a distinctive, indeed middle position in the

debate; deriving from a general reluctance to consider either human or universal notions of security, but also very much in agreement with the overly narrow nature of the traditional approach. As such, this middle position began to talk about the security of collective identities or 'societies'.

This chapter provides an overview of the concept of societal security as it has been conceived since its original appearance in *People, States and Fear*. In doing so, it focuses on three main questions: one, how can society be conceived as a referent object in its own right; two, what is societal identity and how can it be threatened; and three, how can societies defend themselves in the face of such threat. Looking at threats to and the defence of societal security, the chapter explores these issues with reference to, for example, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. The chapter concludes by considering some of the criticism that have been leveled against the concept and discussion of how questions of societal security still persist very much in certain parts of the world.

## 2. State Security and Societal Security

The development of societal security as a concept in its own right was witnessed in the release of the 1993 book *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. For the book, Buzan was joined by Ole Waever and further collaborators Morten Kelstrup and Pierre Lemaitre. Significantly, the writers suggested that societal concerns had become increasingly important as compared to concerns over state sovereignty in contemporary Europe; indeed, so much so that Buzan's previous five-dimensional approach to international security had now become untenable for understanding the relationship between security and identity. As such, they proposed a reconceptualisation: not of five sectors relating to the state, but instead a duality of state and societal security. While society was retained as a dimension of state security, it was also a referent object of security; something, of itself, that needed to be protected. The key to this reconceptualisation was the notion of *survival*. While state security is concerned with threats to its sovereignty (normally understood as the maintenance of political autonomy and the inviolability of borders); if a state loses its sovereignty it will not survive as a state, societal security is concerned with threats to its identity; similarly, if a society loses its identity it will not survive as a society (at least, that is, not in the same form).

In keeping with Buzan's work in *People, States and Fear*, states can be made insecure by virtue of threats to their societies. But state security can also be brought into question by a high level of societal cohesion. This relates to those instances where a state's programme of homogenization (the imposition of a single, overarching identity) comes into conflict with the strong identity of one or more of the country's minority groups. For example, during the early 1990s especially, the 'Romanianness' of the Romanian state was believed to have been compromised because the large Hungarian minority in the Transylvania region of the country further asserted its 'Hungarianness'. In other words, the more secure in terms of identity these societies are, the less secure the states containing them may feel. For Waever (1993: 25) and his collaborators, traditional security analysis had, in this way, created 'an excessive concern with state stability', and thus had largely removed any sense of 'the "security" of societies in their own

right’.

As a concept, societal security was conceived very much as a reaction to events in Europe, both East and West, at the beginning of the 1990s, although some of its justifications for its development can be also be found in other parts of the world. In Western Europe, the process of European Union (EU) integration meant that political loyalties were increasingly being expressed either upwards to the EU level itself, or downwards to the level of the regions, thus weakening the traditional link between state and society. While in Eastern Europe the collapse of some of the former Socialist countries showed only too starkly the conflict between adherence to the state (Federal Yugoslavia) or adherence to other groups (Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims). Elsewhere, the importance of societal security was reflected in the struggles of groups such as the Palestinians and the Kurds. Deprived of a state of their own, these groups necessarily fell outside the scope of a more traditional, state-centric conception; only entering consideration as a nuisance or a hindrance to the project of state stability.

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