

Is realism too limited and too outdated to provide useful solutions to 21st century security challenges?

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8th November 2018

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Abstract

This paper presents the extent to which the realist school of thought is limited and still relevant when applied to transnational security threats. Given the greater focus on transnational threats in the post-Cold War era, it is essential to have a theoretical framework that can provide us with useful solutions to our current security challenges. To understand whether realism is still an appropriate strand of thought and if a more suitable alternative exists, the research has been carried out through the analysis of the primary literature supporting neorealism and the concept of "Human Security" as well as outlining the "Copenhagen School Securitization Framework". Moreover, the secondary literature chosen has been on the impact of transnational threats on the lives of individuals and state stability. The result of this paper is that despite the neorealist approach still having a degree of relevance in explaining state behaviour and power dynamics, it suffers from a series of limitations, being impractical in solving issues affecting the lives of people, resulting in domestic and political consequences from the securitization of issues to ensure state stability. While regional and multinational cooperation is seen as an optimal approach for tackling current issues, considering the inability of the "Human Security" to act efficiently and being conceptually too broad, the paper suggests combining the traditional and non-traditional methodologies for more well-rounded solutions.

1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, there has been a greater emphasis on non-traditional security (NTS) threats that are non-military and transnational in nature, posing a risk to the socio-political stability of nations. Considering the changing security landscape, scholars and policymakers are debating on the applicability and relevance of traditional security approaches to the security threats of the new millennium. This paper argues that despite realism not being completely outdated, as it gives us a pragmatic framework of analysis, it is theoretically unable to provide useful solutions to transnational issues, even having the potential of causing domestic and foreign instability. With the goal of understanding the limitations and relevance of realism, the underlying characteristics of this tradition, with focus on neorealism, given its emphasis on state behaviour, will be explored in the conceptual background with the introduction of the "Human Security" concept as an alternative. This will be followed by a description of transnational threats across selected interrelated political, economic and social dimensions which affect the security of humans and of the state. The scope of this is to understand in the following section the limits of security actors and whether all issues can be securitized considering the great political consequences of this process under the Copenhagen framework. Ultimately, the paper concludes by advancing the idea of merging traditional and non-traditional approaches to security for sustainable solutions given the human and state dimensions of transnational threats.

2. Conceptual Background: Traditional & Non-Traditional Security

2.1. Neorealism

One can argue that realism is one of the most essential theoretical lenses in security studies. Its emphasis on power and anarchy have been important to understand the complexities of inter-state conflicts and wars. Although there are several variations of this tradition, Kenneth Waltz's neorealism has set the standard for the political thought of the 21st century. In his work '*Theory of International Politics*', he has laid out a set of predictive assumptions about state behaviour. Waltz argues that the international system is composed of a structure without an ordering principle, meaning that states act in anarchy. In this system, the order is not established by a higher authority but through the interaction of equal, and autonomous states, which need to focus on their resources to achieve their interests.¹ Within this anarchical context, states pursue self-help, distinguishing themselves through the distribution of their capabilities.²

In contrast to 'Classical Realism', Waltz does not focus on the motivation or on the rational behaviour of leaders.³ He argues that the behaviour states can result from their interaction with other states to maximize their own survival. Since the structure can only be changed by great powers, the balancing can either be through the increase in relative power of states or through the establishment of alliances against hegemonic powers.⁴ According to

¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Waveland Press: Illinois, 1979), 88 - 107.

² Ibid., 93 - 114.

³ Ibid., 91.

⁴ Ibid., 102 - 128.

Waltz, in an anarchic order, the balance of power exists when “two or more states coexist”⁵ without a superior power to influence their interests.

2.2. Human Security

"Human Security" is an independent branch of security studies which explores security issues that pose a threat to the lives of people. This concept shifts away from the state-centric approach of realism, being part of the academic process of redefining the “referent object of security”⁶. While "Human Security" has been debated to a degree in scholarly papers, there is support to incorporate this concept in policymaking to achieve a more practical security for people.⁷ In fact, the "Human Security" concept stems from policymaking, with its origin being traced to the “United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)” Report in 1994. This report has been written upon the realization that traditional security is limited in explaining intra-state conflicts in the post-Cold War era.⁸

The way "Human Security" has been interpreted in the 1994 UNDP report has been “freedom from fear and freedom from want”⁹. The former is the security from threats that lead to death and physical harm such as genocides or organized crimes, whereas the latter is the freedom from the inability to achieve basic human needs such as access to food or medical care. In the report, the main characteristics of this concept are the universal applicability of "Human Security" to every person; the interdependence of traditional and non-traditional threats; the focus on prevention instead of intervention and its people-centered approach.¹⁰ Within "Human

⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶ Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan -Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 155.

⁷ Edward Newman, “Critical Human Security Studies,” *British International Studies Association* 36, no 1 (January 2010): 77 - 94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990519>.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, “Human Development Report,” *Oxford University Press* (1994): 22.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

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Security" seven types of security are encompassed: "economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security"¹¹ .

¹¹ Ibid., 24 - 25.

3. Transnational Security Threats to Multidimensional Security Aspects

3.1. Personal Security

Terrorism is not a new type of violence today considering that in it has killed over 350,000 individuals in the last 45 years. Nevertheless, the death toll has risen in the new millennium considering that 10,000 deaths occurred in the 1980' whereas currently, the highest fatalities were in 2014 with more than 43,000 deaths stemming from around 16,000 terrorism-related incidents.¹² The novelty of these attacks is not in the rise of casualties but rather the motivation of the perpetrators which has shifted away from revolutionary terrorist tendencies to transnational religious and nationalist aims, killing indiscriminately to receive maximum attention for their political interests.¹³

It is evident that terrorism not only causes great human cost but also creates state instability. This is especially the case for developing nations that do not have the ability to defend themselves from acts of terror. This inability is rooted in weak institutions, without a strong judicial system or rule of law, delegitimizing a state's authority and weakening, therefore, its chances of survival.¹⁴ Furthermore, acts of terror also impact a countries economy. With a greater number of terrorist attacks taking place within nations than transnationally¹⁵, the workforce productivity is lost and the security costs rise negatively

¹² Max Roseret al., "Terrorism," Our World In Data, last modified January 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism>.

¹³ Alexander Spence, "New versus old terrorism," in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies*, ed. by Richard Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2016): 101 - 145.

¹⁴ Subhayu Bandyopadhyay and Javed Younas, "Trade and Terror: The Impact of Terrorism on Developing Countries." *The Regional Economist*, 4th Quarter (2017): 12 -13.

¹⁵ Walters Enders et al. "Domestic Versus Transnational Terrorism: Data, Decomposition, and Dynamics," SAGE Publications (March 2011): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311398926>.

impacting a countries national income.¹⁶ Despite transnational incidents being infrequent they still lead to a great loss in FDI since foreign nations will less likely invest with a country prone to terrorism.¹⁷

3.2. Environmental Security

One of the largest environmental threats in our world is the degradation of the environment. The “International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)” estimates that anthropogenic factors are the most probable cause for the increase in the average temperature of the world.¹⁸ Currently, the consequence of this is that over 900 million individuals suffer from desertification worldwide with predictions of this number doubling by 2025.¹⁹ With transboundary pollution creating desertification, millions of individuals do not have access to clean drinking water. With the lack of water sanitation the “World Health Organization (WHO)” claims that 842 thousand individuals die of diarrhea each year.²⁰

With the “United Nations (UN)” predicting that by 2050 the global population will reach 9.4 billion²¹ it has been debated whether this will lead to the instability of states. Norman Myers (1986) has argued that issues such as water scarcity and climate change may lead to violent conflict.²² Robert Kaplan (1994) has expanded upon this in ‘*The Coming Anarchy*’ that with the rise in global population there will be a disruption of the environment causing diseases

¹⁶ Mehmet Cinar, “The effect of terrorism on economic growth: Panel data approach,” *Zbornik Radova Ekonomski Fakultet u Rijeka* 35, (2017): 97 - 121, <https://doi.org/10.18045/zbefri.2017.1.97>.

¹⁷ Alberto Abadie and Javier Gardeazabal. “Terrorism and the World Economy.” *Elsevier* 52, no. 1 (2008): 1 - 27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurocorev.2007.08.005>.

¹⁸ “Global Warming of 1.5 °C: Summary for Policymakers,” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC SR1.5, last modified 6 October 2018, <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

¹⁹ The World Bank. *Entering the 21st Century: World Development Report 1999/2000*, (New York: Oxford University Press: 1999), 88.

²⁰ “Drinking-water,” World Health Organization, last modified 7 February 2018, <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>.

²¹ “World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed November 1, 2018, <https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/POP/TOT/>.

²² Norman Myers, “The Environmental Dimension to Security Issues,” *The Environmentalist* 6, no. 4 (1986): 251 - 257.

and civil instability.²³ As a consequence of food and water scarcity, environmental refugees will migrate from their affected region to a location with more resources over which they will fight for with other ethnic groups. Since intrastate conflict will “revolve, to a significant degree, over the pursuit of critical materials”²⁴ it has been argued that the states need to be economically competitive by securing energy capabilities to ensure their survival.

3.3. Health Security

In our globalized world, there is also a rapid resurgence in infectious diseases noticeable. This trend can be explained from a variety of factors ranging from migration to the continuous use of antibiotics.²⁵ WHO estimated in the early 2000’ that one of the most dangerous diseases in the world are HIV/AIDS, diarrhea and tuberculosis.²⁶ With an emphasis on HIV/AIDS, in 2016 around 34 million individuals are infected with HIV²⁷ and 1.7 million individuals have died of illness related to AIDS.²⁸

For many years health has been seen as a matter of domestic political concern being only linked with security when a state’s military capacity has been affected by infectious diseases.²⁹ It is a recent phenomenon that health issues are now part of national and international security strategies as well as debates on public policy. The year 2000 is widely seen as the start of

²³ Robert, D. Kaplan, *The Coming of Anarchy* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group: 1994), 44 - 76.

²⁴ Michael, T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company: 2002), 1 - 80.

²⁵ Paul J. Smith, “Transnational Security Threats and State Survival: A Role for the Military?” *Parameters* (2000): 77 - 91.

²⁶ “The top 10 causes of death,” last modified 24 May 2018, <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death>.

²⁷ “Estimated number of people living with HIV, 2016 - By WHO region,” WHO, accessed November 1, 2018, http://gamapserv.who.int/mapLibrary/Files/Maps/HIV_all_2016.png.

²⁸ “Estimated number of people dying from HIV - related causes 2016 - By WHO region,” WHO, accessed November 1, 2018, http://gamapserv.who.int/mapLibrary/Files/Maps/HIV_deaths_2016.png.

²⁹ Jonathan Herington and Curley Melissa, “The Securitisation of Infectious Disease: International Norms and Domestic Politics in Asia,” *Cambridge University Press* 37, no. 1 (2011): 141 - 166, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000537>.

health securitization when the UN Security Council (UNSC) has stated HIV/AIDS to pose a threat to African security.³⁰ With the UNSC adoption of Resolution 1308 health issues such as HIV/AIDS have been incorporated in security agendas worldwide.³¹ This disease “poses a risk to stability and security”³² of states by lowering the productivity of labour reducing its domestic budget.³³ The pandemic has especially affected Africa decreasing national growth rates by to 2 to 4 percent.³⁴ The situation only gets worse with civil unrest that makes HIV/AIDS spread easier due to the high inflow of migrants and refugees.³⁵

³⁰ Colin McInnes and Kelly Lee, “Health, Security and Foreign Policy,” *Review of International Studies* 32 (2012): 5 - 23, <https://doi:10.1017/S0260210506006905>.

³¹ Garrett W. Brow and Sophie Harman, “Risks, Perceptions of Risk and Global Health Governance,” *Political Studies Association* (November 2011): 773 - 778, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00922.x>.

³² United Nations Security Council Resolution 1308, “HIV/AIDS and International Peace - keeping Operations,” accessed 1 November, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1308\(2000\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1308(2000)).

³³ Lori Bollinger and John Stover, “The economic impact of AIDS,” *Futures Group International* (1999): 10.

³⁴ Simon Dixon et al., “AIDS and economic growth in Africa: a panel data analysis”. *Journal of International Development* (2001): 411–426, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.795>.

³⁵ The World Bank. “Entering the 21st Century: World Development Report 1999/2000,” *Oxford University Press* (1999): 110.

4. Applicability of Realism in Transnational Security

4.1. Limitations of Security Actors

When considering the wide range of multidimensional transnational discussed in the previous chapter there are limitations on both theoretical sides of neorealism and of "Human Security". It is evident that the people-centered approach cannot be universally applied in all societal sectors. If specialized organizations are not able to tackle a transnational threat, the military has the capacity to react fast enough with effective countermeasures. This is especially the case for asymmetric warfare such as terrorism, stopping illegal migration or securing areas infected by diseases. In addition to this, while it is attractive from a theoretical standpoint to address every human related issue, the excessive broadening of security makes "Human Security" conceptually hard to implement. For this reason, many governments prefer using military means for preventive purposes as well as in the aftermath of disasters.

Nonetheless, the use of 'relative power' through military force cannot be applied in every non-traditional security threat. The military plays primarily a defensive role of fighting inter-state wars, defending the nation from any potential attacks and a symbolic purpose to ensure its survival through 'power maximization'. Therefore the use of the military for humanitarian missions not only drains the financial military budget of the government but also leads to a loss of combat skills. Additionally, many state-centric solutions proposed by governments are inadequate and necessitate regional and multilateral cooperation. Intergovernmental organizations maintain order and stability tackling a wide range of issues that pose threats internationally. This goes against the neorealist overemphasis on state equality and autonomy within an anarchic system since states abide collectively to international rules, although not

universal³⁶, not only out of material interest but also to ensure the welfare of their people. In our globalized and interconnected world, working together through the exchange of information and knowledge towards counterterrorism, improvement in water sanitation or treatment of diseases can radically improve international security. Other non-state actors such as NGOs also play a preventive role providing better assistance and expertise to concerns that affect people transnationally, instead of intervention with the possibility to distort the sovereignty of another state resulting in great political and socio-economic consequences.³⁷

4.2. Securitization Issues

The application of the realist principles in transnational security scenarios arises the question whether the issues previously outlined can be securitized and whether there are any political consequences of doing so. According to the Copenhagen school, developed by Buzan et al. (1998), securitization is defined as an issue “framed as a security problem”³⁸. Through the securitization discourse, only the most pressing issues are taken into consideration neglecting the rest. Securitization is unable to adapt to the forever changing security landscape as it continues to focus on issues such as HIV/AIDS which impact the economic stability of a state, despite it not being one of the greatest factors of death today.³⁹ Securitized issues can also be flawed and simplistic by virtue of not being able to explain indirect variables in the creation of

³⁶ Jacob, K. Cogan, “Noncompliance and the International Rule of Law,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 31, no. 1 (2006): 190.

³⁷ Jeffrey Pickering and Kisgani F. Emizet, “Political, Economic, and Social Consequences of Foreign Military Intervention,” *SAGE Publishing* 58, no. 3 (September 2006): 363 - 376, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290605900304>.

³⁸ Buzan, Barry et al., “Security: A New Framework for Analysis,” (London & Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1998): 75.

³⁹ “The top 10 causes of death,” World Health Organization, last modified 24 May 2018, <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death>.

violence. For instance, the causal link between environmental problems and violent conflict is not a sufficient explanation, needing to consider other factors such as resource scarcity.

The main consequence of securitization is that it undermines the influence of domestic institutions and liberties of civilians since all types of security issues are framed and approached as security threats by military or political elites without the consultation of the masses. The success of securitization lies on the ability of securitizing actors to convince the audience of the existential threat of a referent object in order to adopt emergency measures. The rationale behind this is the urgent mobilization of resources and the deployment thereof.⁴⁰ In line with the Copenhagen School, it remains subjective to see how one can establish what an existential threat is. The “War on Terror” perfectly illustrates how the attack of a non-state actor has been securitized as a national security threat to gain domestic and international legitimization for foreign interventionist policies in Afghanistan and Iraq with the scope of pursuing the maximization of relative power and hegemonic interest.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Buzan, Barry et al., “Security: A New Framework for Analysis,” 6.

⁴¹ Nathalie Frensley and Nelson Michaud, “Media, Securitization, and the War on Terrorism Comparing Bush’s Speech Frames in US, Canada, and European News Reports,” *Southern Political Science Association* (2004): 1 - 28.

5. Conclusion

Without a doubt realism, when approached from a neorealist standpoint, still has a degree of relevance in our world. States continue to be vital in the decision making of organizations, being driven by their persistent struggle for power-maximization and self-interest. This is greatly exemplified in scenarios of systemic violence, environmental migration or communicable diseases which weaken a state's stability. The securitization of these issues shows us the rationale of states that want to ensure their survival and interest either through foreign intervention, maintenance of economic competitiveness or containment of countries plagued by communicable diseases to stop them from spreading. Moreover, the principle of anarchy is particularly clear in the context of lacking universal laws that can hold states equally accountable when damaging the sovereignty of another state. Nevertheless, this framework of analyzing state behaviour, while indeed useful, cannot provide us with pragmatic solutions to solve the security challenges of the new millennium. The overemphasis of neorealism on the power dynamics of survivalism between states does not leave room to acknowledge that states are nowadays interdependent, abide by international norms and desire international cooperation. In this environment, the survival of states is not fully ensured through military means as it cannot be mainstreamed to all societal issues. Regional and multilateral collaboration is more appropriate and cost-effective in humanitarian missions to prevent any deaths caused by systemic violence or the inability to access basic human needs. In contrast, the state-centric approaches are not only inaccurate explanations to complex issues and unable to adapt to factually more important security concerns but also pose a threat to the stability of other countries, as well as their own, through the securitization of selected threats. All things considered, transnational security issues are without a doubt threatening the lives of individuals

and the politico-economic stability of states. "Human Security" does provide us with alternative methods, however, not all issues can be tackled with people-centered approaches, necessitating at times the relative power of states and an understanding of state behaviour. We are urged therefore to combine traditional and non-traditional ways for more sustainable solutions.

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