Themes of Global Security: From the Traditional to the Contemporary Security Agenda
Zenonas Tziarras

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Zenonas Tziarras is currently a PhD student in Politics & International Studies at the University of Warwick, UK, where he researches Turkish Foreign Policy, IR theory and Foreign Policy Analysis. He holds a BA in Mediterranean Studies & International Relations, from the University of the Aegean, Greece, and an MA in International Relations and Strategic Studies from the University of Birmingham, UK. He attended specialization courses in International Security at the University of Delhi, India; he took part in a training program on Leadership & Conflict Resolution at Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey; and he has been an Intern at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo Cyprus Centre (PRIO CC).
Zenonas is currently a Junior Research Scholar at the Greek think tank Strategy International in the program “Peripheral and Global Governance & relations with Turkey”. His interests lie in Turkish Politics/Foreign Policy, Middle East Politics, Foreign Policy Analysis, Security and Strategic Studies, (Energy) Geopolitics, and Intrastate Conflict Analysis.

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Introduction

Security and globalisation are two key concepts that we need to take into account in order to understand today’s international relations. In this light a significant number of both simple and complicated questions, that should be answered in order to understand global security today, arises. Some of these questions are: what does security mean? What is globalisation? Do we really live in a post-Westphalian system? What is armed conflict and what causes it? Is the proliferation of nuclear weapons really bad? Is the nuclear capability really enough to deter and maintain peace? Should the security concept be broadened? If yes, what other threats should it include? How “new” are “new wars” and to what extent is the “state failure” thesis valid? Is the “global war on terror” justified or is terrorism a means to a just end? Is it possible for development and security to coexist or should one of them pre-exist?

How serious threat to security is the environment today and why? Should we see refugees as a humanitarian problem or as a security threat? In what follows we shall try to briefly address the above topics thus providing an overview of the contemporary global security environment.

The Concept of Security and the Globalised International System

To begin with it should be noted that the concept of “security” is, indeed, a subjective one. Despite traditional ideas such as world peace and national security or non-traditional threats such as poverty, the environment and the well being of the individual, it is true that “security” should be generally understood as a status of satisfying stability; in other words, the safety of what different referent objects consider valuable by dealing with different threats through different security policies. From that

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1 Baldwin elaborates this way of conceptualizing security in Baldwin, A. David, “The Concept of
perspective, it becomes clear that the concept of “security” should be broadened and that is, to a great extent, because of the impact that globalisation has had on international relations and international security. That is not to say that globalisation is a recent process. History suggests that globalisation processes have been going on for years, even centuries. Going back to the definition of globalisation, it seems that the main difference between the present day and a century ago, is the evolution of information technology and communications as well as the increased interconnectedness between states due to (apart from the information technology) the spread of liberal trade and market economy. Having said that, we have to admit that the globalisation dynamics, along with the impact of the end of the Cold War, have changed the security priorities. Thus, in the same way that interconnectedness can maintain the peace, according to the liberal ideas\(^2\), it can also affect the international security because, today, what happens in one part of the world can affect another.

Even though the globalisation thesis maintains that we live in a post-Westphalian, less state-centric, global system, that does not mean that the nation-state has lost its role. The 1648 Westphalia agreement officialised the state as we still know it today, and acknowledged certain characteristics of it such as the centralised/nationalised political authority and the homogeneity of state population. As such, state was – and still is – perceived as the main actor in the international system. On the other hand, the post-Westphalian system thesis suggests that the state-centric system is fading and that new, non-state actors are emerging to take their place in the realm of international relations/security. It also suggests that extra-systemic or extra-state conflicts – that is, conflicts between common/interconnected interests thus maintaining peace. See for example Kant Immanuel, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”, 1795 at [http://www.constitution.org/kant/perpeace.htm](http://www.constitution.org/kant/perpeace.htm) and Levy S. Jackob, “War and Peace” in Carlsnaes W., Risse T. & Simmons A. B., eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, SAGE, London, 2002, pp.356-357.

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\(^2\) This draws mainly upon Kant’s notion that liberal democracies/states are more peaceful. In this context liberal policies, economy and institutions create a “liberal” network of
state and non-state actors – have taken the place of wars between states, proxy wars, and even anti-colonialism (liberation) wars. In order to better understand the non-traditional security thinking and the post-Westphalian model we should first examine the state-centric international order and the traditional/strategic security understanding.

**Cold War and Traditional Security**

A very good way to understand the traditional security is through the study of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons reflect the reality of the Cold War and therefore the predominance of political Realism and strategy during that time. Nuclear weapons are considered to be the most extreme form of military power. They could provide crisis stability, prevention of conventional war, and general foreign policy support. The possession of nuclear weapons is based on the idea that security is achieved by creating insecurity. From that perspective nuclear weapons do not create deterrence; instead, deterrence creates nuclear weapons. Within this context we can understand France’s effort to stay on top of things after decolonisation and Pakistan’s effort to even up with India’s power and Russia’s efforts to compete with the U.S.

One could argue that even though nuclear weapons are, morally speaking, fundamentally evil, they can contribute in maintaining the stability between two states. However, it is also true that nuclear weapons are not enough to maintain peace because of the emergence of non-state actors that could drive a state to make the first strike. For example in India and Pakistan—despite the fact that the two countries try to avoid the breakout of a nuclear war – violent actions from non-state/terrorist actors (with bases either in India, Pakistan or Kashmir) could trigger a conflict. That is because one of these parties could blame the other for being the driving force behind, or the haven for, these actions.

**The Emergence of the Contemporary Security Agenda**

During the 80s, this narrow perception of security started fading

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out. Realist notions such as the state-centric international system, the pessimistic view of the world, and the anarchy of the international system were challenged by the, more optimistic, neo-liberal approach as well as by other critical approaches to security like constructivism, feminism, green theory and post-modernism. In addition, the securitisation concept became a particularly interesting one since it claims that certain issues are transformed into security issues by certain actors; in other words, our perception of certain actors or realities as security threats, is socially and politically constructed.

The social construction discourse is also directly associated with identity politics. Identity politics can be found mainly in the scholarship which deals with civil wars and ethnic conflicts. Indicatively we note that civil wars are generally included in the framework of intrastate wars, which means that they are limited within certain territorial boundaries, while the concept of ethnic conflict suggests is mainly characterised by ethnic identity.

The Contested “New” Security Threats and Terrorism

Having seen the transition from traditional to contemporary security it should be noted that some aspects of the broader concept of security, like the “new wars” and “state failure” thesis are a little exaggerated. Even though globalisation and the evolution of technology have played a role in affecting the character of recent wars, most of the “new wars” arguments lack historical perspective. For example, the atrocities and the victimisation of civilians, that the “New wars” thesis presents as “new” characteristics of armed conflicts, have always existed and have remained mostly unchanged.

Likewise, the “fail state” thesis seems to be, indeed, a securitised matter. Even though “failed states” present certain characteristics that could affect negatively their socio-political system and consequently the regional or international

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security, it is obvious that only certain states are chosen to be identified as “failed” over other states with similar socio-political status. This is part of a western political construction which seeks to associate certain states with the threat for regional or global security according to the western interests. Consequently we can conclude that the “failed states” or “state failure” concept is, at least, contested and subjective. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that “failed states” could be ideal havens for terrorist groups or they could constitute possible bases for transnational terrorism activities. That is of course important since terrorism, after September 11, is perceived as one of the most prominent global security threats.

Despite the American rhetoric, that has been developed after 2001, regarding terrorism and the religious/Islamic fundamentalism, it is a fact that the casualties caused by state terrorism are far greater than non-state terrorism’s. It is also important that before the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 there was not a single suicide bombing in that country. Having said that there has to be made a distinction between the two main categories of terrorism. First, the terrorism of non-state actors (of the weak); second, the terrorism of state actors (of the strong). The difference between the two is that states can get away with it. This is not to suggest that non-state actors’ terrorism is justified but to say that it is a matter of perception. Furthermore terrorism, especially the non-state one, is a product of a reaction rather than an action, which leads to a vicious circle. As far as the US’s “global war on terror” is concerned, it has been proved mostly unsuccessful. That is for two main reasons: first, terrorism is a tactic and one cannot go to war against a tactic and, second, a just war cannot be fought by unjust means because it prolongs the vicious circle. The latter could apply for both state- (e.g. US) and non-state (e.g. Al-Qaida) actors.

Development, Peace-building, and Security

In order to deal with most of the aforementioned security problems, the international community has

\[\text{Ibid, pp.437}\]
been undertaking peacekeeping, peace-building, state-building and economic development operations in several parts of the world, with the hope that domestic stability and reconciliation between the conflicting parties (either identity groups or states) will result in local and regional security. These operations are mainly based on the neoliberal ideas and their aim is the structural adjustment of the states in need by alleviating problems such as poverty, human rights violations, the lack of juridical system and by establishing a better welfare system in order to minimise the feelings of insecurity.

Two problems can be identified in this logic: first, development and security are linked through policies that constitute a new form of imperialism and, second, the dilemma regarding which process (development or security) should come first in order for the second one to work better. In terms of the neo-imperialism argument, although most state-building operations have imperialistic intentions, no one can disagree with the fact that these operations make those states more viable to live in. However, the bottom-up change should be also considered. From that perspective reconciliation and security should come first along with some basic development activities in order for the state-building to succeed\(^7\).

**Contemporary “Human Security” Threats**

Although the aspects of global security that we have examined so far are very important, the contemporary security agenda expands further that terrorism, “failed states” and “new wars”. Especially after the end of the Cold War, the environment, migration and forced migration have gradually become very important. The environmental change, as a security threat, could cause several direct and indirect problems such as: heightened sea levels, food and water shortage, increased pollution and diseases, natural disasters, international or intrastate conflicts, migration, etc.\(^8\) Furthermore, having accepted that the environmental change is a valid and very important security threat (a mainly “human


security” threat), migration and forced migration are the next very important issues on the security threat agenda. Migration is a problem that could be the result of the environmental change, or inter and intrastate conflicts, while it could also be a strategy that employs intentional forced displacement as a means in order to cause instability in a nearby country (e.g. Pakistan-India). From that perspective the problem of migration could not only be a humanitarian problem but also a security problem. In this case, the dilemma is to whether to deal with refugees as a humanitarian problem when at the same time that could mean fostering and providing havens to “refugee warriors”\(^9\). Potential security threats that can occur from forced migration or militarised refugees are: triggering a seemingly local but essentially trans-boundary conflict in the host state; the polarisation of the host society; a conflict between refugees and the host government; tensions between the host and the home governments, etc. It is clearly a complicated subject but the fact that we cannot just stop helping refugees because that could help militarised groups, is generally accepted. What we could do is focus on how to prevent refugee displacement by resolving the conflict before it breaks out or try to contain it in close cooperation with the local and regional actors.

**Conclusions and Security Management**

International security has, indeed, come a long way since the end of the Cold War. New security threats emerge every day while this analysis has only presented a small part of the complex and multileveled nature of the contemporary global security agenda. Thus international security cannot be studied without taking into account the new and emerging challenges or even exaggerated concepts such as “new wars” or “failed states”. However, a historical perspective is needed in order to validate or criticise such concepts. Furthermore a comparative analysis of the past and present nature of the international system is always important to clearly identify any structural or

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other differences. Lastly, in order to effectively address a security threat the selection of a security policy or agent must be based on which value, of which referent object, is threatened and on what threatens it.
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