The New Security: Trends in the Study of Security in International Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

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The study of security aspects in the discipline of international relations has grown immensely since the beginning of the development of this academic field, and especially following the end of the Cold War. This article examines the factors that led to its expansion since the 1990s. The key assertion is that with the culmination of the Cold War, the rapid changes within the international arena provided scholars of international relations with new raw material and with research questions that undermined the realist approach, which had dominated this field of study.

Given the emergence of security challenges within countries, especially ethnic strife and civil wars, which have often led to international humanitarian intervention to stop the bloodshed or outright genocide, and the appearance of terrorist threats and attacks by global terrorist organizations (such as al-Qaeda), researchers are now focusing on the activities of non-state players both in relation to individual countries and in the global arena, which previously were overlooked in the security literature.

Therefore, scholars of international relations now have more theories, as well as conceptual terms and analytical tools, to study security within the discipline of international relations than they had before the end of the Cold War. The greater depth and breadth of security studies was not the result of a scientific revolution or radical transformation in common research methods but rather was due to a lengthy process of exchanges

among different approaches to the study of international relations, emphasizing critique and debate between the realist approach and competing methodologies.

Keywords: Realist approach, liberal approach, constructivist approach, globalization, non-state players, Cold War

Introduction

Many of the security studies within the academic field of international relations originated with the Cold War (1945–1991). These studies generally concentrated rather naturally on the most relevant security issues of their time: patterns of enmity, competition, and tensions between the two superpower of the time, the United States and the Soviet Union; the superpowers' relations with their allies; international organizations and institutions through which the countries advanced their security objectives; the nuclear arms race and its implications for the international system, including security regimes and treaties to limit armament or disarm nations.

At the theoretical level, these studies were influenced predominantly by the realist approach, which focused on the ramifications of anarchy in the international system on state conduct and phenomena linked to the division of power among them, such as arms races and defense treaties. Furthermore, during the Cold War, the theoretical arguments between realism and competing approaches—liberalism and Marxism—focused on the characteristics and modus operandi of states: the differences in their military and economic capabilities, regime types, decision-making processes of the leaders, all of which were examined in great detail and provided the bulk of the raw data for security studies in the discipline of international relations. In contrast, non-state players, such as non-governmental organizations operating at the sub-state and/or global levels and terrorist organizations, remained marginal to the debate in the field of security theory.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, new studies have broadened the scope and debate in studying the security aspects in the field of international relations. Three major trends reflected this development: first, increased reference to a range of non-state players as an inseparable part of security phenomena and challenges in recent decades; second, a more profound approach to security problems emerging within states at the regional and

global levels and not just between the superpowers in the international system; and, third, the definition of security as a multidimensional concept that relates not only to security's physical, military, and economic contexts but also to its ideological or cognitive dimensions, such as stability and continuity of identity components creating a sense of belonging to a group or state. The new analytical dimensions also differentiate between group security and individual security; that is, not violating individual universal rights or limiting individual freedom (as a result of either political or economic oppression).[1] These issues, which were also included in the category of security in the field of international relations toward the end of the twentieth century, are offshoots of liberal theories and theories applied from other research fields, such as constructivism in sociology.[2]

The purpose of this article is to examine the processes that led to the diversifying of security studies in the field of international relations after the end of the Cold War. The main assertion here is that for researchers who experienced the transition to the new era, security developments that characterized the post-Cold War era—domestic conflicts, civil wars, and international terrorist attacks—necessitated a changing focus in security studies. This shift led to growing criticism of the existing theories as they did not offer compelling explanations of contemporary phenomena. At the same time, international relations scholars were busy developing new research directions and delving deeper into research directions that previously had been marginal to the security discourse. In other words, the changing spirit of the times and the security phenomena that emerged following the Cold War diversified the research within international relations leading scholars to rethink the research methods and theories being applied to security problems. These changes also prompted historians to present new explanations for security phenomena of the past, partly by examining the influence of non-state players. Therefore, security studies as a branch of the field of international relations expanded greatly. Moreover, although relevant research topics had previously been incorporated into the field before and during the Cold War, they had been marginalized because of the prevailing realist approach.

Security Studies Until the End of the Cold War: Realism and its Competitors

Ever since international relations became an academic discipline in the mid twentieth century, it has been host to critical debate among several schools of thought or perspectives.[3] Notably, international relations is not only a branch of political science focusing on politics at the international level but also an eclectic field that has embraced many theoretical foundations and research methods from virtually all the social sciences and humanities disciplines (especially economics, sociology, psychology, history, and cultural studies). In an article published in 1981, Robert Cox claimed that the division of international relations according to separate units, such as the realist focus on the state, was rooted in convenience. According to Cox, the field of international relations touches upon human society in all its constellations, and not only states or nations.[4] Similarly, after the Cold War, international relations scholars criticized the certitude of the realist approach, which professed to determine, inter alia, what belonged to security studies and what did not.

The end of the Cold War and its far-reaching ramifications for international politics was an important milestone in the development of international relations. It intensified the essential debate about the rigid assumptions of realism, which till then had been the dominant approach, especially among international relations researchers who focused on security. When attempting to explain phenomena of war, strategy, or conflict management diplomacy, the realist approach focused on relations between superpowers and states as the framework for analyzing the dynamics in international relations. This approach assumed that states were not only the central players in international relations but also were expected to behave similarly based on the distribution of power among them, especially military power. According to the realist approach, this was due to the anarchy within the international system. In these conditions, states strive to improve their security and survivability by increasing their internal military power or by joining stronger nations or superpowers through military treaties or pacts. This approach avers that, to explain the security phenomena within the international system, it is first necessary to focus on the states holding the most power, i.e., the superpowers.[5]

Realism theories provided condensed explanations for a range of phenomena that occurred in the twentieth century and earlier, from the wars among the

European powers, through two world wars, to the Cold War, which began with the formation of two blocs of states allied with either the United States or the Soviet Union. According to the assumptions of the realist theories, the Cold War was characterized by stability between the two superpowers, which sought to avoid direct conflict, even despite great tensions between them, the nuclear arms race, and their military involvement in regions where each wanted to increase their influence at the expense of the other (such as the US involvement in the war in Vietnam and the Soviet involvement in the war in Afghanistan).

As a result of the conduct of the United States and the Soviet Union, researchers published about the conditions for achieving deterrence or a nuclear "balance of terror" between the two as the basis for international security stability. A conspicuous example was the literature on MAD (mutually assured destruction), a form of deterrence resulting from both powers' nuclear ability to cause the other catastrophic damage. Therefore, the core of the security agenda during the Cold War consisted of attempts to maintain a balance between the superpowers or to curb them, as each strove to preserve its relative might and expand the bloc it was leading by "signing up" new member states. During this period, the superpowers, and the rival blocs in particular, were focused on mutual threats to security. The superpowers were only secondarily involved in security problems and in regional wars, such as those between Israel and the Arab nations. However, this involvement was clearly related to the Cold War itself; that is, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union over regions of influence led them to involvement in regional conflicts.

Therefore, it is not surprising that between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union/end of the Cold War in 1991, the realist approach dominated security studies in the discipline of international relations, as this approach mirrored the security problems that were seen as most central and pressing from the perspective of the superpowers. It is noteworthy that competing theories and approaches during this period also focused on the conduct and interactions of states, although they refuted the realist approach's assumptions about the ramifications of anarchy.

The debate between the liberalist-establishment approach and the realist one focused the ramifications of anarchy for international security. Unlike the realist approach, competing approaches assumed it was possible to

reduce the tendency for conflict and increase cooperation among nations vis-à-vis international institutions and democratic regimes.[6] The English school, for example, distinguished between the "state system" and the "state society" to emphasize the common interests that encourage international cooperation, thereby mitigating anarchy's ramifications on the tendency toward war.[7] By contrast, the liberal-establishment approach championed the importance of international institutions and organizations as bonds that serve as intermediaries between states and increase cooperation among them.

In hindsight, realism's assumptions clearly reflected the international situation in those years whenever competitive patterns, arms races, and the establishment of opposing alliances between the superpowers came into play. In fact, the United States and the Soviet Union attempted, each according to its ability, to boost their power and improve their military capabilities—especially with regard to ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons—to maintain the "balance of terror." This empirically validated the realist rationale regarding similar behavior of states in the international system (even when the ideologies of their leaders were different) due to the conditions of anarchy.

Indeed, researchers applying the realist approach answered their critics by saying that realist theories and assumptions best explained the security issues that were most relevant to understanding reality; therefore, competing approaches, based on the assessment that it was possible to mitigate anarchy's ramifications and incentivize cooperation among nations (e.g., through international institutions), either missed the point in their analysis of reality or focused on dimensions that did not have any impact on states' behavior in the realm of security (e.g., the liberal approach, which explains how the nature of a state's internal regime affects the conduct of other nations in the international arena).

Moreover, realist researchers intentionally avoided studying the activities of non-state players that destabilize international security (such as terrorist organizations, separatist movements, and transnational criminal organizations),[8] claiming that their impact on international security was minimal compared to that of the superpowers. According to such researchers, even international organizations did not have any significant influence on security, because they were merely an apparatus or arena by which the superpowers could advance their goals, such as for creating international coalitions; otherwise,

the superpowers would not support these organizations and they would collapse.[9]

New Research Directions after the Cold War: Manifestations and Meanings

The major change that occurred in the theories of international relations after the Cold War was an openness to new directions of thinking, which led to diversity in the research on security, in addition to engaging in state issues, with clear connection to the superpowers' military and economic might, as well as the wide range of issues on the international agenda.

The end of the Cold War posed a challenge to scholars of international relations. The mainstream of security theories and studies in the field until then had focused on analyzing the power relations between the superpowers, international institutions, and international security regimes and did not provide tools for analyzing the internal collapse of the Communist bloc and the revolutions and regime changes that occurred in quick succession in the states constituting that bloc.

Ethnic conflict was another issue that only gained researchers' interest in the years following the Cold War, with the ethnic strife that broke out in Eastern Europe and Africa in the 1990s. Thus, many problems and players—previously having been sidelined as relations between the superpowers and their military alliances had occupied center stage of the security studies and shaped the theories in the field—now appeared on the international agenda. In contrast, security issues in weak nations (such as the African states) did not gain attention in the international political arena nor in the Cold War-era security discourse and therefore also were not the focus of security studies. The rapidly changing international reality of the early 1990s provided scholars of international relations with new raw materials and research questions, which probed the established way of thinking about security in the international system. The critique of the realist approach on the one hand and the frequent changes in the nature of international security problems on the other led to range of research directions.

Scholars of international relations particularly wanted to focus more expressly on conflicts in the post-Cold War era: ethnic strife, international humanitarian intervention in zones of conflict and genocide, and the ascent of global terrorist organizations (such as al-Qaeda). In doing so, researchers

focused on the players that previously had not appeared in the literature about security: players operating within states (and conducting relations of cooperation or conflict among them), supranational players, and ideological dimensions of international relations that could explain the creation or emergence of political conflicts or resolutions. In relating to these aspects, scholars formulated new theories, having been inspired by the social science disciplines—such as sociology and anthropology—that have a clear thematic connection to international relations. In the 1990s, those disciplines influenced the development of the constructivist approach to the study of international relations. This approach stresses the role of social processes of structuring, such as the assimilation of common beliefs and concepts through social interactions among players, as background to prominent phenomena in international security, including conflicts and peace processes.[10]

These developments enriched both the professional literature dealing precisely with the non-state components of international relations—including the study of nationalism—and the debate over the impact of ideas and identities on international politics and especially personal security. In the post-Cold War years, the literature that addressed the effects of norms and identities on the division into areas of conflict and peace expanded greatly. Another notable research direction at that time was the focus on regional spheres where unique security phenomena took place, the connections between states' domestic security problems and their involvement in international conflicts, and security problems (such as cyberattacks) that gained momentum as a result of processes of globalization. With the rise of new terrorist and cyber threats, research in the current century has expanded into the fields of cyberspace, the global spread of terrorist organizations and international criminal gangs, and many other global security phenomena, where states may have some influence; but in most cases they are not the entities generating these phenomena, and certainly they are not the only players on the field.[11]

In this sense, the thinking that characterized the Cold War—that states and superpowers constituted the main focus for research on security issues in the field of international relations—was fundamentally transformed by including other players and phenomena in the debate. As a result, the analysis also became more diverse. The most conspicuous result was the transition away from focusing on one central arena ("the international arena"), which had a limited number of relevant players and variables, to a multidimensional

analysis of "international security," relating to a number of overlapping, interdependent arenas of analysis: security at the state or domestic level as well as within the regional and global arenas. Thus, scholars in the field are attempting to renew research methods and focal points in order to explain with greater efficiency the dynamics and changes that have occurred in the security field in the post-Cold War era.

The Development of Security Studies in the Formation of International Relations as a Research Discipline

Although the events at the end of the Cold War created the impetus to move in new research directions, the expansion of security studies within the discipline of international relations represented a long-standing process of crystallizing international relations as a research discipline based on debate between diverse schools of thought and approaches in the social sciences. For example, some approaches focused on environmental influences (or the international system) on player conduct versus approaches that emphasized the ramifications of the nature of regimes, ideas, and corporate processes on players in international relations.

The emergence of new branches of research in security studies maximized the potential that had been inherent in the field of international relations since the beginning. In the context of security, however, this potential could not be realized as long as the realist approach dominated the field and set the tone as it focused excessively on states and the power relations between them and ignored non-state components of international relations. By focusing on security phenomena that was not caused directly by states, scholars of international relations expanded its study, inter alia, by examining the connection between security problems typical of the post-Cold War era and the globalization phenomena.[12] In the post-Cold War reality, criticism of the realist approach and its determinism regarding the distribution of power among states and its influence on their patterns of conduct became much more valid than before. As international security problems transitioned from the inter-superpower level to the regional and even intra-state levels (with emphasis on weak states, which became the focus of security problems in the new era), it became clear that the research direction needed to be shifted.

Therefore, the new era posed a challenge to realist thought and led scholars of international relations to reexamine theories of security aspects and

formulate new security studies, informed by diverse theoretical perspectives that helped analyze a dynamic reality. Consequent to these processes, the predominance of realism in international relations started to wane in the 1990s and diverse research became a striking feature of security studies. New theories and research directions enriched the discourse among the schools of thought and the multiplicity of explanations for phenomena on the international security agenda. Among these were studies of global terrorist organizations, whose ascent became a concrete threat to security after 9/11.

At present, the realist approach no longer has the capacity to strongly determine or influence the issues that are at the core of security studies. In contrast, more studies are applying the liberal approach to understand the function of international institutions in confronting the current security challenges, especially state and non-state player relations, international intervention in local or regional conflicts, and so forth. Concurrently, security studies are also increasingly influenced by sociological analysis, such as comparing the international arena to human society, which is subject to processes of collective consciousness and identity formation, affected by ideas transmitted via social interactions among players. In the security context, constructivist studies (that is, studies taking a sociological approach) have emphasized the impact of ideologies and norms on the emergence of international conflicts and possibly more so on efforts of conflict resolution. In particular, studies acknowledge the norms of sovereignty, international borders, and non-intervention, which assist the international community in creating shared expectations, finding consensual solutions to security problems, encouraging cooperation, and preventing the outbreak of violent conflict.[13]

Research Topics in Security Studies in the Current Century

States as well as state-run international institutions and organizations, especially powers that can affect their establishment and functioning by economic or military measures, are still major subjects of security studies. New studies in the field, however, increasingly refer to a range of security issues that touch the state only indirectly, and instead emphasize the actions of non-state players, whether these are non-governmental organizations or violent non-state players at the sub-state or international levels.

Since the 1990s, these studies have attempted to clarify the current security challenges by incorporating diverse non-state players into the

theoretical framework of their analysis. As a result, they no longer focus on the analytical components of the state but rather examine players operating at the societal level—which previously had received less attention—and players operating globally beyond the limits of enforcement and control by states or international organizations.

As part of this trends, studies focused on non-state players with unique influence on international security, such as networks, have emerged. Unlike international organizations, the networks may be decentralized and lack a hierarchy of functions. The number of players (active or potential) in a network and its number of connections (to transmit necessary information to promote the common goal) increase its effectiveness.[14] Some networks operate within the borders of a single state, while others cross international borders (and are therefore described as supranational). This is significant in terms of how states deal with the security challenges posed by networks: Some networks cooperate with the states, even helping them combat phenomena that undermine their security, while other networks exploit state weaknesses and technology to undermine their sovereignty, thereby posing as security challenges (such as by smuggling and other phenomena). This category of non-state players includes criminal and terrorist networks but also include networks of human rights activists intent on advancing ideologies, norms, or ideas about security in the international sphere or within states (such as condemning regimes responsible for war crimes).

Another expanding research trend is the study of security cooperation between states and non-state entities. Within this context, security governance, referring to cooperation between states/international organizations and private players that are not part of any state institutions but are able to help improve the security situation within the state, as well as regionally and globally, is a prominent subject of research. These private players include militias participating in the reconstruction of states following the end of ethnic strife or civil war (for example, the attempts to reestablish the Libyan state after the revolution in 2011 through the cooperative efforts of several local military organizations). These players also include private security and cyber companies to which states are turning instead of their own armies for localized solutions to security challenges, such as fighting terrorism. The expansion of the phenomenon of security governance in recent years reflects the decentralized approach of international security cooperation: a

transition from security regimes or other settings coordinated by states to more complex structures of security cooperation in which non-state players are granted state authority.[15]

One must not forget that historians of international relations increasingly are paying attention to the role of non-state players in international security. Some historical studies on international relations in the twentieth century (including the Cold War era) published in recent decades have reexamined the effect of non-state players on central historical events. A notable example is the work by US historian Jeremi Suri, who looked at how the global social protests starting in the 1960s affected the détente between the superpowers and their blocs.[16] Suri studied the social protests of internal groups, specifically student demonstrations and other protest activities, both in Western democracies and in Communist states. He determined that the détente between the superpowers toward the end of the Cold War, which led, inter alia, to slowing down the nuclear arms race (the NPT, SALT, and START), was the response of the superpowers' leaders in the two blocs to internal pressure, namely the social protests against the economic and foreign policy of the Cold War. The protests, which spread around the world, were mostly led by young people, mainly students, and not so much by leaders of political movements.

Suri's research displays a unique perspective on Cold War events. Instead of focusing on the material and technological aspects of the arms race or the superpowers' competition in general, Suri concentrates on the fabric of the relationship between leader and society in each of the states taking part in the arms race and the ramifications of these relationships on international security. In this sense, Suri shifted the analysis of international security events from the level of relations between the superpowers or their leader, as was the case in previous studies of the topic, to the internal and cross-national levels, in relating to the social protest as a phenomenon that gathered momentum mainly in the West in the 1960s.

The most interesting conclusion of Suri's study is that internal political pressures brought to bear on the leaders of the superpowers as the protest movements and demonstrations prompted them to reverse relations between the two blocs before the end of the Cold War (reducing the scope military competition, especially the arms race). Suri's analysis further demonstrated that the power relations and capabilities gap between the superpowers during

those years did not provide a reasonable explanation for the détente. In other words, in the preceding period, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union faced an economic problem or military/technological challenge significant enough to have impeded the arms race. Therefore, the military data of the 1960s did not contain any explanation for the diplomatic reversal. Furthermore, the foreign policy of the two blocs before the détente also did not hint at any moderation or willingness to make any concessions in their competition and rivalry. According to Suri, the logical explanation for the détente then is to be found in the internal interactions between domestic pressure groups and the leaders in each of the states in the blocs. The public experienced economic difficulties because of the tremendous financial investments in the arms race, resulting in protests by populations that had lost their trust in their leaders' policies. This had far-reaching ramifications on the bilateral relations of the superpowers and the patterns of confrontation between them.

A Multidimensional Definition of the Concept of Security

Following the Cold War, the debate over different aspects of security led to new multidimensional definitions of the concept within the field of international relations. Prominent were economic security (or socioeconomic security), relating to a person or social group's economic status; ecological security, relating to the quality of the environment, and ontological security, addressing the stability and continuity of the components of one's identity that create a sense of belonging to a group or nation. This last category is based on a conceptual dimension related to a person, group, or nation (unlike physical dimensions, such as military might, which were the focus of the realist research). As the scholar David Baldwin has pointed out, the multidimensional nature of security is not a new revelation, nor is referring to different analytical strata (the state, the society, the community, the individual, and so forth). The various aspects of security in international relations did not suddenly emerge after the Cold War; rather, changes in international circumstances, especially the security problems of this time, left an imprint also on the discourse of security studies within the field of international relations, and this preoccupation with non-military security matters was characteristic of the post-Cold War era.[17]

Conclusion

Scholars of international relations currently have more theories and analytical tools for researching the various aspects of security than they did before the end of the Cold War. The field was enriched by an extended process mainly of dialogue between different approaches to the study of international relations, which was critical of realism and emphasized its debate with competing approaches in the field. Given the security developments that occurred following the Cold War, the ongoing critical examination of existing theories made it possible to expand the study of security within the field of international relations. Thus, as an academic discipline, international relations responded to changes in reality and avoided becoming immaterial. This also made the field more relevant for political leaders confronting the complexity of security issues in the new era.

In a period in which non-state players have become the major challenge to international security, they cannot be avoided when formulating a theory to explain reality as accurately as possible. Also, the developing of research methods specific to security phenome, such as comparing phenomena in separate regions, may improve the proficiency of current theories in providing explanations and the ability of scholars to identify unique security phenomena.

One also cannot ignore, however, the dominant influence of the large powers on international security even after the Cold War. In the Middle East, for example, we have witnessed a return to some of the patterns of competition for regional influence between the United States and Russia, leading to hypotheses about the renewal of the Cold War in the present era. Therefore, security studies within the field of international relations should not overlook the dynamic between the large powers in responding to security incidents and threats throughout the world, which consequently are liable to lead to confrontations and crises.

Moreover, states in general are, to a certain extent, still involved in conflicts within and beyond their borders, and they continue to intervene militarily in conflict zones by establishing international coalitions in the war against terror as well as other attempts to make their mark on international security. In addition, the large powers remain highly influential when it comes to the international security agenda. Therefore, the study of security within the field of international relations, which in the past focused on states and their interactions, now deals with a greater range of players and phenomena

within and between the states as well as in the global sphere. New security studies emphasize the interactions between states and non-state players, which have become key security challenges (such as the terrorist threats by the Islamic State) in parts of the world. These developments enrich the field of international relations. rendering it a dynamic research discipline subject to periodic criticism and new thinking. Furthermore, the new theories and definitions that have been added to the study of security are a clear demonstration of its complexity in the modern era.

Notes

1 Pinar Bilgin, "International and Societal Dimensions of Security," *International Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (2003): 209.
2 The constructivist approach places the conceptual dimension at the center of the analysis of phenomena in international relations: the sharing of ideas and social interactions (or social building processes) among players, including states, inspired by those ideas.
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6 Ibid.
7 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, McMillan, 1977), p. 181.
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11 Barak Mendelsohn, *American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 6.
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14 Miles Kahler, "Networked Politics: Agency, Power and Governance," in *Network Politics: Agency, Power and Governance*, ed. Miles Kahler (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 10-11.
15 Elke Krahman, "Conceptualizing Security Governance," *Journal of Nordic International Studies Association* 38, no. 1 (2003): 5.

16 Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
17 David Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 23.