

Book Reviews

Contemporary Security Studies

Ed. Alan Collins (2007):
Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP).

Reviewed by Alfred Gerstl

Since the end of the Cold War not only international politics but also the disciplines concerned with world politics have changed profoundly. Until 1989/91, the major threat the world faced was the outbreak of a nuclear war between the West and the Communist Eastern bloc—with potentially disastrous consequences for mankind. Today, military conflicts still occur, however, most of them are not traditional wars fought between two nations but intrastate struggles for political power. Overall, non-traditional, ie non-military, threats seem to pose far more dangers for far more people than ever before. Among them are illegal migration, competitive access to energy resources, illicit drug trafficking, the spread of mass diseases or environmental degradation.

Security, notably military security, has always been the core interest of Security Studies, a subdiscipline of International Relations (IR) which itself is a subdiscipline, namely of Political Sciences. Until the end of the Cold War, though, the majority of IR scholars defined security as a (military) threat to the survival of the state. While neorealists still see the nation-state as their core subject, neoliberal, constructivist, feminist or Marxist authors include other referent objects whose security is endangered: the regime, the society, the environment or the individual. Unlike Barry Buzan in the early 1990s, they treat these menaces as threats in their own right, not simply as facets of state security.

Consequently, Alan Collins, the editor of “Contemporary Security Studies”, states in his introduction that in the last decades the concept of security has both been broadened and deepened. New concepts such as economic, environmental or human security have emerged, sometimes complementing traditional approaches, sometimes challenging them, as the twenty one articles in this textbook demonstrate.

The traditional security concept in security studies focuses on military threats. Defined as “perceived or actual freedom from the threat or use of organised violence for political purposes” (p. 130), this approach is concerned with the security of the nation-state. Initially the domain of the military whose narrow research interests were military strategy and the conduct of war, civilian scholars started to dominate this area only after the First World War. However, as Eric Herring writes in his excellent analysis of “Military Security”, not until the development of the atomic and later the

hydrogen bomb did thinking about security in terms of preventing the outbreak of wars become the core interest of this approach.

With reference to the Copenhagen School and other constructivist approaches, Herring illustrates that security and security threats (as social reality in general) are constructed: by values, norms, through human interaction. According to the Copenhagen School, the political process can lead to the securitisation or militarisation of threats. The assumption is that a securitised or militarised issue enjoys political and financial priority which facilitates the resolution of the problem. Herring concludes that it is not sufficient to empirically explore all “objective” facts; it is also necessary to critically reflect the fundamental assumptions of the decision-makers who securitise a topic and, even more important, one’s own assumptions which give meaning to those facts.

Regime security, as Richard Jackson points out, is one of the approaches clearly related to the state, albeit in an indirect manner. Insecurity poses challenges especially for developing nations whose governance structures are, because of globalisation, the repercussions of Colonialism or incomplete statehood, relatively weak and thus in danger of becoming failed states. The primary threats to weak states have their origin within the state, be it social unrest, political protests or military revolts with the aim of overthrowing the ruling elites. Yet if the latter attempt to apply good governance and, for instance, reduce subsidies, they might upset strong interest groups, further undermining their own position. Because of the weakness of the governance structures in most developing nations, the elites who form the regime guarantee the functioning of the state. Thus regime and state security have become inseparable.

Consequently, politicians in these countries often respond with counterproductive policies, in the worst case with violence in order to ensure the short-term survival of their regimes (and their influence and wealth), usually at the expenses of nation-building and socioeconomic development. Therefore it is the population who suffers most from underdevelopment, political instability, institutional weakness, social divisions or human rights abuses. Jackson, though, remains pessimistic about the perspectives for weak states, the majority of all nations. He believes that a “fundamental reform” of the global economic and political order is needed to improve their situation; however, as he concedes, such a development is not likely to occur.

That the state remains an important actor in international politics is an argument Patrick Morgan holds against the liberal school of IR. Though he admits that liberal or in his not convincing wording: liberalist—which in fact means extreme liberal—theories conceptually incorporate the increased cooperation among states as well as states and International Non-Governmental Organisations, civil society groups or Transnational Companies. Believing in the spread of democracy, open society and Capitalism—and the positive effects of these models, illustrated in the notion of democratic peace—liberal theorists are optimistic in regard to the future developments in IR. As Morgan states, the two main approaches in IR, Liberalism and Realism, often overlap. In addition, both theories have developed various subschools, for instance offensive and defensive Realism. Not astonishingly, “neither offers a precise guide to policy or a tightly knit, intellectual powerful theory” (p. 32). The positive effect, though, Morgan

concludes in his basic overview over the traditional IR approaches, is that in the last years new security concepts have been developed in response to the conceptual shortcomings of the traditional IR theories.

One of these new approaches is human security. In her analysis Pauline Kerr points out that this concept, based on the classical liberal notion of individual freedom and autonomy, adds a crucial new perspective to the realist state-centric view of International Relations. Popularised by the United Nations Development Program in the mid-1990s, human security means safety from chronic threats like hunger, disease and repression as well as “protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (UNDP 1994: 23). While a narrow school of human security concentrates on threats of violence, the broader approach analyses socioeconomic menaces resulting from underdevelopment.

Another contested issue in human security studies that Kerr correctly highlights is the role of the state: In many developing countries and notably in failing states, rather than solving security problems, the state endangers the human security of its citizen. At this point, it would have been worthwhile to debate Amartya Sen’s concept of substantial freedom. The Nobel Prize laureate argues that, first, political and civil rights empower citizens to define their own (economic) needs. Secondly, because they raise public awareness and political accountability, democratic rights are a safeguard against major disasters, for instance, since 1945 no democracy with a relatively free press had faced a famine. Despite all its intellectual merits, the human security approach as well as the dominant state-centric realism “are necessary but not sufficient security concepts” (p. 100) on their own, writes Kerr. For a comprehensive understanding of security, she concludes, both perspectives are needed.

In the remaining chapters the authors focus on security concepts, eg regime, societal, economic or environmental security or on specific security threats such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction or transnational crime. Although the quality of the contributions differs and one can argue about the chosen priorities and the justification of the unavoidable omissions, they all clearly and correctly describe the complexity of the different approaches and how non-traditional security menaces increasingly replace traditional military threats. Another important contribution made in the articles on economic, environmental or human security concerns the differences in the perception of security (risks) between the industrialised and the developing countries.

How the discourse on security and security theories differs among scholars from the North and South, but also between Americans and Europeans, is described in the final article. Written by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, two distinguished security experts, it analyses the (American) origins of the discipline in the early 1940s, the Golden Age during the Cold War when deterrence theory was developed, the crisis around 1965–1980 with the evolution of Security Studies into an IR subdiscipline and the renaissance after 1989 with a renewed interest in theory-building under the broad IR umbrella.

Excellent is also Wæver's and Buzan's comparison of the different roles security experts play in the Old and the New World—in Europe they see themselves as public intellectuals rather than policy-orientated experts. The institutional differences remain also important: In the US, think tanks, clearly separated from universities, have always played a major role and have contributed to theory-building. In the post-Golden Age years, however, they “gradually stopped being innovative, inter-disciplinary places for thinking and became increasingly routinised producers of more narrow, technical problem-solving” (p. 393).

In concluding, Ove Wæver and Buzan see a bright future for security studies: The discipline rests on a solid, pluralistic theoretical base, it analyses current threats that affect all societies and it attracts both high numbers of students and funding.

The appealing layout of “Contemporary Security Studies” together with boxes with key points or important quotes, tables, case studies that explain how the theoretical approaches can be translated into practical examples, a glossary and further reading material in the internet help to better access and apply the offered information. Overall, this textbook provides a sound and helpful overview over the most recent intellectual developments in the disciplines of International Relations and Security Studies. It illustrates the new complexities in the realm of security, due to the intellectual pluralism after the end of the Cold War and the variety of new, non-traditional risks that challenge states, societies and individuals. Finally, it shows how much theory-building is still necessary, as many recent security concepts remain under-theorised, and how much empirical research needs to be done to prove or discard the theoretical assumptions of the different approaches.

Discourse, War and Terrorism (Vol. 24 Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture)

Eds. Adam Hodges, Chad Nilep.

University of Colorado. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Reviewed by Virginia Small

As trainee finance journalist at Reuters Economic Services my esteemed editor called me aside to speak with me about the vital importance of the choice of words in reporting economics.

“They can move markets”, he cautioned.

A jovial colleague hearing this as he walked by, declared with a toss over his shoulder, “yes, but one man's fish is another man's poisson”. We laughed at his punning counter argument.