

Realism: The Domination of Security Studies

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EMILY TRIPP, JUN 14 2013

To What Extent has The Theory of Realism Dominated the Study of Security?

The study of security has developed within International Relations as a gateway for understanding driving forces within international politics. Increasingly global and catastrophic conflict makes the study of security central to policy makers and academics seeking to understand, and predict, behaviour in global politics. Realism[1] describes the world order as a system of competing self-interested state actors under anarchy (Baldwin 1993: 4, Buzan 1996: 60, Morgenthau 1978). This understanding of the world order has a direct affect on the definition of security as a feature of that anarchy. I will take 'domination' to mean realism has been seen as the only theoretically acceptable paradigm in which security studies can be understood. Firstly, I will demonstrate that the study of security has been dominated by realism through the use of realist terminology, with reference to examples of relations in the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN). However the definition of security has expanded in recent years, therefore it is necessary to examine how far realism has been able to accommodate for and predict this change. This expansion does not go far enough in testing the limits of the realist paradigm, which will lead to an examination into the development of critical security studies, which both explains and critiques realist dominance over security studies. Ultimately, the only way in which it is possible to understand how far realism has been able to dominate the study of security is by using the framework of critique that is employed by critical security theorists.

The forward to the first edition of *International Security* in 1976 defined security as factors with a 'direct bearing on the structure of the nation state system and the sovereignty of its members, with particular emphasis on the use, threat and control of force' (Carnesale and Nacht 1976: 2). Henry Kissinger, realist academic and US Secretary of State, argued that 'how realistically we perceive our national interests' is a core security concern (Kissinger 1976: 182). This centres security studies on the state as guarantor of security, the state system as determinant of state behaviour and security equated with interest. For realists, 'no state will sacrifice its interests to serve the larger community' (Frankel 1996: xv). In 2012, US National Security and Policy Strategy noted that the threat of anarchy in the international system affects security strategy (Stolberg 2012: 18). Security is therefore understood within the language of insecurity and threat to the nation state. The idea of an anarchic state system remains largely unchallenged, even by the liberalist opponents of realism. Joseph Nye describes international politics as 'anarchic in the sense that there is no higher government' (Nye 2009: 4). Although for liberalists this will not lead to state aggression, for this is checked by international organisations, it is nevertheless an acceptance of nation states as the main threat to security[2]. The institutions may provide a law for safeguarding security, but they do not remove the source of insecurity; namely perceived intentions of state actors. Realism does not necessitate aggression by states, however it assumes that there is a sense of threat in the international system. For neo-realist founder Kenneth Waltz, 'a state will use force to attain its goals' under anarchy (Waltz 1959: 160), however 'the ultimate concern for states is not for power but for security' (Waltz 1988: 616). Security has therefore been defined by language of force and state interests (Stolberg 2012: 16). In so being, the terminology of security has been dominated by realism.

However, as Glaser notes, 'states motivated primarily by security should not as a general rule try to maximise their relative power' (Glaser 1996: 145). If no state is seeking power they are not seeking to expand. Fear generated by states is therefore misplaced, 'if all states are relatively sure that none seeks expansion then the security dilemma falls away' (Schweller 1996: 117). This is a direct challenge to the realist notion of security being in the genuine interest of the states, and not based on a misunderstanding of state behaviour. The threat must be real and not

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imagined in order for it to act as a determinant of state behaviour at all. This being said, questioning whether the security dilemma is brought about through a real or a misperceived threat does not undermine the notion that state behaviour is determined by system-based assumptions. Although realist theory may contain a contradiction in terms of the 'genuine' motivations of states, the overarching paradigm of an insecure international environment remains. Realism has therefore been able to withstand this critique and maintain dominance over the notion of the security dilemma.

The security dilemma becomes apparent through an examination of arms races such in South East Asia after the Cold War. Despite non-Western and regional perspectives emerging since the demise of US and Soviet influence in the region, 'realist assumptions have... remained the key underlying themes' (Collins 2000: 3). The United States and the Soviet Union dominated relations between the ASEAN members, but with withdrawal of their authority after the Cold War anarchic uncertainty returned (Buzan and Segal 1994: 8). For example, Singapore is thought to have constructed a security strategy where 'launching a pre-emptive attack' on potential Malaysian aggression might be necessary (Collins 2000: 96). The House of Commons' research paper in 2011, examining relations between ASEAN members, noted that China was causing 'increasing anxiety' in the region, especially in regard to the South China Sea and those areas that 'China considers its "core interests"' (Lunn and Thompson 2011: 1). China was also seen as the 'main threat to instability' in the 1990s (Buzan and Segal 1994: 18). President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy has said that 'the premises of an arms race are there' (Lunn and Thompson 1994: 7). Perceptions of state behaviour as determinant for aggressive action under an anarchic system shows how far realism has dominated the understanding, by both political actors and academics, of the security of this region.

However Paul Schroeder has argued that realist 'historical generalisations are asserted as self-evident... rather than based on much evidence or inductive... argument' (Schroeder 1994: 114). Schroeder points to the example of states reacting against challenge to the balance of power in Europe by German Emperor Joseph II in 1785 (Schroeder 1994: 118). Although realists point to the Westphalian state system as an exemplar of anarchical relations, in the face of the same threat each strategy employed by states was different. Some balanced, some 'bandwaggoned', while others ignored the threat (Schroeder 1994: 118). Some realists have argued that realism does not take a scientific position, instead applying a philosophical approach that is not subject to a principle of falsifiability (Gilpin 1996: 6). However this challenge implies that realism does not bridge the gap between real events in global politics and analytical theory. Although realist assumptions are 'legitimate as analytic statements', they can also 'produce vacuous distinctions, false dichotomies, and logical contradictions' (Schroeder 1995:194). This attack on realism undermines any meaningful dominance over security studies, given the inherent contradictions in its application.

Moreover, the definition of security has expanded significantly. Now under the remit of security are issues beyond territorial conflicts and inter-state aggression. Simon Dalby argues that a globalised market has brought about two possibilities for the state: self-sufficiency or international interdependence (Dalby 2003: 13). Security studies must now shift its attention beyond the traditional realist realm of territorial security and into a new dimension of economic security. Environmental security has also started to expand the realist definition (Mathews 1989, Dalby 2003: 15). The challenge caused by environmental concerns rests on the threat to the way of life of its citizens. Consumerism in developing cultures is one of the reasons for this threat. It is therefore impossible to maintain this culture while protecting populations from environmental risks that do not come from a single state aggressor. In countering this states will have to challenge the behavioural norms of its citizens. This cultural change could itself cause internal insecurity of the kind unexplained by realism.

However this does not imply realist obsolescence. New security concerns have been encompassed within the realist paradigm by those who argue that issues such as economic and environmental threats reinforce the state system, rather than subvert it (Mearsheimer 1990: 45, Rohde 2004: 9 cited Link 2002: 33). The vulnerabilities caused by these new security dilemmas enhance the role of the state given the tendency of this economically and environmentally precarious world to give rise to inter-state conflicts over resources (Ullman 1983: 140). Despite allegations that the scale and nature of terrorist attacks on New York in 2001 had 'changed the definition of national security' (Lovelace 2003: ii), the language used to discuss these new national security concerns has not escaped the realist paradigm. In a report on military transformation conducted by the Strategic Studies Institute, advances in technology were not seen as a movement towards multilateralism, but were to be protected lest a 'future enemy' may

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be able to use them to their advantage (Deutch and White 2003: 10). This broadening subject matter of security studies has therefore not escaped the realist paradigm.

Post-modernist theorists go beyond the notion of an expansion in security, and argue for a 'new vocabulary' to describe a new system of global politics, to which security studies must adapt (Cooper 2000: 8). In the post-modernist world interests are not understood through the prism of security, but are defined as a 'political process' (Cooper 2000: 27). Unlike in the realist world order where interests are the lasting features of global politics, post-modernists argue that institutions provide permanence to the world order. Security is not about protecting interests but about a framework of co-operation (Cooper 2000: 34-35). Unlike realism, post-modernism does not argue this is the way the world order has always been, rather that this is the direction international relations is going in. The Gulf War, for example, was 'fought to protect an old order' (Cooper 2000: 37). Security as understood by states dealing with the 'old fashioned' state must reconfigure their interpretation of the world order. The European order based on 'new concepts', is one where 'balance is too dangerous; hegemony is no longer acceptable' (Cooper 2000: 40). Human rights and self-determination are at the heart of this world order, with internationalism replacing nationalism. This inherits liberalist emphasis on opening the 'black box' of state; the world order 'depends on the kind of states that compose it' (Cooper: 40). Post-modernism also takes into account possibility of a new kind of anarchy. Robert Kaplan argued that political forces in West Africa are a microcosm of the coming world order (Kaplan 1994). This world will be one where a 'jagged-glass pattern of city-states, shanty-states, nebulous and anarchic regionalisms' replaces the realist state-centric global politics (Kaplan 1994: 72). The state will no longer be associated with the patriotism that legitimises its role as guarantor of security. Instead citizens will 'take psychological refuge in their insulated communities and cultures' (Kaplan 1994: 76). This challenges the way that students of security studies understand the context of security. Realism does not understand this potential change in the international system or accommodate for it. Post-modernism therefore provides a credible alternative to the static universality of realism, and in so doing provides a basis for challenging the realist dominance of security studies.

However post-modernism does not criticise pre-existing realist domination of security studies (Krause and Williams 2003a, 2003b). This failure to 'replace discredited certainties with new ones' means that this critique is relatively weak in challenging realist dominance (Krause and Williams 2003a: xv). Critical security studies, by contrast, replace realist explanation with an outline the relevance of identity and ideas (Wendt 1992, Krause and Williams 1996: 235). This is rejected by realism; 'structure affects the outcome of behaviour regardless of the intentions and motives of the actors themselves' (Gilpin 1983: 85 cites Waltz 1979: 74). Critical security theorists argue that this misunderstands global politics. As a reformulation of the world portrayed by realists and other International Relations theorists, it provides the only critique of realism that escapes realist security studies paradigm. The framework for analysis is a response to change to world order after the Cold War. However it has roots in feminism and Marxist historical materialism (Blanchard 2003: 1292, Cox 1986: 131). In critical security studies security is a socially constructed concept, irremovable from the ontology of the analyst. The scholar of security studies working within the realist framework is thus inherently biased by realist-oriented ideals, as demonstrated above with an analysis of realist terminology. The state can become a potential source of insecurity, rather than guarantor of security, by taking into account communities themselves (Walker 1990: 4, 12). Realists in their focus on territorially bound populations neglected this consideration. The state's forces themselves 'may remain the greatest threat to the population that neo-realism assumes they are protecting' (Krause and Williams 2003b: 33). This is shown with the on-going Israel-Palestine conflict, demonstrating that at the 'heart of many structures of insecurity' is the question of citizenship and identity, and not inter-state behaviour (Krause and Williams 2003: 43).

Not only has the shift in focus on the referent object of security studies enabled a departure from realism, but so too has the notion of 'socialisation'. Realism has confined security studies into examining only the 'shifts in geo-strategic arrangements' as the source of global systemic change (Gheciu 2005a: 210). This ignores the role of collective identities that have influenced security strategy and its study. This 'inside' method of pursuing international activity can be seen within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. NATO plays a decisive role in the 'construction of new domestic arrangements on the basis of liberal democratic principles' (Gheciu 2005a: 212), demonstrated in NATO involvement in Eastern European countries after the Cold War. Far from the structure determining behaviour, the identities themselves are formed 'prior to and in abstraction from the social structures in which they then participate' (Gheciu 2005a: 218). The building up of norms through socialisation is demonstrated through NATO enlargement.

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States that were not 'sufficiently "like us"', were not accepted into NATO, despite the realist presumption that they would and should be (Gheciu 2005b: 976). Identity derives from the fact that we are a 'meanings-making species' (Booth 2003: 91). The construction of identity therefore underpins our understanding of international politics, 'and how we conceive of international politics is at the root of the meanings we make of security' (Booth 2003: 91).

In conclusion, realism has dominated the study of security to a significant extent. This is evident in its domination over the language of security studies, particularly regarding states as referent objects, and aggression, anarchy and the use of force as key features of the international system. Only through the lens of the critical security theorist is it possible to understand the extent to which this domination has occurred. More importantly, critical security studies demonstrate how negligent realism is of matters central to security formulation, such as identity. The nature of this critical challenge is unlike other oppositional theories, such as liberalism and post-modernism, in so far as it does not provide an alternative vision of reality but instead provides an 'ethos' of critique (Campbell 1998: 226). Employing this critical approach indicates that security studies will become resistant to 'dominant' theories. This encouragement of critical thinking undermines realist continued dominance over security studies.

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[1] Realism is an umbrella term for divergent strands such as neo-realism, offensive realism, and defensive realism (Brooks 1997: 457), however given the constraints of this essay I will define realism in terms of its core underlying features mentioned above.

[2] Co-operation as negating state aggression has been undermined both by realist academics and the agents of security itself. For example in a report on a conference directed by the Strategic Studies Institute on military transformation, it is noted that co-operation is used in 'legitimising US actions and marshalling world opinion' (Deutch and White 2003: 4), implying self-interest as dominant over multilateralism. The latter reasoning behind co-operation is linked to the 'prime modernity' thesis developed by Colin Flint and Ghazi-Walid Falah based on the US perception of its own security as necessitating external pre-emptive action (Falah and Flint 2004). This is the basis for which the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the invasion of Afghanistan was legitimised; as protection of US citizens and 'civilisation' (Jackson 2006: 173-174).

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Date written: December 2012