

What is Security? Securitization Theory and its Application in Turkey

Written by Siddharth Sethi

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In his article, "Security! What is it?", Jef Huysmans (1998) starts his examination of the meaning of security by exploring the contribution of critical approaches to the field of security studies. He contends that although these approaches have been successful in broadening the agenda of security studies by contesting the military and state focus of traditional perspectives and incorporating new concepts such as human and environmental security, such approaches have paid less attention to exploring the meaning of security in the face of a broadening and diverse security agenda (Huysmans 1998: 226-8). Accordingly, Huysmans (1998: 227) raises the following question, which he states as fundamental to understanding the meaning of security – "what makes it sensible to speak of security in very different sectors...or regimes?"

In this essay, I focus on the question put forward by Huysmans. Accordingly, I explain the meaning of security in contemporary global politics by examining how it is possible to consider a range of diverse issues such as environmental degradation, political marginalization, and economic deprivation as part of the security studies' agenda. Informed by Copenhagen School's theory of securitization and critical security theory, I argue that the meaning of security is ultimately constructed through subjective representations regarding what a security issue is made by various social and political actors including state officials, non-state organizations, and communities. Accordingly, I contend that whether or not something is considered a security issue depends on the subjective understanding of security on the part of these actors and the context in which they decide to represent an issue as such. I will do this by focusing on the case study of the political debate regarding Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU), in particular by examining how issues generally thought of as non-security issues such as Turkey's economic development and the political marginalization of minority groups in Turkey (Bilgin 2007: 567), were securitized by key authority figures and non-state actors. This essay consists of three parts: The first will discuss the theoretical argument of securitization theory and how issues become security issues through speech acts and representations. The second will examine the role state and non-state actors in constructing security issues. Whilst the third part will explore the importance of context to an actor's decision to label a security issue as such.

Securitization Theory: Security as a Speech Act

Over recent decades, the field of security studies has been challenged to reconceptualize its understanding of the term security to account for its broadening agenda beyond the narrow concepts of state and military security, and beyond the concerns of state actors (William 2003: 512-3). The Copenhagen School has made a significant contribution to the debate regarding the meaning of security. Through the formulation of securitization theory, the Copenhagen School has advanced the argument that security is ultimately an outcome of a special social process or "speech act" rather than an objective condition (Williams 2003: 513). Accordingly, the theoretical basis of securitization theory come from speech act theory (see Austin 1962; Searle 1969), and contests the assumption that threats to security exist independent of someone representing it as such (Waever 1995: 55; Buzan, Waever & de Wilde 1998: 24-6). Instead, the Copenhagen School contends that there are choices involved in deciding which issues are to be characterized as security threats. In this way, whether or not an issue is a security issue is treated not as a result of its objective qualities but rather a result of what different people subjectively identify as security threats (Waever 1995: 56; Buzan, Waever & de Wilde 1998: 29-30). As Waever (1995: 55) argues nothing is a

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security issue by itself, rather it is an issue that only becomes a security issue if someone labels it as such. Subsequently, the Copenhagen School argues that the meaning of security in contemporary global politics is ultimately constructed through the speeches and representations made by relevant political actors.

An examination of the political debate regarding Turkey's accession to the EU supports this argument and explains why Turkey's economic and political development may be considered security issues. Bilgin (2005: 175-6) maintains that since the 1999 Helsinki decision by the EU to include Turkey as one of the official candidates to join the organization, debate emerged amongst Turkey's political elite regarding the security implications of joining the EU. Such a debate, Bilgin (2007: 566-7) argues, reframed the issue of Turkey's EU membership, which had generally been considered in economic and security terms and accordingly placed it outside the realm of normal politics.

The writings of General Sadi Erguvenç and Ambassador İlter Türkmen, two key political figures of the time, exemplify this. In a series of media appearances, newspaper columns, and articles, General Erguvenç depicted joining the EU as a possible "solution to Turkey's insecurities" (Erguvenç in Bilgin 2007: 566). He emphasized how the notion of national security in the 21st century had shifted beyond the traditional concept of military security and instead involved the consideration of economic, political, and societal risks (Erguvenç 1999: 46). Accordingly, he argued that states could no longer rely solely on military means to be secure, but also on other things such as educated populations and economic infrastructure to be secure and compete in contemporary politics (Erguvenç 1999: 46). Subsequently, Erguvenç securitized the issue of Turkey's economic and political development, arguing that in an increasingly competitive international environment, joining the EU would address the threat of being left economically and politically behind (Bilgin 2007: 566). Türkmen (2001: 61) presented a similar argument, maintaining that being secure in contemporary politics meant being able to engage in political forums and establishing political and economic alliances. As such, he securitized the issue of Turkey's economic and political development, stressing that joining the EU was essential to addressing the risk of being outcast by the international community (Türkmen 2001: 61-2).

The above illustrates how the issues of economic development and political inclusion, which are generally not presented as security issues, may be reframed through speech acts to be included on a state's security agenda (Bilgin 2007: 565). As such, it supports the fundamental argument of securitization theory; namely, an issue becomes a security issue if it is labelled as such. For Copenhagen School scholars, however, not all actors can label an issue as a security issue. They instead argue that the choice to securitize an issue is ultimately a political act and hence only actors with political or institutional power such as state leaders have the authority to do so (Waever 1995: 55). Accordingly, they contend that the meaning of security in contemporary global politics is ultimately constructed through the representations of those in a position of power. The appropriateness of this argument is discussed in the following section.

The Role of Different Political Actors in Constructing the Meaning of Security

One of the key issues that was securitized by both sides of the debate of Turkey's accession to the EU was the presence of minority groups including the Kurds in Turkey (Bilgin 2005: 175). On one hand, "pro-EU" actors emphasized how the political reforms demanded by the EU would facilitate more open democracy and in turn afford minority groups such as the Kurds greater social and political rights, improving their security (Aras and Polat 2008: 496; Bilgin 2007: 562). This is highlighted by the words of key officials of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, who stressed that joining the EU "could contribute to [a] peaceful solution [to] the Kurdish problem and problems related to secularism" in Turkey (Kaliber and Tocci 2010: 211). Accordingly, these actors securitized the political marginalization of minority groups in Turkey and the erosion of their political and social rights, emphasizing how joining the EU was essential to protecting them from the threat of state forces and economic deprivation (Bilgin 2007: 562; Kaliber and Tocci 2010: 200). Conversely, "Eurosceptics" contended that the same reforms would further destabilize Turkey. They did this by securitising the presence of minority groups in Turkish society, and in turn representing them as a threat. This is exemplified by the words of Turkish policy advisor, Erol Manisali (2001), who stated that in "15 years' time, not even the Turkish Armed Forces would be able to lift a finger," stressing his concern the reforms demanded by the EU would subsequently erode the Turkish state's monopoly over the legitimate use of violence against minorities and hence jeopardize Turkey's national security (Manisali in Bilgin 2005: 189).

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The significance of these actors' representations of the "securityness" of the political marginalization of minority groups, and the threat they pose to Turkish society, can be reconciled within the securitization framework advanced by the Copenhagen School (McDonald 2008: 573-5). This is because such representations of Turkey's security depict those put forward by Turkey's political elite (Bilgin 2005: 175). While proponents of the Copenhagen School allow the possibility for "securitizing actors" other than political leaders (Buzan, Weaver & de Wilde 1998: 31-3), such a proposition is limited by the assertion that security is articulated from a person of institutional power (Weaver 1995: 57; Buzan, Weaver & de Wilde 1998: 32-3). Put simply, securitization theory focuses on the role of institutional actors such as political leaders in articulating and labeling threats, emphasizing how it is these actors' position of power over the wider public and ability to impact state policy that make them legitimate "securitizing actors" (Buzan & Weaver 2003: 72). As Weaver (1995: 57) argues, "security is articulated only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites." What follows from this is a limited conceptualization of security, in that security is defined as being constructed from the perspective of those with political power.

McDonald (2008: 573-5) maintains that by focusing its attention on powerful institutional actors and voices, the perspective of security advanced by the Copenhagen School is problematic as it marginalizes the perspectives and experiences of many other non-state actors and thus provides a limited understanding of security in contemporary global politics. He contends that in order to gain a holistic understanding of the term security, one must recognize and explore the variety of ways in which the situations of different political communities are constructed as security issues by different actors such as non-government organisations or the media (McDonald 2008: 582). Much of his analysis is informed by the work of theorists from the Welsh School of Security Studies, which stresses that the meaning of security should incorporate the perspectives of the most vulnerable and hence narrowing our understanding of security to that which is constructed by the political elite may marginalize such perspectives, providing an incomplete picture of what security in global contemporary politics is (Booth 2005: 207; Hansen 2000: 306; Williams 2004: 144).

A closer look at the contributions of non-government organizations to the framing security issues in Turkey during the 1990s demonstrates this point (Bilgin 2007: 562). Amnesty International's campaign on the human rights violations against Kurdish populations in Turkey during this period is an example of an alternative voice challenging the conceptualization of security advanced by those in power. Their campaign, *Turkey: No Security Without Human Rights*, directly questioned the justification of the human rights violations against the Kurdish population on the grounds of security (McDonald 2008: 575), in turn contesting the dominant perspective of national security and the Kurdish population within Turkish politics at the time, which was advanced by the "Euroceptics" referred to above. Instead, Amnesty International argued that what should be securitized included the human rights of the Kurdish population, which was under threat from the state (McDonald 2008: 575). This example emphasizes three key issues with the Copenhagen School's strong focus on the state establishment as the primary securitizing actor. First, such a focus can silence securitizations against the state. This is particularly problematic given that the state may be both a source of security and insecurity, particularly in the context of civil wars (see for example, Archvarina and Reich 2006: 127-164; Paris 2001: 87-102). Second, and somewhat related, it means that security is defined solely according to state interests. That is, if state officials hold a monopoly over the construction of the meaning of security, then it is likely that issues which may be appropriate to consider as security threats such as the human rights violations may be ignored as it is not within the state's interests to do so (Miliken 1999: 243-5). Third, the importance of non-state actors to the development of security discourse in the international community may also not be recognized, in turn providing an incomplete picture of what security truly is (Bigo 2002: 65).

Accordingly, McDonald (2008: 580-2) contends that in order to better represent the meaning of security in contemporary global politics, securitization theory must be expanded to recognize the perspectives of all non-state actors and their representations of security. Such an approach to security, however, is also problematic in that it what follows is an indeterminate conceptualization of the term security. This is because by stressing that the meaning of security is ultimately constructed by considering the views of all actors, such a conceptualization implies that the securitization process is open, or in other words, any actor can securitize any issue or referent object (Williams 2003: 513-4; see also Wyn-Jones 1999).

The preferable view, however, is that advanced by Balzacq (2005: 171), who argues that not all actors are in socially effective positions to make claims that an issue is a security issue. Although such a proposition is similar to that

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advanced by classical Copenhagen School scholars (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde 1998: 32), where Balzacq departs from the Copenhagen School is in his interpretation of a successful securitization. Buzan, Waever & de Wilde (1998: 23-4) argue that a securitization is successful if an issue dealt with outside the normal bounds of political procedure. Hence, it is an institutional actor's ability to do this that makes them a legitimate securitizing actor. In contrast, Balzacq (2005: 171-3) contends that an issue is successfully securitized if it is audience-centered and contextually appropriate. Put differently, he argues that an issue is securitized once an actor labels it as a security issue and is accepted by the relevant audience as such. Consequently, for Balzacq (2005: 172), security is a social construction, and an actor's ability to make a socially effective claim regarding a security issue does not depend on their capacity to respond to the threat in question but rather on whether the relevant audience accepts them as an appropriate securitizing actor. Accordingly, he contends that security is constructed through the subjective representations of actors who have a socially valid voice in global politics such as state officials, non-state organisations, communities, and even individuals (Balzacq 2005: 172). Hence, despite not being represented as such by a state official, following Balzacq's approach, the human rights abuses against the Kurdish population in Turkey can be conceptualized as a security issue.

Context and the Meaning of Security

A major limitation of securitization theory in explaining the meaning of security is that it does not explore the reasons why an actor decides to treat something as a security issue (McDonald 2008: 570-1). Whilst scholars of the Copenhagen School acknowledge that the process of labelling an issue a security threat is subjective in nature and that "it is always a choice to treat something as a security issue" (Waever 2001: 251), they do not explain why such choices are made. McDonald (2008: 564) argues that this is problematic as it means that conceptualizing security in terms of securitization theory can subsequently lead to one ignoring the ways in which security is understood in different contexts and by different actors. McSweeney (1996: 81) furthers this argument, advancing a poststructuralist view in contending that interpreting the construction of a security issue as a political act is too narrow a definition, rather one must examine the social, political, and historical contexts in which a securitization is made to gain a more holistic understanding of what security means to that actor and in contemporary global politics. This is because such an examination better informs the reader of why certain risks are considered threats whilst others are not (McDonald 2008: 573).

A closer look as to why the "pro-EU" actors in Turkey including General Erguvenc and Ambassador Turkmen choose to securitize Turkey's economic and political development illustrates this point. Both Bilgin (2009: 105-107) and Sofos (2000: 257-8) offer a post-colonial insight into Turkey's foreign affairs, emphasizing how Turkey's historical political and economic orientation towards the West after decolonisation was of particular concern for pro-EU actors. They contend that a chief concern for these actors was that due its alignment with the West, Turkey had isolated itself from the East and thus to be able to form strong economic and political alliances, and to be secure in an increasingly interconnected international community, Turkey needed to strengthen its relationship with the EU (Bilgin 2009: 121). As such, their choice to securitize this issue can be attributed to historical as well as strategic factors, emphasising the importance of considering context to the construction of security.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the meaning of security in contemporary global politics is ultimately constructed through representations made by relevant social and political actors including state officials, non-state organizations, and communities. With reference to the political debate regarding Turkey's ascension to the EU and the role of non-state actors in framing security issues in Turkey, I have examined issues of Turkey's economic development and the political marginalization of minority groups in Turkey were reframed and subsequently labelled security issues. I also argued that an actor's decision to label something a security issue is informed by context. Accordingly, for me, the meaning of security in contemporary global politics can be conceptualized as a function of these actors' subjective interpretation of what a security issue is and the context in which the decision to label something a security issue is made.

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