EU-GRASP Policy Brief

The EU and the Meaning of Security

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Executive Summary

The development of 'security policy' is never straightforward. From the perspective of the desk of a practitioner, what is and is not security may seem clear, and even objective. But 'security policy' is rarely clear – look at the differences of opinion in Europe over whether to act in response to the uprising in Libya – and the consequences always hard to foresee. Indeed, when we consider the ideas and practices of other nations and cultures, and indeed, of Europe's own ideas and practices in the past, it is clear that security means different things to different peoples in different places and in different times. This Policy Brief seeks to showcase three ideas of security, as a means of understanding how we shape our security policies today.

Introduction:

'Security' should never be taken at face value. What may seem to be a security issue to us in Europe, may not seem as such somewhere else; or indeed, to Europeans, in a different period of time. Issues that may once have been seen to be in a different field may become over time matters of security; how does that matter? An example would be the provision of agricultural goods, now often framed through the term 'food security'.

This Policy Brief is a rather strange one, in the sense that it is not directly connected with 'Policy'. Rather, it is about how we frame policy, what our understandings are that make it seem acceptable and appropriate to consider some policies as legitimate and persuasive, and others as unacceptable.

To do this, the Policy Brief will examine three different ways that security might be considered, ideas and practices of security developed very much in and for Europe, and ones that can shape the way in which Europeans think about the world.

Background:

It is often said that there are two good things about the Cold War; first, that it is over, subjugated peoples are free, and nuclear weapons were not used; and second, that for security policy, it was a simple time. The stakes were clear in terms of ideology, allies, weapons, and dangers. Was it better to be 'Red or Dead'? Clearly, for most Europeans, it was better to be neither. There were objective threats – from the Warsaw Pact, and from nuclear weapons, and from secret police – and the scope for policy choice was limited

thereby. And so, the argument goes, what has happened in the twenty years since the end of the Cold War is that security policy has become very much more difficult, with threats harder to identify and yet at the same time seemingly more numerous.

Of course, many still think about security policy through the prism of the state. Such policies are at the heart of many national governments, and even in Europe, many governments declare that the security of their population is the pre-eminent duty of government. In the face of security threats – terrorism, for example – liberties may be called into question. Security is given a high value.

To try to fill the space at the end of the Cold War, and to try to reset the frame away from states (after all, the biggest security threat to many people in the world is from their own governments: witness the current events in Syria) a great deal of work in the 1990s came to fruition with the idea of Human Security. This declared that security should be about human freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

And yet as important as this is, Human Security is very aspirational, and does not really allow for the clear development of policy. Within Europe, scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields, including civil society, have worked on a variety of alternative ideas; and those ideas are the core of this Policy Brief.

There are today in European scholarly debate, three core ideas of how to frame the use of the term 'security'. The first is the idea that security is emancipation, something to be actively constructed for

all. The second, that security is a relational process that can be called into existence in any policy field; such a field would then (as with climate change) be 'securitised'. The third, that there are processes at work in contemporary Europe today that together bring about the insecuritisation of populations. Each idea will be explained in turn.

Security as Emancipation

Those who are committed to the idea that security is emancipation often draw inspiration from the Frankfurt School of critical thinking. They would emphasise the distinction between their form of thinking – designed to improve the world – and that which they describe as 'problem solving' thinking; that aimed at keeping the world as it is. Security is emancipation because security is about freeing people from the constraints that prevent them from living full and free lives. Of course, one such constraint is that of war; in war and violent conflict, the lack of security means that people are precisely unfree to live unconstrained lives. But war is only one such example. Poverty, gender and race inequality – these are other experiences that constrain rather than enable human fulfilment.

Such an approach asks us to remove states from being at the centre of thinking about security policies. Many states do not produce security for their populations, but even those that do are a means to an end, and they are not the end in themselves. The purpose of security policy is therefore not to make 'America safe' – or France, or Greece or Spain – but rather to use different resources to secure people in

order to allow them to lead emancipated lives.

A people centred security policy is also a holistic one. Structural violence, gender inequality, environmental insecurity – all are part of a set of problems that need to be addressed in order to emancipate people, thereby improving their lives. But such security policy is not only to be produced by states, it is also for organisations such as the EU and for NGOs; it is at the core of civil society, and a cosmopolitan civil society, because these emancipated goods are not only important for 'us', they are important globally, and we all have a duty to do what we can in that global interest. But not only are we to think globally; we should also think and practice such security policy personally; working ourselves to make sure that we are agents of emancipation, and not of repression in our own work and family relations.

Key authors here are Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones, and this approach is sometimes called the Aberystwyth School after a university in Wales.

Securitisation

Security as emancipation is all about the normative; in contrast, securitisation theory is all about analysis. For the former, the analyst is part of the process of bringing about change, through analysis, through work in civil society, and through his or her own personal life. For Securitisation theory, the work of the analyst is neutral, merely ascertaining when an issue has become securitised. Here the argument is that issues are

called into becoming a security matter through a speech act. Food, climate, cyber, were once separate domains of knowledge; now they are connected for some in that they all can have a security suffix – they are domains that have been securitised. This occurs when those in power – usually the leaders of powerful states, but it does not have to be (for example, a powerful figure in religion could play the same role) says that something important is at stake; that the existence of something – a state, a people, a means of religious belief – is at risk; and that all must share in understanding that this issue should now be seen in terms of a threat. This call to securitise – known as the securitising move – can only succeed when the audience (the population or, if you would prefer, the electorate) accepts that argument.

If this securitising move succeeds, then it becomes normal to think of that issue now in security terms. If we think back to the work of the Bush administration after the attacks of 9/11, they were able to construct what might have been seen as a criminal act instead as a warlike one, requiring armies to be involved in invading countries. Because if a securitising move is successful, it legitimises extraordinary measures being taken. Again, in the context of the Bush administration's work after 9/11, they were able to securitise al Qaeda, radical and violent Islam, and the Taliban. Indeed, they were able subsequently to securitise Iraq, and a host of organisations around the work. Bush's securitising move was so successful, that it led to a whole host of other securitisations; it performed in many ways the role of a macro-securitisation.

So we can see when it is that an issue is being securitised, knowing full well that in so doing, the issue is being taken out of the realm of everyday politics and into a special sphere, in which civil liberties, for example, can be comprised. While in Europe we talk a good deal about the militarising effect of the 'war on terror', for Americans another important aspect of it was the passing of the Patriot Act, changing the balance of power between the citizen and the state, all in the interests of 'security.'

Securitisation theory is sometimes known as part of the work of the so called Copenhagen School, a reference to the site of work of many of the authors, and it is especially associated with the writings of Ole Waever and Barry Buzan.

Insecuritisation

So security can be a normative good, if seen as part of a strategy of emancipation, or as something neutral, if part of securitisation; or as something with deeply negative connotation, if viewed from the perspective of insecuritisation. On this approach, there has been a coming together of two previously discrete fields – that of policing and of the military, or of internal and external security – through a myriad of bureaucratic and everyday practices. This newly merged field, supported by a range of surveillance techniques leading citizens to discipline themselves as to how to behave, are part of that which Foucault described as 'governmentality', the means by which authority governs the population. Empirically, much of the work originated with studies of the freedom of movement

of persons inside the EU, which led to the connection in networks of public bureaucracies across national boundaries to understand who has the right to enjoy that freedom, who needs to be surveilled as a possible threat, who is an inconvenience, and who needs to be intercepted, or indeed interdicted.

In this process of governmentality, all have their sense of security undermined; those who are the subjects of surveillance on the grounds of illegal migration, possible terrorist leanings, or the 'suspect communities' in which such people might work, and indeed wider populations, who learn to fear within and without the country. And the effects of this general insecuritisation can be deeply damaging – to liberty, and indeed to a sense of social solidarity. Insecuritsations lead to processes in which some are marginalised – the Roma for example in many parts of Europe, central and eastern, as well as western. And it is particularly important to see the real impact of such processes on those who are marginalised and silenced, as this is to see the impact of undemocratic governmentality.

Insecuritisation theory is sometimes known as the Paris school of security studies, and authors particularly associated with this work include Didier Bigo and Jef Huysmans.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this Policy Brief has been to unsettle the notion that security has one fixed notion that we can work from. It has been to share the approaches of three particularly European schools of thought. And it has been to challenge the reader to consider whether, in the public policy of security, it is possible to further the practice of security as emancipation; whether it is desirable to watch for the public securitisation of practices; and/or whether the insecurities created by security practices can be legitimised in contemporary Europe.