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Rethinking security strategies: New threats and new actors?

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RETHINKING SECURITY STRATEGIES: NEW THREATS AND NEW ACTORS?

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THE WAR ON TERROR IS OVER

From a certain point of view, the European version of the 'war on terror' is a Spanish one. Clearly, the European public sphere was deeply touched by the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Moreover, the historical invocation of Article 5 of the NATO charter engaging all Alliance members in the defence of the United States had considerable consequences for Europeans and the European Defence structures. However, the experience itself, and more importantly again, the discursive framing of that experience, remained distinctively American.

The discursive hold on the events of 20 September 2001 was seized in an extraordinary way already on 12 September when President George W. Bush declared, 'Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated'. By conceptualizing the bombings and the American response to them, Bush seized the conceptual control of the processes of understanding that would follow. Even though none of the primary characteristics of interstate war were present, the invocation of 'war' made it possible for the Bush administration to mobilize legal, budgetary and, of course, military means in order to confront it. The imaginary logic of friend-enemy that flows naturally from the discourse of war, harmonized with and reinforced the rising xenophobia that resulted from the attacks. The discourse of 'war on terror' became self-reinforcing with a more general complex of fear of the unknown.

Alternatives to the conceptualization of war are thinkable. Most prominently a legally-based focus on the criminality of terrorism would have mobilized other tools, with other premises and different effects. Terrorism is, of course, already against the law in the US and all European states. The question becomes what means to use in order to deal with it. Nonetheless, the conviction of the necessity of the mobilizing military means, instituting 'homeland security', and progressively suppressing civil rights all flowed from the logic of war, which quickly became the only available conceptualization for events, both governing interpretations and proscribing responses.

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Aside from the sometimes heated debate over NATO involvement in Afghanistan, begun in October 2001 as a mission to capture Osama bin Laden, and over the invasion of Iraq in 2003 European reactions to the 'war on terror' were somewhat ambivalent. The European Union to the minimum necessary measures to honour its obligations to the United States. This remained the case until 11 March 2004 when a coordinated set of bombings targeted the Madrid commuter train system. An immediate wave of consciousness, reinforced one year later by the tube bombings in London, that terrorism was a European matter. The European Union now had to face the challenge of developing its own response. The paradigm of the 'war on terror' was already fully developed, ready to be adopted. However, general discomfort with the American discourse of 'war' and the liberties it was permitting the US take, left Europeans in a somewhat ambivalent situation. The situation is very complex and this is not the place to demonstrate in detail, but one might assert the European response, both in public attitudes and in the European Commission's political responses, was somewhat more focused on legal, social and political issues.

For over seven years the discourse of 'war on terror' held a strict monopoly on defining the threat of terror, the available ways of imagining its dangers, the appropriate judicial categories for shaping legislation about it, the legitimate political means for addressing it, and the proportional military means to deploy in order to combat it. This extraordinary grip held by the discourse of 'war on terror' on the challenge of terrorism becomes clear once we observe that the election of Barack Obama, by no other means, than to deflate the discourse itself, ended the 'war on terror'. President Obama has seldom used the expression and just over a month after Inauguration Day, the United States (US) Defense Department officially changed the name of operations from 'Global War on Terror' to 'Overseas Contingency Operation'. The 'war on terror' is over.

MUTATIONS IN THE CONCEPT OF SECURITY

The short life and death of the discourse of 'war on terror' is played out against the background of an extraordinary evolution in the concept of security. Few concepts have changed so radically in the course of such a short time (with the exception, perhaps of the 'war on terror'). Before the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, the concept of security had very little currency. In the relatively short period from 1945 until the present it has become one of the central terms on a global scale.

This evolution can be divided into three periods. From 1945 to 1989 one might speak of the era of national security; from 1989 to 2001 can be considered as global security, from 2001 to 2009 (that is to beginning with the Obama presidency) one might speak of an era of domestic security. Clearly we are entering in a new era of security thinking, though it is still difficult to say what will characterize it.

National security

When Truman signed the United States' National Security Act in 1947 the concept of security was changed over night. The Cold War logic of nuclear threat and deterrence was dominant. Moreover the Cold War seized the

idea of security as a national one. Security was national in its scale and scope, and that minor (and also major) security questions did not carry the same weight as those directed toward the two superpowers. As a result of the powerful influence of cold war ideology, the security concept was remarkably dominated by the notion of national security. And this interpretation was forced upon the entire world for 40 years. The recognition of a real or imaginary threat against the nation-state during the Cold War contributed to the renaissance of the security concept.

Global security

The end of the Cold War, and most probably the years prior to it, saw a sudden decline in the national, bi-polar distinctions that organized the concept of security. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the attention of the world was at last torn from the East-West axis. It became obvious what to many was already very obvious, that security and insecurity were not limited to the parties of the nuclear standoff. Security began to be seen as something more personal, more individual, and more local. In 1994 the United Nations Development Programme published its annual report, this time advancing and arguing for the importance of 'human security' as a viable concept for understanding the new—but obviously very old—security challenges facing the world. Among the new (old) challenges highlighted were migration, climate change, energy, water, organised crime, health, identity, and personal liberty and politic security (rights).

Domestic security

The period of the 'war on terror' has been one of inwardness, of cultivating and sharpening an imagined distinction between us and them, the good and the bad, the inside and the outside. An overall atmosphere of uncertainty, fear and distrust has permitted security threats to flame up in unexpected places. The politics of fear that has dominated the period has simultaneously been a politics of the unknown, of precaution and of possibility. As we know, this atmosphere of uncertainty has provided fertile soil for enhancing the potential for the illiberal practices of liberal states.

THE NEW SECURITY LANDSCAPE

In the last 20 years the conceptions and expressions of security have exploded. There seems to be every expanding perception of insecurity and a growing need for articulations of security. We have financial security, IT security, food security, airport security, human security, societal security, health security, legal security, home security, etc. To understand the cause for this tremendous variation we must be attentive to the social and technical backdrop against which the security concept plays itself out today. Five prominent characteristics can be named.

The Industrialization of security

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give all kinds of advice in the field, mercenaries replace national armies in certain contexts. The world can be divided into security users and security suppliers. And in many situations the security supplier behaves as another's user. Security-as-product operates across borders, communities, states, organizations, loyalties, and interests.

Security as technology

But most importantly, increasingly sophisticated technological solutions are being applied to these new security challenges. This has several consequences that we will get to later, but the economic aspect should perhaps be highlighted here: technology and technical solutions to security issues are portable, transportable. They have no necessary, organic or implicit relationship to the problems they solve. They are moveable and expendable. Security has become a largely technical challenge, not a human challenge. People are increasingly moving out of the picture. Scientific research tools are utilized to develop better, more precise, more comprehensive, and increasingly invisible solutions to manage the security problem. The human, ironically, is often seen as secondary to the objective and implication of security.

The product differentiation of security

We can simultaneously observe that the natural result of this kind of industrialization is product differentiation. This follows from the logic of capitalism. Just bring a Norwegian child to the cereal aisle of an American supermarket and you will experience the power of this process. Demand does not increase in accordance with needs, but in accordance with supply. The more security becomes an object of the market economy—a product, the more it becomes naturally differentiated, the more it becomes divided, adapted to the consumer, or user, individualized, commodified, etc.

The globalization of security

Furthermore, security has become globalized. Security, which is traditionally tied to geopolitical boundaries, will eventually disengage from territory and the planet itself. Security and insecurity have become extraterrestrial phenomena, detached from concrete things and concrete threats. Threat will become increasingly diffuse, ambiguous, and unclear. This development also marks the emergence of risk as a central factor in the evaluation of the security concept.

The production of insecurity

The different elements shaping the development of security lead to a strange and uncomfortable effect: the production of insecurity. In other words, insecurity grows proportionately with the accelerated consideration of, and response to, security. Fighting various forms of threat most often leads to solutions that remove people and the individual from the picture. We build walls, construct fences, design detection systems, etc. These

types of measures have many functions, and prevent danger to some degree. But they also have the effect of diminishing trust, trust in others, trust in society, trust in oneself. Less trust generates less security, or more insecurity, something which defeats the purpose of the desired effect.

CONCLUSION

The change in our understanding of security and insecurity is directly linked to the change in the relation between individuals and the values they hold dear. At the sunset of the 'war on terror' we have learned that security is an expression of a certain perspective on life, of individual and collective anxieties and aspirations, of expectations about what to sacrifice and what is worth preserving. Security is often associated with the material aspects of life because, in our time, they have a tendency to incorporate, if not replace, human values. But these technical and material values should not be confused with life itself. Security does not involve only things. It involves people who value things and who need certain things as a means to survive.

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