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Contextualising ‘national security’

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Abstract

States quite naturally spend a great deal of time, energy, talent, and money on national security, prioritising protection against external armed attacks, for which traditional military forces are vital, and against internal threats such as espionage and subversion. In recent decades, this traditional security problématique has broadened to include defence against non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, cyber attacks, foreign meddling in domestic politics, and information warfare. Collectively, these challenges can be daunting, and the cost of failure can be high. But how do leaders know whether they are investing resources wisely? What would be an appropriate way of answering a question of this kind?

In this paper, I suggest that calibrating resource allocations to security problems requires asking and attempting to answer a series of very basic questions that rarely attract the attention they warrant. These questions include the following. What does 'security' mean? How might one provide it? What things are worth securing, and why? How important are the various things the 'security' of which competes for resources? In most cases, I submit, if state leaders conducted a security audit using a rubric such as this, they would discover that they are spending their resources very unwisely indeed.

Keywords

Europe in the World

Introduction

States quite naturally spend a great deal of time, energy, talent, and money on national security, prioritising protection against external armed attacks, for which traditional military forces are vital, and against internal threats such as espionage and subversion. In recent decades, this traditional security *problématique* has broadened to include defence against non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, cyber attacks, foreign meddling in domestic politics, and information warfare. Collectively, these challenges can be daunting, and the cost of failure can be high. But how do leaders know whether they are investing resources wisely? What would be an appropriate way of answering a question of this kind?¹

In this paper, I suggest that calibrating resource allocations to security problems requires asking and attempting to answer a series of very basic questions that rarely attract the attention they warrant. These questions include the following. What does ‘security’ mean? How might one provide it? What things are worth securing, and why? How important are the various things the ‘security’ of which competes for resources? In most cases, I submit, if state leaders conducted a security audit using a rubric such as this, they would discover that they are spending their resources very unwisely indeed.

Understanding ‘security’

To begin with, consider the very concept of ‘security’ itself. Most people would say that they understand the word intuitively, and if pressed would define it in terms of safety from harm. This much is unobjectionable. But nothing is ever absolutely safe. Everything is at least potentially vulnerable to harm. So security is a relative concept, not an absolute one. Moreover, something can be relatively safe from one kind of harm but highly vulnerable to another. Additionally, we commonly mistake *confidence* in something’s safety for safety itself, fail to appreciate the severity of certain kinds of threats, overestimate the severity of others, and fail to update as necessary. Put another way, security is not something one ever manages to achieve; it is something one constantly strives to promote. But only up to a point. It is always possible to spend more on securing something. Inevitably, we must make decisions about what level of investment in security is ‘good enough’ in any given circumstance.²

Security is therefore best understood as an objective condition of relative safety from harm that can only be assessed contextually, i.e. in terms of what the Copenhagen School of International Relations would call a *threat-referent pair* – a ‘referent’ being a thing that we seek to secure.³ We can only ever meaningfully describe something as highly, moderately, slightly, or not at all secure *from something else*.

What is the referent for ‘national’ security? There are many possible answers, including territorial integrity, state sovereignty, political autonomy, way of life, form of government, regime authority, and rule. Different states prioritise different things, although of course they can pursue several of them simultaneously. Almost all states spend resources to defend territorial integrity (although notably some do not. Costa Rica and Liechtenstein, for example, have no militaries). China prioritises Communist Party rule, and in particular the rule of Xi Jinping.⁴ Taiwan prioritises autonomy.⁵ France puts an unusual premium on defending its way of life.⁶ The point here is that conceptions of national security are politically and/or socially constructed, not fixed or given. Some states do not even prioritise their own persistence. In the early 1990s, for example, Czechoslovakia opted to split in two and the Soviet Union voluntarily dissolved. One of the things that makes the ongoing war in Ukraine so intractable and so threatening to global order is Vladimir Putin’s apparent unwillingness to accept that dissolution.

1 This analysis draws on the more detailed treatment in Welch 2022.

2 Baldwin 2001, pp. 19-21.

3 Buzan et al. 1998.

4 Welch forthcoming.

5 Waldron 2012.

6 Hunter-Henin 2012.

Important security referents

When we use the term ‘national’ security, we almost always really mean ‘state’ security.⁷ But the state is not the only important security referent. Other serious claimants to resources include individual human beings (‘human security’), cultures (‘cultural security’), and at the most macro level possible that part of planet Earth that sustains life and the life that it sustains (‘ecospheric security’). Each of these security referents is potentially threatened by natural disasters and other natural physical processes, and also by human activity.

It is important to note that not all referents can be secured against all possible threats. All the referents that we currently care about, in fact, are ultimately doomed (for example) by solar evolution. At some point Earth will become too hot to sustain any life at all. Fortunately, the relevant time horizon is too distant to be of current concern.⁸

For threats that are tractable, the appropriate modality of security provision varies according to the context. Some threats are best dealt with by attempting to block them from arising in the first place (prevention), others by keeping them at bay if they cannot be prevented from arising (interdiction), still others by shielding the referent if interdiction is impossible (defence), and, finally, in circumstances in which it is not possible to avoid a direct impact, by ruggedising the referent (resilience) or preparing for its recovery (restoration). Therefore, it is clear that making decisions about allocating resources to things of importance is an enormously complicated task involving assessing not only threats but also the viability of potential responses for a potentially wide range of security referents to an enormously wide range of potential causes of harm, both natural and anthropogenic. Trade-offs are unavoidable.

Assessing value

There is no point in wasting resources on things that are not worth securing, but how should we assess this worth? Here it is necessary to leverage axiology, or the theory of value. It is possible to value something for one or both of two possible reasons: either it is valuable for its own sake (‘intrinsic value’) and/or it is valuable for what it does or enables (‘extrinsic value’). The former, I have argued elsewhere, is a very limited set: the only things that we can know to be of intrinsic value are pleasure, happiness, and love.⁹ These are the only three things that we unquestioningly value not because of what they do for us but simply because of what they are. While they can overlap or implicate each other, they are conceptually distinct, and each is multidimensional. For present purposes, it is unnecessary to delve into detail; it is enough simply to note that these are the things that make life worth living. What gives us pleasure, makes us happy, or inspires love may be very idiosyncratic; it may be culturally informed; and it may even be unconventional or iconoclastic – but a life devoid of any of them, or full of nothing but their opposites, would not be worth securing. Alas, none of them can be secured directly. The only things that can be secured directly are their preconditions (and even securing these provides no guarantees). Hence security policy can only be directed toward securing things with extrinsic value.

There is no question but that national security can, under many circumstances, promote the conditions for lives worth living. However, this is not always the case. Predatory states, for example, typically make possible lives worth living only for a political elite – or if their subjects do manage to lead lives worth living they do so despite, rather than because of, the states they inhabit. In such cases, we can conclude that those states are not worth securing, and if the transaction costs of disestablishing them are not unacceptable this ought to be done. North Korea provides a textbook example. The North Korean masses would surely be better off if they were not subjects of the so-called Democratic People’s Republic. Therefore, devoting resources to national security cannot always be justified. Needless to say, this observation will not impress North Korea’s leaders.

7 Clear usage would reserve the adjective “national” for “nations,” i.e., ethnic groups, many of whom do not have homeland states of their own.

8 Cole 1958.

9 Welch 2022, pp. 36-8.

They will spend heavily on national security regardless. However, it does point to the conclusion that the philosophical case for devoting resources to national security depends fundamentally on the performance of states as measured by their ability to promote the conditions for lives worth living.

Whose lives count? It is on this point that policymakers, like people in general, typically give free rein to a particularly insidious unconscious bias, namely anthropocentrism. Almost all of us routinely and unthinkingly privilege human lives over non-human lives and things of value to humans over things of value to non-humans. This is an unjustifiable conceit. Humans are not the only beings capable of intrinsically valuable experiences. We know that at least certain other species are capable of pleasure, happiness, and love. Neurologically sophisticated, highly social animals give clear evidence of this. Humans may be unique in their accomplishments – sometimes unique in kind, but in any case typically unique in degree – but we are not unique in our capacities to experience pleasure, happiness, and love. Higher apes, whales, dolphins, elephants, and certain species of birds, at least, all clearly have what it takes to lead and appreciate lives worth living. Arguably, no human being is capable of the depth and intensity of pleasure, happiness, or love available to the average family pet dog. If we are to devote resources to securing things that can make for lives worth living, we should think broad-mindedly and inclusively with respect to other beings capable of living lives worth living.

There is one very powerful implication of this, namely that the security referent with the greatest claim on our care and attention is not the state, which in many cases is substitutable without loss (often, perhaps, even for gain), but the ecosphere. A healthy ecosphere is the *sine qua non* of a good quality of life for humans and non-humans alike. In pursuit of this, states can demonstrate their extrinsic value and help establish a claim to their own worth as security referents. All of the dire, tractable, active threats to ecospheric security are anthropogenic: climate change, resource depletion, pollution, habitat loss, and so on. We are currently in the middle of the sixth great extinction, and it is being caused entirely by us. We are disrupting, and occasionally destroying outright, local ecosystems at an unprecedented rate.¹⁰ An additional dire, tractable, latent threat is also anthropogenic: nuclear winter.¹¹ Avoiding nuclear war is not only a national security imperative but also an ecospheric security imperative too.

Sound ecological policy and practice, in short, is a performance metric indicative of a state's worthiness of security resources.

What other performance benchmarks justify spending resources on national security? I would argue that both human security and cultural security are relevant. The modern bureaucratic sovereign state is particularly well suited to providing human security because of its historically unprecedented capacity to muster and allocate resources for functions and services that can promote it. Unfortunately, the modern bureaucratic sovereign state is also highly capable of undermining human security – as is a broken, failed or otherwise dysfunctional state, if only permissively and to the extent that it enables predatory behaviour on the part of sub-state or non-state actors.

But in what does human security consist? Here I would argue that we should think of human security in very narrow terms, i.e. with respect to the provision of basic human needs such as food, water, shelter, bodily integrity, and freedom from violence. Conflating human security with human rights, as the canonical 1994 UNDP Human Security report did, is a category mistake: human security is an empirical condition, whereas a human right is a normative claim. We should also avoid an expansive understanding of human security that risks confounding it with higher-order human needs such as acceptance, friendship, self-esteem, and accomplishment. While satisfying higher-order human needs definitely conduces to a life worth living, the state cannot do this directly. It can, however, supply the material resources and a safe environment that will enable someone to attempt to satisfy them on their own.¹²

10 Brondizio et al. 2019.

11 Mills et al. 2014.

12 Welch 2022, pp. 159-90, in which I argue that the temptation to think of human security as freedom from fear is also misplaced.

We should also avoid the temptation to conflate human security with cultural security. While cultural instability can get in the way of a life worth living, cultural change is inevitable and cannot be prevented. At most, the pace of change can be moderated. Under most circumstances, states are justified in devoting resources to moderating the pace of cultural change so as to allow members of vulnerable cultural groups time to adapt gracefully. Fortunately, many appropriate measures – language laws, for example – are typically inexpensive and others, such as regulating immigration and standards of public behaviour, involve no cost over and above what states would spend on border control and policing anyway.

What absolutely cannot be justified is forcing the pace of cultural change – for example, with culturally genocidal policies of the kind recently implemented by China to Sinicise and secularise ethnic Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.¹³ This is a recipe for misery, not pleasure, happiness, or love. A state that deliberately undermines the cultural security of vulnerable populations also thereby undermines the case for its own claim to national security resources.

Putting national security in perspective

The priority that states generally give to ‘national’ security – as opposed to ecospheric, human and cultural security – is understandable in light of traditional processes of socialisation (indeed, ‘acculturation’) of policymakers everywhere. Typically, they have not been trained to think outside the box or to situate their understanding of national security in a broader perspective. They understand it as a discrete – and particularly important – imperative. They are not inherently wrong to care about it, but they should take pains to appreciate that it is not intrinsically more important than other security concerns. Indeed, it is largely a function of them.

Of course, even policymakers who do put national security in proper perspective will prioritise it whenever it is in immediate peril. The current government of Ukraine may be forgiven for being more concerned at the moment with defence against Russia than with fighting climate change. However, for most states traditional military threats are remote or non-existent. The general tendency to spend heavily on armed forces cannot be justified in the light of more dire threats to more important referents. In addition, states commonly spend heavily on minor or insignificant threats. The Global War on Terror is a case in point.¹⁴

For understandable reasons, we are not particularly good at threat assessment. We tend to prioritise short-term perceived threats over long-term real threats, and we are more sensitive to certain kinds of threats than to others.¹⁵ Corrective reflection is difficult, but it is also necessary. National security is rarely unimportant, but we need to appreciate that it is tightly connected to other security referents and find ways of socialising policymakers into thinking accordingly.

13 Ala 2021.

14 Mueller & Stewart 2012.

15 Gilbert 2006.

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