

## SECURITY, SECURITIZATION AND THE AGENDA FOR ‘LIBERAL SECURITY STUDIES’: A THINK-PIECE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper reviews the concepts of security and securitization in an attempt to underscore the burgeoning complexion of the security problematique in the contemporary world. By means of a discursive exegesis of select extant themes, the paper posits that the transformation of the security praxis from the orthodox traditional tradition to the critical modern tradition has compelled a new understanding of security; necessitating, thereby, a new disciplinary orientation: Liberal Security Studies.*

**Keywords:** Human security, Liberal Security Studies, securitization, security, state security.

### **Introduction**

Security has been one of the most rampant concepts in contemporary public discourse. It has punctuated the prevailing rhetoric on high-politics, diplomacy and governance. In spite of its apparent currency and familiarity, the concept of security has been widely misunderstood and/or controverted (Mogalakwe, 2013).

In the rapidly securitizing world (Okoli, 2016), there has been much obsession with, and emphasis on, the security *problematique* in public policy and governance. In effect, there has been “the diffusion of the discourse about security in all the spheres of everyday life” following the “theoretical impetus” of “securitization” (Ivan, 2011, p.743). Nonetheless, the essence and import of security, whether as a field of practice or as an area of study, have not been clearly and properly situated.

Consequently, security has remained “one of the most ambiguous, contested, and debated ideas” (Tome, n.d, p.9). Accordingly, The traditional perspective (of security) has been severely contested as new approaches develop. The concept of security has been reworked in all its fundamental components and dimensions, from object and reference to range and security measures (Tome, n.d, p.1).

There is, therefore, a need to rethink the concept of security in order to capture the complex diversity of its meaning and nuances with a view to engendering a new paradigm of Security Studies. This is the main motivation for this paper. The remainder of the paper is organized around the following themes: the concept of security, securitization and the inter-subjective security *problematique*, agenda for Liberal Security Studies, and conclusion.

### **Conceptualizing Security: A Discursive Exploration**

To begin with, it is pertinent to debunk the widely held but over-simplified view that security is an existential state – perhaps, a state characterized by peaceful, tranquil societal relations and life assurance. Security is not essentially about being secure; it, rather, has to do with the ‘act’ (or ‘process’) of securing. As Flyoyd (2016, p.86) rightly admonishes, “Security in the first instance is not to be seen as a state of being (the feeling or reality of being secure); it is to be seen as an action”.

Viewing security as an act or an action presupposes that security is a process. This process has its actors, contexts, regimens, and dynamics. More fundamentally, it has its history, politics, and ecology. These factors must be considered in an attempt to critically come to terms with the nature of the phenomenon of security. What then is security? According to Tome:

Security means the protection and promotion of values and interests considered as vital for the political survival and wellbeing of the community. The closer the community is to the absence of concerns of political, economic, and military nature, the more safeguard its security (n.d, p.10).

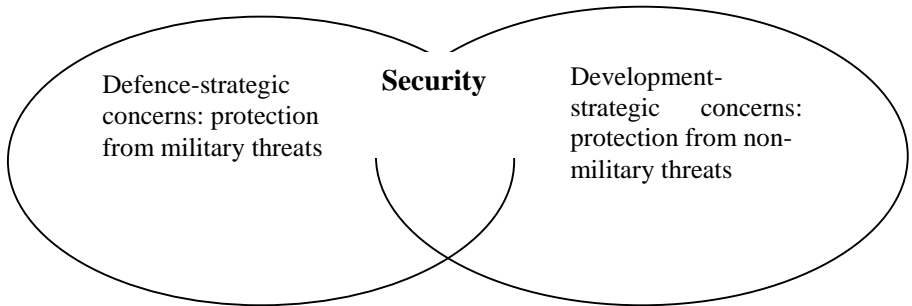
The above definition is important because it recognizes the community (a collectivity of people) as the fundamental security referent. The community adverted to in the definition can be local, national, or international. Securing a community thus means to safeguard its corporate survival and wellbeing by protecting it from both military and non-military threats.

The essence of security is to protect human community from all objects of danger. This induces threats that militate against “human survival, health, economic wellbeing, livable environment and political rights” (Tome, n.d, p.4). Existential threats with which security is concerned are multifaceted. They can be political, economic, military, ecological, socio-cultural, territorial, technological, or even extra-cosmic in nature (Okoli & Uhembe, 2015; Okoli & Atelhe, 2015; Okoli & Ochim, 2016).

Threats to human survival and wellbeing (security) can be local, national, transnational, or global in essence. Exposure to such threats renders human community, at whatever applicable level, vulnerable. Securing human community therefore means the process of protecting it from all forms of existential threats and vulnerabilities, be they military or non-military in essence.

The concept of security has two salient components, namely: defence and development. The defence component of security deals with military threats, while the development component is concerned with issues pertaining to general human welfare and wellbeing. The relationship between these components of security is illustrated in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Components of Security**



Source: Conceived by the author (cf Okoli, 2016).

From the above illustration (fig. 1), it is evident that security is a holistic concept. In effect, it is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is contingent on a number of determinants. The determinants are as follows (table 1):

**Table 1: Determinants of Security**

<b>Determinant</b>	<b>Remark(s)</b>
Military capability	The power and preparedness of the armed forces, the police, and the paramilitaries
Socio-economic conditions	Assurance/safeguard of jobs, livelihoods, healthcare, education, food sufficiency
Socio-ecological conditions	Prevention and mitigation of natural disasters
Social relations	Mitigation/resolution inequality, social conflicts/disharmony
Governance	The capacity of the government to regulate: enforce laws, policies

Source: Compiled by the author.

Extant scholarship on security has crystallized into two dominant paradigmatic traditions: (i) the state security paradigm, and (ii) the human security paradigm. These two traditions have dominated the contemporary polemics on the essence and scope of national security (Okoli, & Ogayi, 2012; Okoli & Orinya, 2013; Okoli & Agada, 2014; Okoli & Okpalele, 2014; Okoli & Ayokhai, 2015).

The state security paradigm focuses on the military dimensions of national security, with emphasis on state preservation and survival (Okoli & Ogayi, 2012). It stresses the imperative for territorial integrity, sovereignty and military hegemony (Robinson, 201; Okoli & Uhembe, 2015). On the other hand, the human security paradigm prioritizes human welfare and wellbeing as the essence of security (Ivan, 2011; Okoli & Agada, 2014). This paradigm has expanded the frontiers of the national security to encompass concerns of environmental security, food security, economic security, livelihood security, conflict security, to mention but a few (Onoja, 2010; Ivan, 2011; Okoli & Ogayi; Onoja, 2014; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014; Okoli & Ochim, 2016). The differences between the aforementioned paradigms can be summarized as follows (table 2):

**Table 2: Differences between the State Security and Human Security Paradigms**

S/n	State security paradigm	Human security paradigm
1.	It is state-centric	It is human-centric
2.	Nation-state is the main referent of security	Human community is the main referent of security
3.	It is pro-defence	It is pro-development
4.	It focuses on military threats and vulnerabilities	It focuses on non-military threats and vulnerabilities
5.	It is concerned with state preservation and survival	It is concerned with protection of human life, dignity and wellbeing
6.	Concerns of security are limited to territories	Concerns for security are more or less universal/global
7.	Concerns of security are not necessarily inter-related	Concerns of security are inter-related and mutually reinforcing
8.	Security is promoted through interventionist approach	Security is promoted through preventionist approach
9.	It is statist and militarist	It is humanist
10.	It is restrictive and reductionist	It is holistic and comprehensive

Source: Compiled by the author.

It is important to note that the new understanding of security does not presuppose a dogmatic dichotomization of the security discourse along the state-centric and human-centric prisms. It only underscores the imperative for a ‘comprehensive security’ (Okoli, 2015) with obvious emphasis on non-military concerns. According to Tome: ‘Comprehensive security’ underlines the multi-dimensional and multi-instrumental character of security, and shifts focus from political military disputes to a myriad of economic, social and environmental concerns. At the same time, it concentrates on non-military instruments such as development assistance, economic co-operations, or international institutions (n.d, p.6).

The notion of comprehensive security is, however, not without any blemish. In fact, it has been criticized as being too “inclusive and ambiguous” (Tome, n.d, p.7). Such an omnibus conception of security risks the tendency to being too eclectic and generic to refer to any reality in particular. It is also manifestly value-laden and poorly systematized. These weaknesses are held to have vitiated its descriptive capability as well as conceptual plausibility.

Beyond the afore-stated conceptions, four important perspectives to security are identifiable in the extant literature. These are: (i) the survivalist perspective, (ii) the constructivist perspective, (iii) the emancipationist perspective, and (iv) the humanist perspective. It is to be noted that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive in import (Grayson, n.d). The survivalist perspective holds that security is all about survival. This implies that the essence of security is to protect the referent objects from existential dangers

that threaten their survival. This perspective resonates strongly with the realist school of national security (Fako, 2012; Erdag, 2013; Kasim, 2013).

The constructivist perspective views security as a “produced object”: something “produced via the interactions between actors and structures” (Erdag, 2013, p.65). This points to the fact that security is not necessarily an “objectively existing condition”, but it requires “a social process of mediation before it can become a broad social concern and before it becomes politically actionable” (Zwierlein & Graaf, 2013, p.49). This perspective has found ample expression in the securitization literature that holds, among other things, that security is, after all, framed or constructed.

The emancipationist perspective seeks to understand security from the point of view of socio-political liberation. The thinking in this regard is that the purpose of security is to free the referent objects from vulnerable situations (Nunes, 2016). This perspective is being propagated by the exponents of Ethical Security Studies as a way of promoting a just and emancipatory global security order (Flyoyd, 2016, p.103).

The humanist perspective of security emphasizes the centrality and primacy of human welfare, wellbeing and development. This perspective is eminently represented by the human security paradigm, which underscores the need to protect the human community from existential fears and wants (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2016). The humanist perspective is in sharp contradistinction with the statist conception of security that considers the state (its sovereignty, territoriality, physical preservation) as the centerpiece of security. The plausibility of the statist perspective has been variously and vigorously contested by the rest of the aforementioned perspectives.

### **3. Securitization and the Inter-subjective Security Notion**

The paradigm shift from the orthodox to critical conception of security culminated in the emergence of securitization theory. Securitization theory has broadened and deepened the understanding of security “to include political, economic, social, and ecological elements” (Robinson, 2010, p.848). More importantly, it has underscored the import of security as a socially constructed, historically contingent and contextually dynamic phenomenon (Robinson, 2010; Zwierlein & Graaf, 2013).

Within the context of securitization theory, security is understood with reference to four fundamental concepts, namely: existential threat, referent object, emergency situation, and extra-ordinary measure (Kasim, 2013, p.2). To elaborate:

The existential threat refers to the superiority of one issue and is so (sic) distinct compared to others that it must receive absolute priority. If the referent object does not successfully address it, the issue at hand would put the existence of the referent object in danger. In essence, the very next step after invoking security is the declaration of emergency situation. By declaring it, the state traditionally will claim ‘a right to use whatever means (that) are necessary to block a threatening development’ – that is the extra-ordinary measure (Kasim 2013, p.2).

Securitization conforms to a discursive process whereby an issue is framed by the state as an existential threat, and, therefore, is equated with state survival in a sense that justifies priority of action. Hence, “A successful securitization process thus first posits an existential threat, then demands an emergency response, and finally undertakes actions that break free of normal social and political rules” (Robinson, 2010, p.851).

Associated with the securitization theory is the assumption that security is neither the cause nor the consequence of a specific factor. Rather, it is a dynamic social process that has its own political and historical dialectics (Fako, 2012; Erdag, 2013). Securitization theory has thus taken the security discourse to the realm of ‘threat-import/threat-impact’ narrative. This narrative is essential because it situates the primary way in which we make sense of the security world, produce meanings and articulate intensions on security, and legitimize actions in that regard. The four cardinal elements of the security narrative have been highlighted by Wibben (2016, p.103) as follows: threat that locates danger; referents to be secured; agents charged with providing security; and means by which threats are contained and security is allegedly provided.

#### **4. Towards a New Disciplinary Tradition: Agenda for Liberal Security Studies**

The origins of Security Studies are traceable to the Post-World War II International Relations. Then, the focus of the discipline was on the manifestations of state’s military power in the context of armed struggle and high diplomacy. This trend persisted and prevailed through the Cold War era. According to Robinson (2010, p.847), “During the Cold War, Security Studies was dominated by interest in military statecraft, and strategic studies”.

However, the incremental decline of the Cold War occasioned a radical shift in the focus of the traditional Security Studies. In effect, there was a departure from “the centralized security system of the Cold War era to the increasingly fragmented and complex security structures of today” (Elke, 2003, p.5). Since then, Security Studies have witnessed tremendous transformation and diversification in keeping with the burgeoning complexion of the contemporary global security sector.

A critical issue in the evolution of a new Security Studies is how to situate the place of the state in the whole security praxis. As Onoja (2004, p.120) rightly observes, “A contentious issue is the question of whether the state or human being should be the (security) referent. The new Security Studies thus seeks to de-emphasize the dominance of the state in the security discourse and practice. This is in recognition of the fact that the state is only one of the multiple security referents in the contemporary world. Besides, concerns of security are not necessarily state-centred. Of a truth, security obtains below, within and above the state (Grayson, n.d).

Another critical issue in the new Security Studies is the need to de-militarize the field. For so long, Security Studies has been needlessly mortgaged and sandwiched within province of military or strategic studies. This has affected the approach and subject matter of the discipline. The new Security Studies embodies the understanding that security threats and strategies are not inherently and essentially military. As a matter of fact, they are more ‘civil’ (non-military) than military (Okoli, 2015; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2016).

Akin to the above is the imperative for redefining the subject matter of Security Studies to capture the ramifying dimensions of contemporary security issues and concerns. This implies prioritizing the following cognate questions:

What is the object of security and what entity must be protected (whose security)? What is the nature and type of threats, risks, and challenges (security in face of whom, or what)? What is the agent of security (security by whom) and with what means (security instruments)? (Tome, n.d, p.2).

In other words, the subject matter of the new Security Studies should be compendious enough to capture the essence of security not only as an outcome but also as a complex system that involves actions, actors, processes, procedures, mechanisms, practices, interests, and contexts. This would make for a new security apprehension that is adaptive, “interested, contextual and historically specific” (Onoja, 2014, p.121). In the same vein, the historical and contextual contingencies of security should be properly captured in any attempt to situate its subject matter. As Zwierlein and Graaf (2013, p. 46) justify:

Security is not just the outcome of physical or political circumstances and incidents. People and organizations have to attribute meaning to those circumstances and incidents. They have to be incorporated into political, administrative and bureaucratic decision-making process and procedures. This may seem obvious. But the history of security is usually not described in these terms.

Considering the focus of Security Studies in the manner adverted to in the foregoing entails, among other things, restraining the field from the syndrome of a-historicity. Although the focus of modern Security Studies has been fairly historical and contemporary, its subject matter has not been sufficiently historicized in a manner that fosters a rigorous understanding of the dynamic and dialectical essences of the security phenomenon. The new Security Studies, being advocated for in this think-piece should, therefore, seek to properly contextualize and historicize the security issues as realities that are embedded in socio-historical and dynamics (cf Onoja, 2014). The rationale for this is simple: all security issues occur in a social context and through a socio-political process, and these facts bare on the meaning and nuances of security as a historical phenomenon. This recommends for a Security Studies that is context-specific, context-sensitive, and socio-historically amenable. By logical extrapolation, this also necessitates freeing Security Studies from the syndrome of Eurocentricism and western epistemological orthodoxy.

Furthermore, there is a crucial need to open up the horizon and frontiers of Security Studies to embody relevant elements of Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, History, and Criminology. The inter-disciplinary essence of the security *problematique* recommends a multi-disciplinary approach and focus for the new Security Studies. Besides the aforementioned traditional fields, the new Security Studies has a lot to benefit from the emerging micro-fields of Social Sciences and the Humanities, such as Humanitarian Studies, Peace Studies, Diplomatic Studies, Conflict Studies, Intelligence Studies, Development Studies, and Crime Studies. Insights from these cognate sub-fields would go a long way in consolidating and edifying the epistemological foundations of the advocated new Security Studies.

Finally, there is a compelling need to effectively severe today’s Security Studies from the disciplinary dogmatism of International Relations and Strategic Studies. Although Security Studies owes a lot to these fields, it has since transcended their disciplinary frontiers and has evolved into robust and systematic body of knowledge that requires disciplinary autonomy and distinction. The new Security Studies must, therefore, be de-statedized, demilitarized, de-Westernized, diversified, historicized, liberalized, and ‘autonomized’. This underscores the imperative for ‘Liberal Security Studies’ that is transubstantiated as a radically reborn disciplinary mode. Above all, there must be a conscious attempt to refocus the bearing of Security Studies to reflect on the essentials of human-community security at the local, national, transnational, and global levels.

## 5. Conclusion

The concept of security has been one of the most promiscuous terms in contemporary public discourse. In addition to being a fundamental preoccupation of governance at all levels, security has been invoked by governments to justify extra-ordinary policies and actions in the contexts at high politics, emergency rule, and humanitarian crisis. It has also been widely acclaimed by nations as the quintessence of public good.

Conception of security has evolved dialectically from defence-centric to development-centric perspectives. The latter is exemplified by the human security paradigm, which has expanded the security discourse to encompass all facets of existential threats and vulnerabilities. This has crystallized in a sort of ‘security complex’ whereby all aspects of societal life are being securitized.

Amidst the evolving dynamics of the security discourse over the years, the concept of security has suffered immense terminological-cum-paradigmatic ambiguity and obfuscation. This has complicated the subject matter of security both as an area of study and a field of practice. A rethink in the understanding and study of security is, therefore, a desideratum. This new thinking proposes a re-conceptualization of security as protection of human community from all existential threats and vulnerabilities, be they political, economic, ecological, socio-cultural, technological, or military. The implication of this is that contemporary Security Studies must refocus towards a multi-disciplinary tradition that is capable of comprehending the totality of meanings and nuances embedded in the now prevailing security thinking. The agenda for Liberal Security Studies is thus initiated herewith.

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