

## **A Philosophical Justification of the Amorphous Character of the Concept of “Security”**

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### **Abstract**

What is “security”? Does it just mean the protection of lives and property away from danger? How does the concept of “security” play out in the international system? The concept of “security,” it needs to be said, has been a subject that has been of principal concern among theorists of international studies but with almost no attention from philosophers even as they employ one of the philosophers’ core methods – analyticity. Based on this research gap, our contention is to provide a critical exploration in agreement with some theorists of international relations that just like philosophy, which lacks a univocal definition, so is the concept or idea of security. The submission of this essay, therefore, is that theorists in international studies should be contented with the knowledge that the idea of security must be a contested concept and there is nothing strange about that. For the idea to be applicable, *their attention should be directed towards* contexts in which the term is being applied and see which theory is more fitting for that particular context.

**Key words:** Security, Steven Smith, Classical Realism, Constructivism

### **Introduction**

Our agenda in this essay is to provide critical analysis and reflection on the status of the proposition that “security is essentially a contested concept.” It is important to point out from the onset that the idea that security is a contested concept derives from the work of Steven Smith (2005). It should be mentioned that the idea of security used to be seen mainly from the theoretical background of positivism and realism. However, what Smith does through his essay entitled: “The Contested Concept of Security” is that such an approach is no longer reliable. This is because, in international relations, the idea of security is viewed from the angle of realism, which usually suggests that security mainly involves states and the use of military force. This means that the state alone is a referent object (McSweeney 1997). Following this understanding, various theories of security such as the Welsh interpretation of security, Copenhagen school and even constructivism developed.

Given the various theories that have developed concerning the concept of security, there is no need to provide any argument against the proposition that “security is essentially a contested concept.” In this essay, we are going to be using two instances currently on-going in the international system to buttress this proposition. For us in this essay, the proposition that “security is essentially a contested concept” means that there is no fixed security theory that is true for all climes and occurrences. We shall be arguing this thesis by illustrating that there is no ‘one size fits’ all idea of security for examining all cases or instances of security in the international system. One theory may be useful in this condition but not applicable in another. Let us now consider each of the prominent theories of security with some of the perceived limitations that are present in each of them thereby leading to the conviction that security is a contested concept.

### **Why Security is an essentially Contested Concept**

One of the most outspoken scholars on the position that security is an essentially contested concept is Steven Smith (2005). He uses the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre to justify that it is not in all cases that the state is a referent frame. The September 11 attacks have succeeded in showing mainly that the United States was not waging war against another State but a cell or non-state actor within another state. This non-state actor seems to have a different ideology from the relationship that the state itself has with the United States of America. This is one of the reasons given by Smith for his conviction that security is a concept that is not clear and fixed. Bhal (2014) holds the position that is not to be debated that security is fixed. Thus, due to the level of disputes and issues which are related to the concept of security, Gallie (1956) has argued that the realisation of the non-fixed nature of security has caused an air of neutrality among scholars.

The aim of this essay is to consider how each of the various theories of security conceives security such that it leads to the affirmation that truly when talking about security, we should see it as a contested area. This is because as we shall notice, each of the theories is looking at the idea of security from a different angle or perspective. This is in line with what Smith has done. After showing the limitations that may be found in the traditional or realist account of security, he considers some other schools of thought on security that entered the scene to provide deeper and more encompassing approaches to security. In the end, all of the arguments explored by each of these theories end up affirming the conviction of Smith (2005) that security is a contested concept.

**Classical Realism:** From the angle of classical realism, the idea of security is seen from the angle wherein the state is the primary reference. What this theory of security suggests is that the state is the highest organ and it must be the major referent frame in security issues (Carnesale and Nacht 1976). It needs to be pointed out that when we are looking at the concept of security from the angle of the classical realist, there are various divergent positions on the subject among them. One common denominator that is however replete among all of them is that the position of the state cannot be compromised for whatever grounds (Carnesale and Nacht 1976).

The foundation of the realist doctrine on security can be traced to positivism in science (McGlinchey 2021). The methodology of positivism is derived from the pure sciences as it treats reality as something distinct regardless of the ways that we look at it or wish to conceive it. As noted by Smith and Owens (2005), positivism hints at the fact that when talking about reality, facts and ideas about it must be neutral.

Reality is an approach that views the world as ‘out there’ waiting to be observed and analysed by the researcher. Theories that are built on positivism see the world ‘as it is’ and base their assumptions upon analysing physical elements such as states and international organisations which they can account for and ascribe values to (McGlinchey 2021: 19).

In addition, the positive ideology also wishes to make a clear distinction between theory and fact (Harris 1988). The deduction from this influence of positivism on classical realism is that states exist militarily and it is justified to also use military aggression or apparatus when the sovereignty of the states is harassed by another. This is the main idea of security from the angle of classical realism and one of the major proponents of this idea of positivism is McSweeney (1999). However, the idea that security is fixed as held by McSweeney (1999) has been critically found to not be the case as disclosed in the works of McDonald (2012), Kolodziej (1992) and Gallie (1956) where it has been debunked that such a fixed conception of security is not feasible.

It was Steven Smith who is most outspoken concerning the indefinable nature of the concept of security. Smith (2005), can demonstrate that when one looks at the 9/11 attacks, the classical realist concept is not encompassing enough to account for some of the underlying factors that are responsible. Smith (2005) is highly convinced that using the state as the primary referent object is no longer reliable. According to him, “the events of September 11, suggest that such an account is only of limited use. This is because, one of the key actors, Al-Qaida, was not a state and, more important, was not organised in the traditional way that states have been organised” (Smith 2005: 32).

Smith goes on to critically examine the basis of the rational choice theory and neoclassical realism, the two approaches used by classical realism means in understand the extent to which classical realism is not available for understanding the 9/11 attacks. Smith (2005) finds this to be problematic. For him, the rational choice theory is limited in comprehending the agenda of Al-Qaeda, since it cannot give a detailed or comprehensive analysis of how identity and interests interact in social relations. Furthermore, Smith (2005) is convinced that rational choice focuses on the ideology that states or groups behave in a rational manner when their projections or expectations are to be maximised. Here we can notice some hint of utilitarianism in this aspect of classical realism.

Utilitarianism is a theory advocated by the English Jurist Jeremy Bentham. Though there are many variants of the view discussed, utilitarianism is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the best. There are various ways through which this idea is conceived. One thing to note is that the theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of the consequences produced. What distinguishes utilitarianism from egoism has to do with the scope of the relevant consequences. On the utilitarian view one ought to maximize the overall good – that is, consider the good of others as well as one's good (Bentham 1948). In simple terms, one may state the utilitarian criterion of the rightness of particular actions as follows: *an action is right if and only if, in the situation, there was no alternative to it which would have resulted in a larger total of welfare in the world*. This means that if there was something the agent could have done instead of the action he or she performed, which would have resulted in a larger total of welfare in the world, then he or she acted wrongly (Tannsjo, 2002:19). This is the principle upon which the rational choice theory thrives.

The fundamental flaw of Smith (2005) is that the approach omits or overlooks the interests and identities of actors since assumptions are invited. Neoclassical realism, for Smith (2005) is also flawed because of its limitations in understanding actions because different groups have different internal and external structures which are exemplified by states in recent times. The common denominator of these two, for Smith (2005), is their emphasis on the military might of the state above any other actor.

Perhaps, we should state, however, that just because irrespective of the limitations experienced by classical realism, this does not mean that it is totally useless and hence, should be discarded. In a later part of this essay, we shall turn again to the consideration of the relevance of classical realism particularly as it pertains to the Taiwan Strait. For the moment, it is helpful to have a deeper understanding of the contention of Smith (2005) as he applies another five security theories to the 9/11 attack in a bid to establish his strong point that security is indeed indefinable. Next on the list is the Copenhagen school.

**Copenhagen School:** This is a school that boasts renowned names such as Barry Buzan Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1997). The central idea of the Copenhagen school on the concept of security is that “security is all about survival” (McSweeney 1997, 82). As noted by Oliveira (2020), the Copenhagen School cannot be taken as a radical reaction to the inadequacies or limitations experienced by classical realism. One way to give a proper exposition of the concept of Copenhagen theory on security is in the following words:

We believe even the socially constituted is often sedimented as structure and becomes so relatively stable as a practice that one must do an analysis also on the basis that it continues, using one's understanding of the social construction of security not only to criticize this

fact but also to understand the dynamics of security and thereby manoeuvre them (Buzan *et al.* 1997).

The Copenhagen school has also been noted to involve an element of constructivism in its assessment while also maintaining a dialogue with the classical approach (Duque 2009). A careful and critical comprehension of the idea of the Copenhagen School on security is that when talking about the concept of security it needs to move beyond the realm of the state as other non-state and important variables cannot be ruled out. The other factors that cannot be shoved aside are: legal, economic, social and ecological (Smith 2005). Even when it makes the case that other variables aside from the state are worthy of being considered, the Copenhagen school continues to hold a subtle position that the state is still central. It is based on this analysis that Smith's idea of security as a contested concept is reinforced. This is because Smith (2005) shows that much as the Copenhagen school continues to see the state as a referent frame, it is limited and cannot analyse properly the 9/11 attack on the world trade centre. The next theory on security is constructivism.

**Constructivism:** As a theory of security, what constructivism does is to consider security away from the perspective of the state as a referent frame. Constructionism argues that identity and interests are paramount when talking about security. As noted by Wendt (2002), "agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures. The agency can be understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system that consists of material and ideational elements." Constructivism makes the bold attempt of comprehending the core ideology of state and non-state actors through the identities and interests which are continuously changing. Thus, the constructivist takes the position that identities inform interests and actions (Theys 2018).

By looking at the concept of security from this perspective even the theory of constructivism is lacking a grounding or appears to be a sweeping notion of security which then makes the concept to be contestable or lacking firm understanding. This is the criticism offered by Smith (2005) as the prior identities of those that carried out the 9/11 attacks on the one hand and their identities on the other hand are not reconcilable. For Smith (2005, 40), "many Muslims will not be willing to admit that "Bin Laden had planned and ordered the attacks, whatever the evidence that the West put forward." The implication of this objection to constructivism, therefore, is that it is limited and does not provide us with a convincing understanding of security. The next in line is the critical security scholarship.

**Critical Security Studies:** There are various headings under which critical security studies go. In other situations, critical security studies are also called the emancipation school. The foundation of critical security studies is linked to critical theory with some elements of Marxism. Foremost scholars who are associated with this school are Ken Booth (2007) and Richard Wyn Jones (1999). Its basic or overriding understanding of security is that it is no different from emancipation. This group of scholars, whilst talking about the concept of security see it and emancipation as two sides

of the same coin (Booth 1991). In the words of Booth, (1999: 41–42) “emancipation is not timeless, universal or attainable at the detriment of others.” From another angle, Diskaya (2013) reflects that for the critical security studies school, “true security is absolutely depending on the process of emancipation and without emancipation accomplishing true security would be something impossible.”

Whilst using the 9/11 attacks for assessing the position of the critical security studies on the subject matter of security, Smith renders the theory inapplicable. Within the context of the 9/11 attacks, Smith (2005) claims that it is not clear who wishes to be emancipated. Is it the US or Al-Qaeda? What this clearly implies is that we cannot be sure of what security really means even when we look at it from the perspective of the critical security studies dimension. The next theory to consider is the feminist theory of security.

**Feminist Security Studies:** Scholars who like to examine the concept of security from the perspective of feminist security studies begin with the perception that “security is saturated with men and has historically been a field that is masculine, and as such strength and power are invested in masculine attributes, ideas and strategies while feminine characteristics often attributed to women (such as emotions) are deemed as weakness and hindrances to the power structures” (Gasztold, 2017).

While taking the concept of security as held by the feminist security studies to task, Smith (2005) is still adamant that it is not encompassing enough to tell us what security is all about. The way the hijackers behaved toward women, Smith (2005) maintains, is a global affair that is not restricted to the security arena alone. Smith seems to be saying that even if the position of women is given full attention in the security concept, it does not offer a sweeping idea of security that will make it not a contested concept.

From the beginning of this essay, we have given attention to various theories on the concept of security in order to examine the conclusion by scholars such as Smith (2005) that security is a contested concept that lacks a definite understanding. On first showing, this may seem to be a form of irrelevant position. However, with the four popular theories or approaches to the concept of security and how it plays out in the international system, it is clear that in truth, it is difficult to pin down an idea of what security really means. Irrespective of the ways that security may be understood, it is our position in this essay that obviously, security is a contested concept and we cannot have a fixed idea of it. Even if this is true, this does not mean that all the security theories that we have considered are not relevant. What matters most is the ability to be able to understand which of these concepts of security is applicable in a given circumstance. This is because of our understanding that not all of these theories can be used to understand an issue in the international system simultaneously. Where one concept of security does not work, then another will. As a way

of making our point, we are going to provide two illustrations with two appropriate security theories.

We shall consider the ongoing crisis in Ukraine between Russia and Ukraine. Russia has entered the territory of Ukraine with its military intending to take over Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukraine is not relenting as her military forces are also on the ground to see that the military forces of Russia fail. When we take a look at this international crisis, we can take to the position that the idea of security from the perspective of classical realism is justified. As previously noted, one important thing to understand about classical realism is that states exist militarily and it is justified to also use military aggression or apparatus when the sovereignty of the states is harassed by another. If one employs the concept of security from the perspective of classical realism to understand the ongoing Russo-Ukraine crisis, then it will be clearer that it is an appropriate one.

Another example which shows that even when security is a concept that scholars have not settled on what it is precise, its theories are applicable in some specific contexts is the position of critical security studies. This plays out in the Taiwan Strait where Taiwan is considering a break away from China. This is contrary to what China and even Russia an ally considers following the idea of the One China Policy. Specifically, the Russian foreign minister recently explained that “Our position on the existence of only one China remains unchanged...We have no problem with upholding the principle of China’s sovereignty” (Reuters 2022). However, from the perspective of Taiwan, the need to leave Russia is an instance of emancipation as Taiwan sees it as a move that will guarantee her security as an independent state (JM 2017). What needs to be realised is that in the case of the conflict arising from the Taiwan Strait as well as the willingness of Taiwan to seek ways to attain independence from China, security as emancipation is justified.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of our discussion in this essay, an attempt was made to examine whether or not security is a contested concept. We relied on the study of Steven Smith (2005) who is of the clear position that security as a concept is essentially contested. However, in light of our analysis of the various theories of security and how they conceive the idea of security, *it may be extremely difficult not to* admit Smith’s opinion that indeed the concept of security is not settled. Even when this admission has been conceded, we have undertaken in this essay a position that goes beyond the pessimistic position of Smith. Thus, we contend that even when the idea of security cannot be reduced to one, there are international incidents that show that one or two theories on security can be used to have a deeper understanding. To make our position clearer, this essay used the current crisis in Ukraine and the tension over Taiwan with China as justification. From the analysis conducted in this essay, our position is that even if the concept or idea of security cannot be defined and remains contestable, this does not mean that present conceptions or theories on security are totally useless. We anticipate the development of more theories on the idea of security aside from the ones we have discussed. Our anticipation is based on the rational nature of human beings that

often make ways for changes in events in human society. The point we hold in this work is that both the currently existing theories and those that may be developed in subsequent time will surely fit into a particular situation in human history and so should be considered meaningful and acceptable based on their applicability.

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