

THE ROLE OF
SECURITY IN ADVANCING
TRANS-ATLANTIC
INTEGRATION
– Course Content –

FLORIAN COLDEA

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LECTURE 1

Security – What It Is and Why It Matters. Definitions, Evolution, Characteristics¹

Abstract

Lecture 1 introduces the concept of security and other relevant terms for understanding the importance of this concept – vulnerabilities, dangers, risks, and threats. It underlines the evolving nature of security, from historical and cultural points of view. It presents the different types of security – national, collective, global, emphasizing the similarities and differences, as well as the actors responsible for ensuring each of those concepts.

Objectives

To understand the concept of security and the security-related concepts – vulnerability, danger, risk, threat.

To understand why and how the security concept was shaped from a historical and cultural perspective.

To differentiate between the different types of security, the specificities of each type and the actors involved.

Key concepts

Security, risk, threat, vulnerability, national security, collective security, global security.

Selective bibliography

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Security is one of the most important concepts throughout the world and throughout the history of mankind given its vital role for human survival.

According to the psychologist Abraham Maslow, who developed a theory on the hierarchy of human needs, safety and security represent the second tier (out of five), just after the biological needs. Some thinkers even argued that without security we cannot fulfil the biological needs, thus highlighting its critical significance².

So it is not surprising that we find references to security in all cultures, including in the central religious texts – the Bible, the Quran, the Tripitaka, etc.

Analyzing those references, one cannot but notice that the understanding and practice of security differ from one culture to another and also from one period of time to another.

What is similar is that security has been a fundamental concern for each society, community or state, regardless of the historical period taken into account. As a result, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 and translated into over 500 languages, states in Art. 3 that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person”³.

1. Origin and Definitions

Looking back at its origin, the word *secure* is derived from the Latin *securus*, meaning “freedom from care”: *se* (without) + *cura* (care, anxiety), and *securitas/atris* meaning “freedom from danger”. The Roman mythology even included a goddess of security and stability called *Securitas*, who often appears on coins and personifies the security and stability of the Roman people, the Roman Empire and the Roman emperor.

There are a great number of definitions for *security*:

– *The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*: protection against something bad that might happen in the future; the degree to which something is safe and protected; the activities involved in protecting a country, building or person against attack, danger⁴.

– *The Collins Dictionary*: all the measures that are taken to protect a place, or to ensure that only people with permission enter it or leave it⁵.

– *The Cambridge Dictionary*: protection of a person, building, organisation, or country against threats such as crime or attacks by foreign countries⁶.

One can notice that all of these definitions include two main characteristics – (physical) harm and intentional actions (carried out by human actors or behaviours). The latter is particularly relevant because the intentional nature of the actions or threats differentiates *security* from *safety*.

Even though the two terms are sometimes intertwined, this difference is highly relevant – *security* means protection against deliberate threats while *safety* means being secure against unintended threats.

As mentioned above, given cultural and historical reasons, there is no agreed definition of security or of national security, especially when it comes to the responsibilities and the instruments used by the states to ensure the security of their citizens and the security of the state itself.

“During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment thinkers put individual security before the state, which had the obligation to protect citizens given its legitimacy and the principles underlying its existence and feasibility – the separation of powers and respect for human rights and freedoms.

In the 19th century, the existence and definition of security were linked to the state and the nation. Ideology has become an important factor in the evolution and definition of security, with certain political regimes trying to justify and legitimize not only defense and independence actions, but also expansionist ones. The most eloquent example of this was German fascism, which used security, the need for *vital space*, as a justification and legitimization of the outbreak of World War II.”⁷

“Since then, the concept of security has undergone substantial changes and transformations, as the state has ceased to be the single most relevant actor of international relations with the emergence of non-state actors (terrorist organisations, organised crime and illegal trafficking networks, multinational private companies, international non-governmental organisations, etc.).”⁸

Moreover, we have witnessed an increased diversification of security’s forms of manifestation in multiple domains: social, economic, environmental, health, etc.

“Also, the modern approach to the concept of security added a subjective dimension to its problematic area: a community is safe if its members feel safe. In other words, the security state of a nation is closely interdependent with the security perceptions of policy makers, citizens’ self-perception of the security state (real threat versus perception of the threat) and public reflection of national security issues.

This reality is reflected in the definitions given in the specialised literature: as early as 1952, Arnold Wolfers considered that ‘security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired and subjective values, the absence of fears that these values will be subject to attacks’⁹, and David Omand, coordinator of the UK intelligence community between 2002 and 2005, considers that national security should be defined as ‘the state of trust of citizens that the risks of everyday life, whether caused by man or natural, are adequately managed so that they are convinced that normal life can continue’¹⁰.¹¹

2. National Security: Vulnerabilities, Risks, Threats

Against this background, now more than ever it is of paramount importance to identify and define what *national security* is and what it is not.

In order to achieve that, each state has to clearly identify what are the “vulnerabilities, risk factors and threats to its national security,

their sources and their potential for manifestation – indispensable elements for designing and implementing effective prevention/countering measures – as well as the opportunities to promote its security interests”¹².

“*Vulnerability* is a state of fact or phenomenon which diminishes the ability to react to existing or potential risks or that favours their emergence and development. At state level, vulnerabilities diminish the response capacity of institutions with national security responsibilities (and of society as a whole) to existing or potential risks or may favour the emergence of risk/threat factors.”¹³

“Vulnerability has the characteristic of being exploitable (by the source of a threat) in the sense of causing damage, direct or indirect, to the values of society, individuals or their property.”¹⁴

Among others, vulnerabilities may be caused by:

– “system malfunctions (dysfunctions in the relations between the components of the social system, in relations between institutions, etc.), affecting the functionality of information systems (confidentiality, integrity, availability and authenticity of data and information)”, or by;

– “subjective elements, as a result of the action of individuals pursuing personal interests, i.e. inaction or inability of national authorities to make timely and adequate decisions.”¹⁵

Risk implies the presence of at least one factor affecting security, but also the potentiality of its manifestation.

“Risk factors are internal and external situations, circumstances, elements, conditions or conjunctures, sometimes doubled by action, which cause or potentiate the materialization of a threat to national security according to a given vulnerability.

The risk to national security – in a broad sense – results in the discrepancy between *positive expectation* (objective) and *negative event* (deviation from the objective), which can occur, but especially by its impact (measurable in negative effects, extent, costs, affected areas, etc.) on the state, society and individuals.”¹⁶

“It is important to understand that the level of exposure to risk can be amplified or diminished by the ability of an individual or a state to cope with and survive internal and external emergencies – in other words, by her/his/its resilience.