

THE CHANGING NATURE OF “INTERNATIONAL SECURITY”: *THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED DEFINITION*

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Historically, the concept of international security has been equated with the use of force between nations, with a particular focus on great power warfare. However, during and since the 1980s, this description became increasingly questioned in terms of who should be secured, the nature of international threats, and the type of responses that were subsequently warranted to manage such threats. The new formulations of international security seemingly rectified the problems raised by the narrow conception of international security. However, as this article will demonstrate, these new security definitions are not without their own difficulties. This article will contrast the benefits and drawbacks of both the traditional and new definitions in order to illustrate that neither provides a sufficient conception of international security on its own. Instead, the article will put forward an integrated definition that incorporates the benefits, and rejects the drawbacks, of both. The article maintains that expanded notions are important but not at the expense of conventional understandings of international security. The article will also establish that the term “international security” should include security challenges that could threaten the international system, including non-military threats that may destabilize a state to the point of implosion.

INTRODUCTION

In international relations, words play an important role in determining how academics and policy makers view the world and make decisions on issues of great concern. The term “international security” is perhaps the most salient phrase in demonstrating the importance of semantics, as it is imbued with a sense of urgency and significance. As Adrian Hyde-Price points out, securitizing an issue means removing it from the regular political discourse and “signal[ing] a need for it to be addressed urgently and with exceptional means” (Hyde-Price 2001, 38). For much of contemporary history, and certainly since World War II, the concept and study of international security has been equated with the use of force between nations, with a particular focus on the role of great powers. This reflected the view that international security involved the territorial integrity of nations and the greatest threat to such territorial integrity was posed by wars between states, and particularly between great powers (Nye and Lynn-Jones 1998).

During and since the 1980s, this description became increasingly questioned in terms of who or what should be secured, the nature of international threats, and the type of responses that were subsequently warranted to control these threats. New conceptions of international security arose to incorporate, *inter alia*, different actors (such as human security), different forms of threats (such as environmental security), and different responses (such as non-military collective action). Analysts, activists, and policy makers promoted

these new definitions because of the perceived shortcomings of traditional notions of international security. The new formulations of international security seemingly rectified the problems raised by the narrow conception of the traditional definition. However, as this article will demonstrate, these new security definitions are still plagued by their own difficulties and challenges. As a result, there has been somewhat of a vindication of the traditional notion that international security should be primarily concerned with violence towards states, as it demonstrates merit when contrasted against the problems of the new forms of international security.

This article will contrast the benefits and drawbacks of both the traditional and modern definitions in order to illustrate that neither provides a sufficient conception of international security. Rather, the article will put forward an integrated definition that incorporates the benefits and rejects the drawbacks of both traditional and modern conceptions of international security. The analysis will begin with an examination of the fundamentals of the phrase “international security.” The article will then describe how the new definitions arose in response to the problems posed by the old conception. Following this, there will be a discussion of the subsequent problems with the new definitions and the corresponding benefits that traditional notions of international security bring to bear. The article will conclude by arguing that although these new understandings of international security present advantages, they raise issues that are not always equivalent to international security. It is necessary to conceptualize “international security” in a manner that neither subsumes all environmental or human problems under an international security rubric, nor limits international security to warfare alone. Instead, as the article will argue, an integrated definition focuses on the *impact* of threats rather than the nature or the source of the threat itself.

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE PHRASE “INTERNATIONAL SECURITY”

Security is an elusive subject for study. Adrian Hyde-Price (2001) describes how some academics argue it cannot be defined in any “objective” way, and that any problem can become a security issue once it has been securitized by policymakers. Security, then, manifests itself tautologically: any problem that is labelled security is in fact a security concern. However, as Hyde-Price (2001) then points out, this makes the security field entirely reactive to what policy makers deem a security threat, removing any independent analytical value. Such definitions of international security cannot, therefore, help to guide or inform policy, and although it may be of theoretical interest, this article will instead focus on the more objective definitions of security that can be used for academic and policy analysis.

In his article “Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?” Roland Paris provides a basic but nevertheless useful definition: “a ‘security threat’ connotes some type of menace to survival” (2001, 98). The dilemma lies in interpretation, as there are three major aspects to the definition. First, there is a “menace to survival;” security is about threats and even threat perception. Second, security involves a referent object or

unit of analysis, in that the “menace” poses a threat *to* someone (or something) and is also posed *by* someone (or something). For instance, an attack by one state against another is a classic international security threat. Finally, discussions about security often include the means to secure the referent object from the threat, so a third area of debate is over the best response to a security threat.

The expansion of “international security” is consequently characterized by a shift in thinking with respect to the referent object, the threat to security, or the means to provide security. This shift is often achieved by adding adjectives to the term “security.” For instance, and as will be explained below, environmental security shifts focus from military to environmental threats; human security shifts focus from the state to individuals as the referent object; collective security shifts focus from unilateral to cooperative responses. Traditional definitions can thus be viewed as the foundation from which modernists expanded the concept of international security. The first two areas of debate (threat and referent object) form the crux of much of the international security debate, although the third aspect (response) also has a role.

The first debate focuses on the “threat” itself. Proponents of new conceptions of security maintain that the security definition must be broadened to incorporate new threats – environmental degradation, for example – that were previously relegated to other fields for analysis. Richard H. Ullman provides one broad definition, stating that a threat is an “action or sequence of events that... threatens drastically and over a relatively brief span of time to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state” (1983, 133). Mohammed Ayoob relates security to vulnerability and threats, maintaining that there exists a continuum of “vulnerability,” and problems become vulnerabilities when they “threaten to have political outcomes that affect the survivability of states” (1991, 259). Human security likewise moves the discourse beyond traditional threats facing the state towards human or individual-centric threats. Although the exact definition of human security is contested, it was born out of a 1994 United Nations Development Program report and contained seven security elements: economic, food, health, environmental, physical harm, community, and political (Paris 2001, 89-90). Traditionalists disagree with these broad notions of threats, arguing that military force is the primary threat and other issues, such as the environment and poverty, should only be considered as potential secondary causes of insecurity but not an international security issue *per se*.

In addition to disagreement over what constitutes a proper threat for inclusion in the definition of international security, referent objects are often vaguely described and are thus the focus of the second debate. While individuals, societal groups, and states all appear as focal referent objects in contemporary writings on international security, traditional notions of security, though they come in various guises, can be generally understood as the “military defence of state interests and territory” (Paris 2001, 87). It became the norm to view the state as the primary unit of analysis, and as a result, the notion of protecting the territorial integrity of the state became the end in and of itself. Thus, as Nicholas Thomas and William T. Tow (2002) point out, the state is the primary focus of analysis and action; a state faces a threat from another state, and it

is the state that primarily responds. Yet the purpose of state security is, at its basic level, intended to protect the *people* within that state. Alternatively, new conceptions of security – human security in particular – have considered the individual to be the unit of analysis. The consequence is that there is no agreement over what constitutes the proper referent object for international security.

Beyond the referent object and the threat, there is also a third disagreement, which exists over the proper response to any given threat. According to Hyde-Price, in terms of responses, “security has two dimensions: avoiding war (its negative dimension) and building peace (its positive dimension)” (2001, 28). In essence, when the referent object can reduce its vulnerability to a threat, its security is thereby increased. This can be achieved in two ways. First, the object can concentrate on the negative dimension by eliminating the threat directly, through political, economic, military, or other means. The second method focuses on building the positive dimension, where the object reduces its vulnerability to a threat by increasing its capacity to deter or prevent a threat from posing a direct risk. Deciding which to pursue is in some ways tied to the threat under consideration. In his review article, “The Security Problematic of the Third World” Mohammed Ayoob (1991) describes how traditionalists have placed the emphasis largely on using military capacity to reduce vulnerability, whereas many advocates of new formulations of security instead focus on non-military responses. In 2003, for instance, there was a debate among academics and policymakers whether invasion or diplomatic and other pressures was the best response to the potential threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Furthermore, new security definitions often promote a cooperative response to threats. And as J. Ann Tickner (1994) argues, there are some threats to the global system that cannot be solved by territorial protection.

THE SHIFT FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN FORMS OF “INTERNATIONAL SECURITY”

Because traditional notions of security focused on the use of force between great powers, the focus of international security studied during the Cold War was naturally on superpower conflict and nuclear war. With the end of the Cold War, analysts began to argue that the subject of international security “had to be recast to reflect the changing nature of conflict” (Freedman 1998, 48). As Mats Berdal (2000) notes, internal conflicts came to dominate the security agenda for two reasons. The main reason is simply because of the increase in incidence of internal conflict; few conflicts today are international in the sense that all the combatants are state actors. However, he also points out that the international community is becoming more involved in intrastate conflict. Indeed, as evidenced by interventions in Somalia and ex post facto acceptance of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, the Security Council itself has adopted a broader understanding of the international peace and security agenda.

Simultaneously, a view arose that “the new security agenda is increasingly composed of more intangible and diffuse risks and challenges” (Hyde-Price 2001, 27). With this shift in focus, there has been a concurrent shift towards analysing the social conditions that cause these new conflicts. Lawrence Freedman (1998) expands on this idea, pointing out that this shift towards the analysis of root causes of conflict is in fact sensible even to traditionalists, because there will always be a wider context to the use of force. Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Sean M. Lynn-Jones (1988) describe how interdisciplinary approaches are a key aspect of international security studies. However, traditionalists limit psychological, economic, sociological, and other fields to analysing *aspects* of the traditional threat: war. Thus, for traditionalists, economics is only important insofar as it affects the likelihood of war, and typically that between great powers.

Analysts and advocates further appealed for the expansion of international security to consider the large number of individuals trapped in suffering. This occurred because “the end of the Cold War generated a major re-evaluation of normative and policy assumptions... [of] what made *people* ‘secure’”ⁱ (Thomas and Tow 2002, 177). This appeal occurred largely because with the end of the Cold War, there seemed to be space in the academic as well as policy arena to consider non-military problems facing the world. The result was that issues such as access to food, a clean environment, and economic welfare increasingly became issues of concern for international security studies. These matters first became important as state security threats in their own right, as analysts pointed out that these threats could exacerbate existing tensions and thus spark conflict. Further, there was a growing sense of a global consciousness that the international community – and the West in particular – was morally compelled to assist those individuals suffering in other nations.

WHEREFORE TRANSFORMATION? OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

The recent shift towards new ways of thinking about security arose because of the problems associated with the traditional concept of security. There are four problems with the old notion of security and five merits to the new definition’s response to these problems.

The first problem with the old definition is that in focusing on the state as the unit of analysis, it does not allow for an analysis of threats posed by the state itself to the people within that state. The problem with this is that citizens are often directly threatened by the state in which they reside. Thus, the first benefit of the broader definition is that human security allows for an analysis of the harm that a state can do to its own citizens. Moreover, Barry Blechman (1998) highlights the fact that although protection of the state is important for human welfare, it is not a sufficient guarantor of individual well-being. Indeed, as Tickner (1994) discusses in the context of the Cold War, traditional notions of security were at odds with the insecurity of those citizens who, firstly, lived with the threat of nuclear destruction, and secondly felt adverse impact from the amount of resources expended on nuclear weaponry. By focusing on the individual level,

human security thus incorporates territorial protection while likewise paying heed to other threats facing people. Human security thus points out that even though states may be “secure,” the individuals that reside within them are not always similarly secure.

The second problem with conventional understandings of international security is the focus on the external nature of a threat. Because they use states as their unit of analysis, traditionalists look at the threat constituted by other states. They thus fail to consider insecurity that emanates from within a state, such as that caused by political repression. Moreover, although traditionalists point to external threats from other states, most of the world is not immediately threatened by such concerns. The rest of the world is instead more concerned with internal conflicts and threats to society such as “indiscriminate violence, illegal immigration, drug dealing, and organized crime” (Gasteyger 2000, 90). These have been, however, largely considered domestic issues by the traditionalists. As a second merit, then, the new definitions of security endorse considerations of all threats, whether they originate from within the threatened state’s borders, such as displaced persons or terrorism, or transcend borders themselves, such as environmental concerns. Indeed, much of the human security analysis has been focused on the detrimental role that human insecurity can have in states neighbouring the host of the problem (Thomas and Tow 2002). Similarly, the third merit to new definitions is that they are not limited to interstate violence. Paris (2001) points out that the notion of human security emerged from the criticism that the traditional notion of security was too narrow for contemporary considerations. As Tickner (1994) explains, in the developing world, many threats originate from within the state, and not externally from another state. Furthermore, proponents of environmental security argue that not only can its decline at times lead to conflict, but the more general impact is a “downward pull on economic performance and, therefore, on political stability” (Tuchman Mathews 1989, 166).

A third drawback to traditional definitions is its lack of focus on longer term or potential threats, such as HIV/AIDs and health security. New definitions, particularly human security, incorporate such threats, thus providing a fourth merit in that they allow for an appreciation of threats that do not immediately pose acute distress. Paris (2001) explains that although some threats, such as environmental ones, are only projected, advocates maintain that they require immediate attention in order to prevent them from becoming actual threats. Further, analysts such as Jessica Tuchman-Mathews (1989) and Laurie Garrett (2005) have demonstrated that non-military threats, such as environmental and health issues, can pose threats and produce enormous costs. Likewise important in terms of understanding the origins of future threats, particularly for Western states, is the fact that threats “are now more likely to emanate from some distant turbulence” (Freedman 1998, 57). The subsequent argument, then, is that it is important for Western states to pay more attention to sub-state problems in other countries as they could give rise to serious threats in the future. Directing attention to these non-military issues via a security label is thus important, given that often such considerations are ignored unless they present an immediate and apparent danger.

Traditional definitions retain a fourth problem in their considerations of proper responses, where they have tended to focus on enhancing unilateral military capabilities. This is most well known in terms of the policy of mutually assured destruction during the Cold War, whereby the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics strove to attain enough nuclear armaments to ensure that in the event of an attack, each would retain sufficient nuclear weapons to destroy the other. The result of an attack by one would therefore be total annihilation of both. Another merit to focusing on individuals and non-military threats, then, is the fact that the analysis of a proper response usually includes alternatives. Indeed, as Hyde-Price (2001) points out, many have argued that given globalization and the “new” threats, states alone are no longer best able to deal with threats.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW DEFINITION

Despite the variety of benefits that these new definitions of security bring, they have also presented a novel set of challenges and problems. Indeed, despite the motivations behind an expansion of the phrase, analysts soon began to question where limitations would be drawn between those problems that belong under domestic policy, and those threats that require attention in terms of international security policy. This has resulted in the re-emergence of advocates for traditional notions of security who provide five critiques of modernist definitions, and thereby support a return to traditional thought.

The first accusation levelled at proponents of the new interpretations of international security focuses on human security, and the fact that the term is often vaguely defined. The lack of a clear definition is partly because human security proponents cannot agree as to whether all problems facing individuals should be included or whether there should be some cut off between “development” and “security,” neither of which is well-defined. The vague definition is due to the fact that the phrase has brought together activists of varying issues, and a narrowing of the definition would likely make it difficult for such a diverse coalition to function as a whole (Paris 2001, 87). However, the resulting definition can conceptually encompass virtually anything that can be construed as discomfiting to an individual, and “if human security means almost anything, then it effectively means nothing” (Paris 2001, 93). It is difficult for policymakers to assess the relative importance of each aspect of human security, and as a field of study, the concept loses analytical value once it has broadened to such a point of inclusiveness. Without “clear criteria for specifying what is, and what is not, a security problem... an expanded definition of security will lose its intellectual coherence” (Gärtner and Hyde-Price 2001, 5). Some proponents have thus taken on traditional notions that use a narrower concept, where violence is the key threat. A common consequence has thus been the narrowing of the human security field to encompass only violent threats to individuals (Mack 2005).

The narrowing of human security has in fact been taken one step further, whereby human security is defined to incorporate only those threats to individuals that result in threats that transcend borders (Thomas

and Tow 2002, 179). For instance, a refugee flow that destabilizes a region, such as the Great Lakes region in the mid 1990s, would constitute a human security threat. However, this gave rise to the second critique of the new understanding of security, which originated as a complaint by some human security proponents, who claim that such a definition has returned to the focus on the state as the referent object. A third problem with the new understanding of security is that the majority of the new threats are difficult to measure in terms of their actual impact. Hyde-Price (2001) emphasizes how such problems are largely potential threats rather than actual threats. Both environment and health threats constitute prime examples, as it is difficult to prove that they can be the exclusive, or even primary, cause of a conflict.

A fourth critique arose because the new versions of international security were often borne out of a belief that the world had become a relatively safer place, which allowed for the focus to shift towards non-military threats. Yet it is difficult to argue that military threats facing states have disappeared from the international scene. Freedman further points out that if analysts have too much of a focus on non-military threats facing non-state actors then there is the potential to develop complacency towards analysing the aggressive nature of states under anarchy. As aggressiveness and anarchy are still features of the current international order, conventional military threats are still relevant to security studies. This is particularly the case considering that although the external threat of territorial integrity may not be an imminent threat to the West, it continues to be a very real threat in many other parts of the world. Moreover, a relatively short amount of time has passed since the end of the Cold War, and given the recent war in Iraq and regional tensions, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, it seems rather short-sighted to assume that external threats of international aggression have dissipated entirely.

Finally, as Thomas and Tow (2002) discuss, another problem with contemporary threats is that they have no originating enemy. In other words, the value to traditional conceptions of security was that the threat was pre-meditated and originating from a specific source. How can non-traditional threats, such as the environment, be neutralized without an “enemy?” This speaks to the larger difficulty that once such problems are characterized as threats, military solutions are immediately considered, given that for much of modern history security threats had a military aspect that required a military response. Consequently, when problems are “securitized,” policymakers will tend to reach for a military solution. Freedman (1998) further argues that this is the result of forcing non-military problems into an analytical framework that was constructed to deal with military threats.

CONCLUSION: AN INTEGRATED DEFINITION

The debate between the two concepts raises serious questions regarding how we conceptualize and define international security. One extreme offers the view that international security is threatened when any human being suffers; the other extreme is that international security is only affected by the inter-relationships

between states. With the numerous benefits and drawbacks displayed by both traditional and modern definitions, there is a need for an integrated conception of international security. This article will now establish that the term “international security” should be focused on the impact on state stability rather than attempt to classify which threats and referent objects should be included.

Concentrating on the impact of threats recognizes that not all human, environmental, and other security problems are necessarily of concern to international security. To illustrate, few would argue that gang warfare in the United States or the low human development indicators in some Canadian Aboriginal communities constitute international security concerns. They do, however, represent human security concerns, as defined by proponents of the narrow and broad schools respectively. We thus require a definition that encompasses some of the aspects of the new threats without losing sight of the importance of the security of nations.

Indeed, military concerns will clearly occupy an important space in the international security discourse so long as anarchy prevails, even though one might argue, as Hyde-Price (2001) does, that we are witnessing limited anarchy through self-imposed measures, such as international laws and norms. Heinz Gärtner and Adrian Hyde-Price (2001) go further in their introduction to *Europe's New Security Challenges*, maintaining that there is conceptual space for considering non-military threats to the international order. Yet as Hyde-Price states elsewhere, international security studies “cannot and should not encompass all human distress; as an analytical approach to conflict, it must only deal with such issues when they threaten to provoke conflict and insecurity” (2001, 28). That is, although problems such as poverty should be considered as a potential cause of conflict, poverty in and of itself should not be considered a security threat.ⁱⁱ Yet despite the traditional view of security, threats to international security are brought about not only by military threats. While traditional conceptions have focused on inter-relationships between states, the international system is likewise affected by unstable states, and particularly state implosion.

State instability and implosions are brought about by internal issues, which can be traced back to non-military causes, even if the destruction is through military means. This is best understood by considering the concept of structural violence: the indirect violence facing individuals within a state. Structural violence reduces life expectancy because of “deeply embedded socioeconomic inequalities... [resulting in a] lack of access to basic material needs” (Hyde-Price 2001, 33; Tickner 1994, 187). Thus, expanded notions of security, such as human security, are important inclusions in international security definitions because they are directly relevant to structural violence, which in turn can affect a state’s stability. Yet, international security is only affected by such problems when the threat to human security is of such magnitude that it endangers the state in question. To return to the example mentioned above, current human security problems within the United States and Canada are not considered international security issues because they do not threaten the stability of either state. Warring factions and low human development indicators in Iraq,

however, constitute a direct threat to the Iraqi state and are thus threats to international security. The critical aspect which must be included in an integrated definition is that the *impact* of a threat to state stability defines whether it is an international security issue.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, threats facing international security include direct violence between states, but also involve other threats, such as famine or disease, that bring about state instability.

A second characteristic of international security, when defined by impact, is that it can involve any referent object. Indeed, this article maintains that the concept of international security has moved beyond interstate events; even contemporary traditionalists have acknowledged that international security involves the protection of states from threats originating within their own or other states. Thus, the notion of human security certainly resonates with this understanding of international security. Therefore, it may be useful to turn to a point made by Diego Rojas Coronel: “the idea of an *international order* as a specific, protected object” (2004, 9). Taking this one step further, we can use Barry Buzan’s notion of “units of security,” whereby states, individuals and societal groups can each be a referent object, so long as their actions – regardless of whether they are caused or affected by the threat – have an impact on the international system (Coronel 2004, 3). This concept complements the above definition, as it also focuses on consequences, rather than attempting to pre-identify the referent objects in international security.

Finally, turning to the nature of response, the traditional definition tends to focus on unilateral and often military reactions to security threats. This, however, is a function of interpretation and not the definition itself. According to the United Nations Charter, the Security Council is afforded the right to interfere in any issue it deems a threat to international peace and security. The international community decides to impose its will in order to mitigate a rising problem when it views that problem as an international security issue, regardless of whether it originated internally or externally. Moreover, individuals are frequently vulnerable to events and processes at the international level. This is compounded by the fact that states are often unable or unwilling to address vulnerabilities at the sub-state and individual level, and therefore require assistance from the international community. Focusing specifically on the impact of a threat, therefore, allows for both international and unilateral responses, depending on the nature of the threat’s actual or potential impact.

Human security and other expanded notions of security thus seem to be better considered, as Paris (2001) argued, as labels for categories of research, not frameworks of analysis. In order to broaden the nature of international security studies without expanding to the point of inadequacy, it is important to recognize that this field is concerned first and foremost with organized violence that affects the international system. There are times when international security will be primarily concerned with conventional military threats; however, there will also be occasions when the conditions for peace, insofar as they affect state stability, will be of primary salience. Hyde-Price asserts, “security involves preventing war through military preparations to deter armed aggression from within and without and, more positively, fostering conditions conducive to

building a legitimate and enduring peace order” (2001, 40). This can be demonstrated by juxtaposing two questions. First, does it matter if immediate inter- or intra-state violence is prevented but we fail to avert a global environmental catastrophe that destroys the planet? Conversely, what does soil erosion matter if the earth has been destroyed in a nuclear holocaust? While extreme, these two examples demonstrate that neither military nor non-military threats are unimportant, and one cannot be forgotten at the expense of the other.

An integrated definition should therefore include those challenges that could threaten the international system, either through direct violence between states or by means of state instability, particularly state implosion. This definition recognizes that international security can be affected by non-military threats as well as state and/or non-state groups. Further, an integrated definition acknowledges that although unilateral responses may be in order at times, many issues affecting current international security involve – and indeed require – an international response. Thus, in this integrated definition, threats are defined by their *impact* (international violence or state instability) rather than their type (such as environmental) or origin (such as refugee flow). This provides a starting point for an integrated analysis of international security that allows for the inclusion of any threat, referent object, or response, so long as it affects the international system or involves the international community.

NOTES

ⁱ Emphasis added.

ⁱⁱ Here it is also important to note that principles will often come into conflict with security; for instance, as Freedman explains, a state will often find itself choosing between security and civil liberties. This was evident in the United States and other Western states following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as measures were implemented to better discover and contain terrorist groups.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Ullman’s (1983) definition provided a starting point for looking at the impact of security related concerns, arguing that we must look at the impact on the people within the state, rather than simply the physical integrity of the state’s borders. Yet his definition still focused on national, or internal, security, and he does not explain why such concerns should be considered *international* security problems. For instance, he makes a compelling case for including “decimating epidemics, catastrophic floods, or massive and pervasive droughts” as security problems (Ullman 1983, 133), but he stops short of making a case that these problems should likewise be included in a definition of international security.

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