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CARFAX

Changing conceptions of security in the Third World

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This article developed from research undertaken in the Central American states of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Developments in the region were assessed in order to determine the extent to which a re-conceptualisation of the traditional understanding of security was needed. The lack of case study material was considered a major weakness of some recent work on the on the concept.[1] This study was informed by relevant historical information, drawn mainly from the post-World War Two period, although special attention was paid to recent times. Analysis of interpretations of the Central American Crisis (the name often used to describe the period of prolonged tension in the region beginning in 1979 and continuing into the early 1980s) suggested weakness in the predominant position of security as a concept within International Relations.

Before the crisis, Central America had not attracted much attention and its apparent geopolitical irrelevance saw it characterised as an unimportant region of 'banana republics' (a term first used by US humorist O Henry) ruled by dictators. Analysis rarely reached beyond such stereotypes. However, the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, and the gathering strength of revolutionary groups in El Salvador, soon stimulated intense academic interest and debate about the nature of the crisis. Two broad types of interpretation of the Central American Crisis emerged, with some overlap. First, those which blamed predominantly external factors and analysed the situation in an international context. Second, explanations which concentrated on the internal dynamics of the crisis as a domestic political problem. The former category used a predominantly traditional security–strategic studies approach to analyse the region's problems. Central America was seen in an East–West context, as an arena of superpower conflict. This view is particularly associated with the Reagan administration. In the campaign leading to Reagan's first presidency 'the insurgency in El Salvador was portrayed as resulting primarily from Cuban and Soviet subversion rather than domestic social and political conditions'.[2] That the region's conflicts had indigenous roots was denied or subsumed in the much more immediate and crucial problems of managing the delicate Cold War balance or implementing the so-called Reagan Doctrine of 'rolling back' communism.

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This group viewed Central America as a particularly worrying area for Super Power rivalry given the region's proximity to the USA. The Nicaraguan revolution and the powerful guerrilla challenge in El Salvador were seen as examples of Cuban/Soviet subversion and expansionism which needed to be met with a strong challenge. The rationale underlying such a view was the resurrection of the domino theory, which attributed revolutions to the expansionist forces of international communism. It also argued for the existence of close linkages between revolutions, thanks both to an emulation effect and a desire to export revolution on the part of revolutionaries. In this way, the 'loss' of one apparently insignificant country might lead to the 'loss' of an entire region and ever wider security implications, including threats to the national security of the USA itself.

Of course it could be argued that the real fear was the example of independent Third World countries who might determine their own fate in terms of resources, economy and culture, rather than succumbing to their traditional role as a source of cheap raw materials and primary commodities for the West.

However, on its own terms, the domino theory contains a small kernel of truth in that political events in one country can have an influence in other countries. Despite this surface plausibility, as a theory of international politics, the domino theory is far more misleading than it is illuminating and its consequences are often tragic, as they were in Vietnam.[3] In Central America the domino theory may be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy; the nationalist Sandinista revolution was dubbed an international communist conspiracy, while economic, military and diplomatic pressure from the USA pushed Nicaragua to seek Soviet assistance. In this way the feared threat to national security was actually created.

Despite the limited applicability of the domino theory it became an influential view of the crisis. Powerful and threatening images of maps turning red and refugees flooding into the USA were pumped out by the US administration and media. These images became highly influential by playing on irrational fears and racism. Television advertisements made much of the geographical proximity of Central America—just two days' drive from the Texas border.

According to Reaganite interpretations of the crisis, following the 'loss' of Nicaragua, the USA had to 'draw the line' in El Salvador to establish its credibility against the Soviet threat. In the State Department's 1981 White Paper entitled *Communist Interference in El Salvador*,[4] the civil war in that country was described as a textbook case of indirect armed aggression by communist powers. This document, subsequently discredited as unproved speculation and lies, demonstrates clearly the determination of the Reagan administration to cast the issue of the Central American Crisis in East–West terms.[5]

On the other hand, interpretations of the Crisis emerged which concentrated on internal factors. The wide body of literature which has developed, has generally not attempted to set its arguments within a specific security context but has demonstrated the extent of problems throughout the region at sub-state levels. In the early 1980s, such interpretations were mostly concerned with the issue of land distribution, although academic interest in the ecological roots of the Central American Crisis increased considerably throughout the decade.

The actual ending of the Cold War did seem to give weight to the arguments of those who had seen the crisis in traditional security terms, since, to a certain degree, it led to a lessening of regional tensions. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas accepted their ousting by the United Nations Opposition (UNO) coalition in 1990 elections. In El Salvador negotiations led to the signing of peace accords in January 1992 and in Guatemala the government and Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) guerrilla forces held stop-start peace talks in 1991 and 1992 and have recently initiated the process once more.

However, recent tensions suggest that any lull in hostility has been temporary, if not illusory. In Nicaragua the Sandinista-controlled army has battled with both re-compas (armed ex-Sandinista combatants) and re-contras (armed ex-Contra combatants), who in turn battle with each other. In an odd reversal of the regional pattern, a left-wing military-linked death squad (EPI) is thought to have emerged. In El Salvador recently, there has been increased death squad activity and more accusations of non-compliance with the terms of the peace accords, including those relating to the 1994 elections. In Guatemala, peace talks have frequently stalled and the military has openly involved itself in politics again. In Honduras, the army has maintained a high profile, including the occupation of the capital, Tegucigalpa, during 1993. According to the armed forces this was to reassure the public in the face of terrorist threats, but within the country the feeling was that this was an intimidatory tactic aimed especially at journalists.

It should be noted, that despite a tense and uncertain situation, the end of the Cold War has seen the region become the subject of less academic enquiry. Central America can no longer be viewed as crucial in a traditional security sense and work done in the area is tending towards an emphasis on environmental problems; for example, Faber's *Environment Under Fire: Imperialism and The Ecological Crisis in Central America*.[6]

In the light of the above, this article asks certain fundamental questions about what such developments mean for our understanding of security in the context of the Third World. How relevant are traditional and military dominated security analyses to understanding Third World societies? What is relevant to such an understanding? Is a new concept of security needed and if so, how might the established concept be broadened? What are the implications of any broadening of security for the study of International Relations in general and for a region such as Central America itself?

The article is intended as a straightforward introduction to some of the ideas involved in the ongoing International Relations debate over re-conceptualising security. It is hoped that reference to an actual case study will help clarify some of the issues involved. Initially, the history of security within international relations is outlined. The article then moves on to suggest the need for a reappraisal of the concept and looks at the way this has already been attempted in the case of the environment. The findings of a Central American case study are used to evaluate the possibilities and desirability of attempting to move beyond security as it has traditionally been understood within mainstream International Relations. In some ways the traditional understanding of security is simplified and set up as something of a straw man but this is seen as inevitable given the aims of the article and the space available.[7]

A brief history of security

Within modern International Relations, security was initially looked at from a Western historical perspective. Between the First and Second World Wars, both sides of the Realist–Idealist debate were preoccupied with the concerns of a particular type of state and so security was defined as the relationships between the great powers and how these could be controlled more, or less, peacefully. As Ayoob suggests, since the debate was the product of a particular intellectual tradition, which faithfully reflected a particular process of historical and political development and could be traced at least to the Peace of Westphalia, this was entirely understandable.[8]

Because of World War Two and effective criticisms such as Carr's critique of collective security, Idealism was discredited and Realism came to dominate the study of International Relations in paradigmatic fashion. This dominance of the Realist school in International Relations was reflected in a continued bias in security definitions towards great powers and absolute security.[9] Security came to focus on war, the ability to fight wars and the external threats to the state which might give rise to them. Security depended on the ability of a nation to deter an attack or to defeat any that might come.[10]

The conceptual development of security was limited for a long time by the parameters of this tradition within which it evolved. Advances or changes, such as they were, remained located within the Realist paradigm. An example of this is the development of strategic studies. At times strategic studies has dominated investigations of security because the nature of superpower rivalry was such that it was absolutely vital to keep abreast of technical developments in weaponry, warning systems and so on. As a result, the development of security as a concept was considered unnecessary, and possibly dangerous, in that to change notions of security would tamper with the delicate balance which had prevented nuclear conflict.

Fundamental problems for the Third World have scarcely been considered within the context of Realism. Work on security which took account of the Third World exhibited the tendency simply to adapt the concept applied to developed states. Walter Lippman said that 'a nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values, it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory in such a war'.[11] To make this notion of core values applicable to the Third World it is necessary to reduce it to 'the minimum core values of any nation: political independence and territorial integrity'.[12] The maintenance of these values may have contributed to security at the level of the international system but it has no meaning for those living in insecurity at the sub-state level.

Within strategic studies the Third World also became a consideration, especially in the context of its attempts to acquire nuclear weapons. Study was based on the concern that certain Third World states would try to throw their weight around given their previous lack of power and influence. 'The growing military weight, economic power, and political influence of developing states require a re-examination of prevailing assumptions about their role and impact and global security.'[13] The implication has been that Third World states would

be less responsible than those in charge of the balance of terror for many decades, since they have more to gain and less to lose.[14]

The incorporation of the Third World into security studies was clearly inadequate from the point of view of developing states themselves. If security is seen as the maintenance of minimum values then it can be used to justify keeping internal order at any cost. This has led to policies of repression and patterns of expenditure that serve extremely narrow sectional interests. The survival of a particular regime became the essence of Third World security. Such an arrangement proved useful both to the Super Powers and Third World governments. If the interest of the regime in power is dressed up in the language of national security to lend it an air of legitimacy internationally, in reality, it is only possible to recognise regime security.[15]

In Central America, for instance, militaries have been primarily concerned with countering threats of internal subversion. The danger of attack from outside the hemisphere by any other means is not of prime concern.[16] Here and elsewhere, countering internal subversion has resulted in considerable expenditure on sophisticated instruments of repression and the relative neglect of spending on areas such as health and education. This has been detrimental to the quality of life of large numbers of people.[17]

Indeed, the traditional approach to security matters, based on the Realist conception of International Relations, fails to identify the most pressing concerns of many people in the world's poorer states. For many people in the world the real security dilemma is clearly how to survive until tomorrow. The Ethiopian, Somali and Sudanese food crises are among the most visible examples of this type of problem.

However, interaction among sovereign states on the one hand and greater identification of individuals with their respective states on the other has seen the security of individuals totally subsumed within the category of state security at the level of political analysis. Indeed, 'the citizen is expected to serve the state and look to it for security within the world order'.[18] Thus 'while there has been much debate about the compatible or incompatible nature of state security with the security of the international system and on the measures that could be taken to reconcile the two demands for security, the security of units below the level of the state has rarely, if ever, been an important point at issue in most western discussions and analyses of the concept of security'.[19]

The need for a reappraisal of security emerges

The Realist paradigm still predominates in International Relations theory and literature. However, Realism no longer stands alone in International Relations theory but is pitted against Pluralist and Structuralist approaches in a triangular debate. As with Realism, these other approaches contain a variety of opinions within them, but have enough in common to be recognisable as distinct paradigms, and it will be important to bear in mind their possible implications for the study of security.

The Pluralist paradigm, including world society and interdependence approaches, rejects the Realist 'billiard ball' model of International Relations in

which states and forces predominate. Pluralist approaches prefer to see the world as a 'cobweb' in which a wide variety of actors, including multinational corporations and ethnic groups, are involved in myriad crosscutting relationships. The complexity, newness and variety within this approach signify a lack of clarity but its multicentric emphasis provides an important challenge to Realism and has important implications for traditional definitions of security focused exclusively on the state.

Structuralist insights into International Relations, such as Marxist, neo-Marxist and dependency approaches, see the discipline's dominant actors as classes, and emphasise the links of politics and economics. In contrast to the 'billiard ball' and 'cobweb' analogies, the Structuralist model has been likened to a 'multi-headed octopus' with tentacles constantly sucking wealth from poor, weak peripheral areas to rich, strong central ones. The boundaries of Structuralism are wide; approaches emphasise the unity of the whole world system at all levels and treat inter-state politics as surface phenomena.[20]

These challenges to Realism raise doubts about the prominent position of traditional definitions of security within the study of International Relations. While evidence exists to suggest that Realist analyses are not altogether redundant it does seem that security in the context of Third World states should refer to more than the state level and military dimension, to the whole range of dimensions of a state's existence which are already taken care of in the more developed states. Many Third World countries find themselves burdened by debt, environmental problems, ineffective administrative structures, ethnic divisions and weak economies. Can, and should, security for such states be understood in the same way as the security of the developed world?[21]

Recently security has come under closer scrutiny and its study has started to develop quite significantly. A decade ago Buzan said that 'in its prevailing usage the concept is so weakly developed as to be inadequate'.[22] For a variety of reasons dissatisfaction has been expressed with this state of affairs and an increasing body of literature is developing on the subject.[23]

This article is part of the general orientation, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, towards re-examining security as a concept. The closer scrutiny of security over the last decade has been facilitated by considerable changes in the world and in the nature of theoretical attempts to explain it. Whether security as previously understood is inadequate as a concept, or whether it has at least ceased to be adequate as a central organising concept of International Relations, has been increasingly questioned.

The end of the Cold War means that a whole range of issues that up until recently seemed absolutely critical has turned out to be of purely historical interest.[24] Endless agonising over the escalation of regional proxy wars between the superpowers and the likelihood or possibility of a first strike by one or the other are now irrelevant. Gorbachev's 'new thinking' with regard to relations with the Third World had only transitory importance in attempting to evaluate security in Third World regions such as Central America. Gorbachev and his ideas have been superseded and questions about superpower rivalry in the Third World are of only historical interest. Consequently some work on security has become out of date very quickly. Work done by Ayoob, Calvert and Weiss &

Kessler examines Third World insecurity in the context of relations between the USA and USSR, a relationship which no longer exists.[25]

In the 1990s, while the challenges facing most nations are not as immediately catastrophic as those confronted by the adversaries in the Cold War, actors at all levels of analysis face problems which may well be equally disastrous in the longer term and whose resolution may require international cooperation on an unprecedented scale.[26] Because of this, there has been a tendency to recognise the inadequacy of the previous definition of security and at the same time to maintain its centrality to International Relations by revising rather than discarding it. The view can thus be taken that the study of security, without being restricted to a particular level of the international system, has been developing out of necessity. In this context, Central America has proved a useful test case. In the 1980s the region received a lot of attention as a crucial area of superpower rivalry. Although the ending of the Cold War did allow some lessening in regional tensions, the underlying problems still exist and it is clear that the Cold War security lens which may have seemed appropriate in Washington is not appropriate for Managua or San Salvador. Central America is a region where large numbers of people struggle to live from day to day and have little or no interest in global security problems.

Given the period of momentous historical change through which the world is passing, a reappraisal of security, particularly a re-examination of the focus on military matters, seems entirely justified. However, the problems caused by the rapidity of change mean new and finished theories are unlikely. This work is best seen as part of a process which hopes to test the growing opinion that security is no longer just military security, and that as time passes it will be conceived more broadly and include threats to economic and environmental well-being.[27] An attempt is made to see how far it is desirable or possible to expand our previous definitions of security and what should be the place of the concept of security within International Relations. The continued dominance of the previous simple definition could present a substantial barrier to progress in understanding International Relations.

Problems of widening the security debate: the case of the environment

Probably the most important aspect in arguments over broadening security has been a concern with the environment. This significant part of the security debate highlights some of the most important arguments for and against re-conceptualising security. In looking below at some of the major positions taken in terms of environment and security, it should be remembered that there are important distinctions and differences of emphasis even within them, and that the current situation is of a remarkably complex mass of ideas, often competing, sometimes complementary.

In a sense, the environment has always been included in Realist calculations of power. Consequently, there are those who are satisfied both with traditional notions of security and with its ability to incorporate the environment. Others, while satisfied with the basic concept as it stands, see that a more explicit recognition of the clear links between security and the environment is needed.

Global deficiencies and degradation of natural resources, both renewable and non renewable, coupled with uneven distribution of raw materials could lead to unlikely—and therefore unstable—alliances, to national rivalries and to war.[28] Such views would therefore argue for the inclusion within a more or less conventional definition of security, of a recognition that wars may start over resources, that wars destroy resources once they have started and that the environment may be manipulated for military purposes.[29]

Importantly, however, such limited views of security are increasingly being questioned. Certain factors which were long taken for granted, such as clean air and protection from ultraviolet radiation, are now in jeopardy because of human behaviour during the last two centuries. In the last two decades more and more evidence has been discovered which suggests the destruction of ecological systems upon which depends our continued existence as a species. For this reason it seems logical to argue that the environment is likely to become an important dimension of political life at all levels.[30]

Since inter-state conflict has been such an important part of world politics, there seems to have been a strong tendency to try and accommodate emerging environmental concerns within a traditional Realist view of security. However, Realism tends to encourage the squeezing of environmental issues into a structure of concepts including 'state', 'sovereignty', 'national interest' and 'balance of power'. The fit may be a poor one, leading to the distortion of important aspects of global environmental problems.[31] It has been suggested that this tendency may have developed in the climate of the new Cold War of the late 1970s and early 1980s as an attempt to counter the excessive concentration on military threat.[32] Despite criticisms, attempting to develop security along these lines, might be justified on the grounds that it seeks to raise the profile of environmental problems in such a way that they are taken as seriously as attack by a foreign power would be.

The result of such attempts to re-shape fundamentally the existing concept of security has been seen by some as a conceptual muddle. Confusion is perceived to have emerged from the clear differences between threats dealt with by the traditional concept of security and those posed by environmental degradation. Traditional security was based on national interests, while the resolution of environmental problems may require a global outlook. Threats of violence dealt with by the traditional concept are usually deliberate in contrast to the unintentional or side-effect nature of environmental degradation. Traditional security deals with 'us against them' zero-sum situations in which effort over a limited time period is likely to lead to victory or defeat. By contrast, in the context of environmental threat the human race is its own enemy; victory, possibly crucial to our very existence, will depend upon sustained effort for a possibly unlimited period.

Consequently, not only have some writers sought to modify security to take into account the environment but others have attempted to redefine security completely, or to re-focus International Relations to emphasise the ecological component.[33] They argue that environmental matters should challenge our world-view, providing an important and morally compelling alternative to traditional approaches. Environmental degradation is not seen as a threat to

national security; rather, environmentalism is a threat to traditional security mind sets.[34] In effect, such approaches argue not for tinkering with the international system but for fundamental structural changes to it.

Complicating the environmental debate is the fact that some of the terms used are not clear. An important example is the idea of sustainable development. Since the Brundtland Commission (1987), this idea has become very influential. Sustainable development ideologies have had an impact on people's consciousness so that there is now a more general environmental awareness. Sustainable development is talked about as something which is necessary for the planet as a whole.

However, despite its widespread use in debates over our environmental future, a major problem with sustainable development is that, in becoming so popular, it has lost a lot of consistency in meaning. It has used by a great number of people of differing political persuasions and there is much truth in O'Brien's contention that 'when Mrs Thatcher adopted the concept of sustainable development in her speech to the Royal Society on 27 September 1988 … it was clear that the concept has passed into the everyday language of politicians, and consequently faced the danger of losing any real meaning'.[35] 'Politicians have undoubtedly welcomed the opportunity to fasten onto a phrase that suggests radical reform without actually specifying what needs to change or requiring specific action.'[36]

In a way, sustainable development has become one of those ideas, like democracy, which everyone feels they must uphold. Even if a government or organisation has no intention of promoting sustainability, politically it would be foolish to admit the fact. In an article on Rio's Earth Summit, Herman Daly says that part of the agenda for this event claims that an 'open trading system which leads to the distribution of global production in accordance with comparative advantage, is to the benefit of all trading partners'. It thus 'extols international trade and global economic integration as self evidently good and calls the combination "sustainable development" '. This is a case of giving a positive name to the preferred policy without real justification.

Brundtland might be seen as an appeal to our better natures in a world capitalist system dominated by profit maximisation motives. Thus, while everyone now talks about sustainable development, it certainly seems that any difference in behaviour of the world community has been slight. Indeed, the term may actually be providing moral cover for all manner of ecologically destructive and exploitative projects. And, as Daly argues, 'should not poor countries transform their resources into products they need, rather than export them in exchange for consumer goods?'. Such a policy could form the basis of genuinely sustainable development. In the context of the Third World, the issue of sustainability may well be crucial in redefining security. Sustainability implies stability and a more secure lifestyle, if not protection from external attack.[37]

Re-examining security in Central America

In assessing the need to redefine the concept of security to make it applicable in Third World contexts such as Central America, five major topics or issue areas

were chosen and examined. These were the military, the environment, land and agriculture, economic structure and the impact of natural disasters.

Military matters have been the traditional focus of security analyses in the sense that the ability of a given military to deter external threats to a nation's territory has been seen as the essence of the subject. The role of the military in most Third World societies is certainly more complex than can be understood within traditional conceptions of security. At the most basic level this is because the peoples of the Third World are more likely to be the targets of their own security forces, imposing internal order, rather than those of a neighbour invading to further its ambitions. The military's use of valuable resources and its role in environmental degradation should also be emphasised.

With the passing of the Cold War, the deteriorating global environment seems to have replaced nuclear war as the greatest threat to life on earth. Environmental decline must be stopped and reversed if possible, not only for the preservation of intrinsic environmental value, but also for sustainable economic development, and for political stability within, and between, states and regions. Moreover, it is necessary for security at all levels: from the individual, through the state to the international political system. Or as Booth puts it, 'if we do not bring the interrelated problems of climatic change, overpopulation and scarce resources under control within the next generation then all bets must be off regarding the prospects of an international community living in stable peace'.[38] Unfortunately in the real world 'the current direction of transformation of the international economy, with the emphasis on liberalisation as a spur to growth is at odds with the requirement of environmental sustainability'.[39]

The environment will be absolutely crucial in determining the future of the planet. For the Third World, global and regional climate change will be of huge significance in predominantly agricultural economies. Research on Central America provided a comprehensive survey of environmental degradation and resource use in the region, covering important issues such as deforestation, soil erosion, pesticide use and water, and gave a clear idea how crucial an issue the environment is.

Issues of land, food and population are absolutely crucial in the still predominantly agrarian economies of the Third World. Unequal land distribution has frequently been blamed for internal strife although the often neglected issue of land use seems important. Land use patterns are often determined by the demands of international markets; this struggle within the world economy is often at odds with the economic security of individuals and may exacerbate problems of population growth and distribution. Indeed, Third World countries 'suffer from an acute lack of control over the international economic environment'.[40] Whichever sector is considered, 'development in the 1990s makes few concessions to future generations, to inter-generational equity, while trapping millions of poor people within a cycle of deprivation and missed opportunities'.[41]

Natural disasters are events which can engender fatalism in populations as they periodically destroy decades of effort. But human beings are not helpless against the threat they pose. Although all societies are vulnerable to natural disasters, there is an important connection between development and the extent

of vulnerability, especially in terms of the resources available to respond to such events. Disasters are often deeply political, with national and international linkages. Detailed evaluation of natural disasters and subsequent relief efforts clearly demonstrates their political component.

The analysis of five major issues areas demonstrated that a traditional security–strategic studies approach, which placed Central America within an East–West context, was not relevant. It can be argued that the political and economic limitations placed upon Central America by other actors in the international system have profoundly affected the region's societies, but it is basically domestic arguments over what should be done within this context which caused the violence of the Central American Crisis. The crisis was an internal challenge to the state. However, the region figured prominently in strategic studies definitions of security as a critical area of Western influence. In this sense, the security of the region, long defined in terms of stability and the maintenance of the status quo was severely jolted. It is for this reason that long hours of academic analysis were devoted to the Central American Crisis, and a large body of literature emerged.

But within Central America, and, indeed, in much of the Third World, traditional definitions of security as the ability to deter external threats to the state, have had limited relevance. Such states have generally been much more preoccupied with internal threats. Consequently the role of the armed forces has much more to do with the maintenance of internal order, and protecting existing regimes, that with protecting the state against external threats.

To those using a traditional–strategic approach to security, the end of the Cold War means that the Central American Crisis is over and that a few small republics have ceased to be important. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Central America is just one of many issues which seemed absolutely critical and turns out to be of purely historical interest for traditional security analysts. There is no longer a need to 'draw a line' in El Salvador, demonstrate resolve to allies or contend with the possibility that the Central America Crisis might somehow spark superpower conflict.

Within Central America, the immediacy of the crisis is certainly at an end. Elections have just been held or are due to take place soon in all the republics; Costa Rica 1994, El Salvador 1994, Guatemala 1994, Honduras 1993 and Nicaragua 1996. However, the lull in hostilities seems to have been the result of war weariness as much as anything else, and lack of international importance does not signify a radical break in the torrid internal histories of most of the region's countries.

Thus war and the armed forces, which have played a big role in the region since at least World War Two, continue to do so even though the region has been effectively removed from the international security agenda. It may well be for this reason that traditional and military security approaches continue to occupy a position such that they impede the growth of an alternative. However, despite the clear relevance of traditional approaches, it has been argued here that to concentrate on traditional elements in security is to miss the most crucial problems of the region and that the military role in the region's security needs to be re-examined. The great merit of looking at Central America, or any other

Third World region, as part of the Cold War, or as essentially a military problem, is simplicity. However, this simplicity is not universally relevant and ignores, for example, the profound misery in which millions live globally, and even within a small region such as Central America.

Is a new concept of security needed?

Arguing that traditional definitions of security are not generally relevant in the Third World does not deny that there were good reasons why a strategic studies approach came to have such weight in International Relations. It was plausibly argued by proponents of the approach that the danger of nuclear war was so great that its avoidance had to take priority over other issues. It should not be assumed that the issues of traditional security definitions, such as avoiding nuclear war, are not still important. However, while the ending of the Cold War has not made the threat of nuclear war disappear, it has allowed other issues to gain more prominence.

Consequently, in the post-Cold War era, the elegant simplicity of Realist interpretations of security is being pushed and pulled in various directions, increasing the weight of the paradigmatic challenges to Realism presented by Pluralism and Structuralism. In looking at the various attempts to redefine security the only confident conclusions which can be drawn at this stage are that security seems to mean many different things to many people, and that the problems of a region such as Central America cannot be understood fully, or even predominantly, within the context of the traditional security concept.

The basic argument advanced here is that if there were good reasons for the dominance of traditional security analyses in International Relations, they are not, and never were, very relevant for understanding the Third World. For instance, concentration on traditional security has led to the neglect of problems of the individual, who has often lived in great misery. A concept of security that sees internal and external security as exclusively dependent on military capability is clearly limited; it fails to take account of serious problems. For the world's poorer states, a situation of little observable conflict and a low probability of external attack, is neither stable nor unproblematic. Secure in a traditional sense, such states are often in the process of extreme economic deterioration, with poverty stricken societies and areas in the process of desertification. Some countries exhibit an increase in drug production and trafficking, all in an international context in which the Third World has lost much of its strategic importance, and thus the ability to generate external help for development.

The question then follows as to whether a concept of security is required that takes account of the problems experienced by states such as those of Central America, or if it is enough that these problems can now receive greater academic attention in the post-Cold War world. In other words, how is it best to understand Third World societies and will our understanding be increased by expanding a currently limited concept? This question is best answered by looking at the problems of developing security as a concept.

From security to sustainable development

Security as traditionally defined is relatively simple. As more levels of analysis and issues are brought in, the attempt to broaden security becomes increasingly complicated. By specifying referent objects other than the state, security can easily encompass a wide range of things. It is possible to argue that the security of many actors is intimately linked and that it is not profitable to study any given type of actor in isolation but rather as a part of a whole. An easy mistake to make is to regard all threats to human well-being as threats to security. By taking such a route it is possible to become hopelessly confused, as anything and everything 'bad' becomes a 'security concern'.

Of course, one may attempt to limit the broadening of security in order to maintain its clarity, but the problems of expanding it at all are exemplified by the cases of the environment and sustainable development, and how these could or should be incorporated into security studies. As it was argued earlier, there are major differences in the ways it is envisaged that the environment will broaden the concept of security. Some take the view that the incorporation of the environment into security should be limited to how it is possible to manipulate the environment during conflict. Others argue for a much greater representation of the environment in security studies to include environmental threats to nations and humanity. But again, there are fundamental differences between those expanding the traditional definition of security and arguing for greater emphasis on the environment, and those who want a radical overhaul of the system and a separate ecological approach to life on earth.

As for sustainable development, there is much debate about what it actually represents. Sustainable development has quickly become an important but essentially contested idea. To some it means consistent positive growth in GDP. For others it is an ecological idea which would almost certainly involve consistent negative growth in GDP, for at least some countries.

Given the historic centrality of security in International Relations it is perhaps understandable that there is a tendency for those wishing to get their ideas to the forefront of analysis to seek to change definitions of security. However, the problems of incorporating vague or politically charged ideas such as environment and sustainable development into security suggests that it is more important that the real concerns of poorer states stimulate greater concern among academics and decision makers, than that the concept of security be revised to incorporate them. It must surely be questioned whether the effort of squeezing complicating ideas such as 'the individual' and 'ecology' (which have little to do with Morgenthau-like ideas of national interest defined as power) into a simply understood, predominantly Realist concept, is a worthwhile exercise.

Emphasising the idea that there are potential linkages between various issue areas and traditional security may be more useful in terms of developing a broader field of security studies. Deteriorating environments, inequitable land distribution, unequal distribution of wealth, vulnerable economic structures and the political activity stimulated by natural disasters may all lead to wider tensions with relevance in a traditional security sense.

These linkages may have particular relevance in Central America, and quite

possibly elsewhere in the Third World, where many aspects of society have been shown not to be sustainable into the long term. Militaries are consuming resources needed elsewhere, the consequences of export agriculture are seriously degrading the environment and growing populations exacerbate an already critical situation of land inequality. These problems are interconnected. It must be concluded that what Central America needs is policies which guarantee a sustainable and secure future for more than just a small percentage of the population. Although the term sustainable development may be problematic, in the sense that it lacks clear meaning, it seems that work on the idea of sustainable development itself might be more profitable than attempting to revise the concept of security. Such work will need to recognise the importance of qualitative economic developments rather than quantitative economic growth, and incorporate the realisation that the important task of raising living standards in lower income countries must be combined with limits on the resource use of richer ones.

Implications for regions such as Central America

The evidence suggests that a region like Central America, with such enormous environmental problems, might be best served by addressing the concerns of those arguing for an ecological approach to security. Such an approach would recognise the clear links between such factors as land reform, economics and the environment and could be broadly described as Structuralist. The case for such an approach is particularly supported by the case of natural disasters. Societal structures in Central America are simply not adequate, in that they deny the majority a secure existence, and their periodic destruction by hurricane or earthquake has, consequently, been common. The day-to-day struggle within the current system precludes, for many, the opportunity to lessen their vulnerability to natural disasters. Tinkering within the system, implicit in approaches to security which incorporate the environment into the traditional definition, is maintaining the system, and consequently the misery of a large number of people.

The structural adjustment policies currently being implemented in the region under strong pressure from multilateral lending agencies, especially the IMF, emphasise long-term economic growth, and thus sometimes get called sustainable development, but are not contributing to ecological sustainability. The new environmental awareness accompanying structural adjustment, manifest as 'green capitalism', signifies environmental conservation by such methods as 'debt for nature swaps', the use of forests as genetic banks by Western pharmaceutical giants and ecotourism companies. However, this tendency will not alter the fundamental structural disadvantages of Central American societies and, whatever its short-term advantages, will not prove viable in the longer term. 'Green capitalism' is another example of the short-term adaptive approach to economic survival for the states of Central America which is failing to provide for broad sectors of the population.

For Central America, which problems are actually addressed, and how this is done, is more important than debates over how to define security. However, it

will be difficult to move towards a long-term and ecologically sustainable development given the realities of the world economy and the economic behaviour this induces within the region. The post-Cold War 'triumph of capitalism' and the nearness of the region to the USA seems to condemn the region to a highly troublesome future characterised by periodic individual, local and national crises. Thus, although the attempt to fit the region's most important problems into a security framework may seem to be an unnecessary complication, it may be considered vital in efforts to try and get them more seriously addressed.

Lastly, a very real danger in trying to look at Central America's most crucial problems within a security framework concerns the role of the military. Central American militaries see themselves as responsible for national security. Indeed, national security as defined by traditional concepts of security has been left in the hands of secret, hierarchical male-dominated institutions of trained killers delegated a specific task. Resolving environmental problems would involve reforming many and varied aspects of everyday life such as the status and participation of women in society, types of land use, and the building of sewage systems. Given the negative and destructive roles played by Central American militaries, attempts to broaden definitions of security lead to the danger that the armed forces may broaden their own security agenda to justify increased involvement in all aspects of society. Indeed this has already happened to some extent, with the situation particularly worrying in Honduras and Guatemala. One of the principal tasks for Central America is reducing the role of the armed forces in society, not expanding it.

The re-conceptualising of security thus appears to be a double-edged sword in addressing the problems of Central America. Although it may widen the focus of International Relations to include those problems, the tendency has been for needed Structuralist solutions to complicate themselves by attempting to adapt an existing Realist concept. Furthermore, the military, central to Realist analyses of security, are demonstrating the tendency to use any change in the definition of security to expand their role in society, something which must be considered negative on the evidence of this article.

Implications for International Relations

Security is potentially a more complex concept than is traditionally understood and the increasing number of people working on the concept suggests that it will be an important area for future investigation. The traditional Realist definition of security in International Relations is relatively simple. However, Pluralist and Structuralist paradigms emphasise that other linkages exist between various actors and issues, the inclusion of which might enrich current concepts of security.

Security as understood in the traditional sense is not free of political meaning and interest. The traditional definition of security developed to represent the view of the most important issue for Western developed states. Security thus came to be a dominant organising concept in the study of International Relations but it was not the only way of looking at the subject. Non-Realist interpretations

of International Relations from the Pluralist and Structuralist paradigms suggest that traditional concepts of security have kept important issues off the political agenda. Of course, attempts to re-conceptualise security will not be free of political implications either.

With the ending of the Cold War and the recognition of, for example, environmental problems, even for Western developed states, other concerns have become a part of the mainstream political and International Relations agenda. Thus some attempts to expand the concept of security seem to fit the new interests of the world's powerful in the extent to which they include environmental matters and the definition of sustainable development used. In redefining security to include the environment in ways which do not suggest the need for significant restructuring of the global political economy, the concerns of the world's most powerful states are kept at the forefront of International Relations. In this sense the definition of security may be changing but it will still be a concept which, while it can be applied to the Third World, will be inadequate for a full understanding of it.

One can go beyond the traditional definition of security or the limited expansion envisaged by those arguing for environmental security. Security can be re-conceptualised as, or including, ecological sustainability and the need for fundamental structural changes in the political system. There seems to be an important danger in this; too many new concerns may be squeezed into security, causing the concept to become so broad that the division between security and International Relations in general become very blurred.

It is thus difficult to avoid the conclusion that the debate over expanding security is not entirely useful. Traditional concepts of security developed for reasons which were valid at the time for the people who used them. However, they are clearly limited in attempting to understand Third World regions such as Central America. But getting involved in complex debates over how to redefine security may not be the answer. To improve our understanding of International Relations it may be more important to recognise that the current historical juncture allows us to broaden the focus of what is seen as important and worthy of study. Pluralist and Structuralist paradigms make us aware of actors and issues other than the state and its security from external attack, and consequently give new insights into International Relations. In the case of Central America, a Structuralist approach, based on sustainability, would seem a particularly valuable path to take.

The traditional concept of security does not show itself amenable to stretching. Stretching causes the concept to lose meaning without offering any compensating advantage. Thus, rather than redefine security, as traditionally understood, it might be enough to recognise its limitations in terms of when and where it should be applied, and to investigate its linkages to other areas of International Relations. Traditional security could then continue to exist alongside more serious considerations of problems of more interest to Third World states, such as environmental problems and survival within the world economy, using non-Realist tools of analysis.

The current period of change and uncertainty about the future suggests that International Relations would be well served by a period of coexistent

paradigms. However, if the position of Realism is not weakened the consequences might be serious. The evidence brought to light by research on Central America suggests that a traditional Realist concept of security fails to recognise or adequately deal with important environmental problems which may ultimately threaten life on earth; neither does it address fundamental structural disadvantages in the world economy which condemn ever larger numbers of people to live in misery.

Notes

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