

From Deployment to Withdrawal: The C-17 Transport Plane in the Afghanistan War

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/06/06/from-deployment-to-withdrawal-the-c-17-transport-plane-in-the-afghanistan-war/>

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“I was the lucky person,” one Afghan refugee said in August 2021 after disembarking from the plane that had taken him out of Kabul to a refugee camp in the United States (U.S.) (Salim as cited in Seddiq, 2021). His work as a translator had earned him one of the coveted spots on a C-17 military transport plane evacuating civilians from Afghanistan as part of the hurried U.S. withdrawal from the country. The translator recognized that many of his compatriots had been left behind to face the uncertainty of Taliban rule: they had not made it onto one of the planes, which had come to symbolize security for many Afghans.

This paper examines the C-17’s role as an object of security in the Afghanistan War. Whose security the C-17 promoted or endangered varied, depending on U.S. political objectives and other components of the war’s security assemblage. Consistent throughout its shifting roles, however, was the plane’s ability to act as a material expression of the dividing line between security and insecurity — an observation that invites a conceptualization of the plane’s role as a boundary. The analysis makes a twofold argument: (1) the C-17 was a liminal space that constituted an objectified boundary between security and insecurity in the Afghanistan War; (2) how this boundary was “drawn”— in what contexts and dividing which sides — was determined by U.S. security politics and fraught with political implications.

After outlining key theoretical concepts, this paper undertakes an empirical analysis of the C-17 as an object of security in the Afghanistan War. It then reflects on the implications of this analysis, specifically the conceptualization of the C-17 as an object that enacts politics by delineating a boundary between security and insecurity.

Theoretical Review

This paper draws primarily on theoretical literature on the material turn in International Security Studies (ISS). This literature focuses on the mediating role that specific objects play in the social relations that underpin the production of security and/or insecurity. In this view, objects are not passive but rather active and perhaps even agentic thanks to their “capacity to operationalize associated discourses, fields, and practices” (Mutlu, 2013, p. 174).[1] This strand of literature is associated with Critical Security Studies (CSS) and therefore seeks to challenge traditional conceptions of security by exposing the political undercurrents of seemingly apolitical materialities in making and unmaking security. In other words, the symbolic qualities of materials become a focal point in these critical analyses.

Military Materialities as Objects of Security

Material-semiotic CSS scholars have studied a variety of *objects of security*, from the Atomic Scientists’ “Doomsday Clock” (Vuori, 2010) to full-body scanners at airports (Mutlu, 2013, p. 176). Work on military objects has focused on things like drones (Grondin, 2010), tanks (Boot, 2006), and non-lethal weapons (Anaïs, 2011). Compared to the Doomsday Clock or full-body scanners, these objects are rather traditional instruments for enacting security practices. Their affiliation with the military and their capacity as weapons to inflict injuries makes them almost inherently securitized.

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Because of their affiliation with the military, these objects are also political. As institutions tasked with exerting armed force on behalf of a political entity (usually a state), militaries link politics and international security, regardless of how exactly the relationship between politics and armed force is construed.[2] Military objects represent a political entity and can be used to enact *security politics* on behalf of that entity. In that capacity, however, they also shape the *politics of security*, i.e. the political prioritization of certain forms of security over others and the protection of certain people over others.[3] In Latourian terms, military objects exemplify *dingpolitik* in international security and studying them can provide insights into both of these facets of the security-politics nexus (Latour, 2005b).

Although a material-semiotic view emphasizes the impact of specific objects on international security, these objects do not exist in isolation. They are situated in a broader “security assemblage” that determines how security and insecurity are produced in a given context (Voelkner, 2013). Security assemblage is a term used to describe the web of actors, technologies, norms, and discourses that characterize a particular securitized setting (Voelkner, 2013). A specific object is a part of the assemblage, but its meaning is determined and may change depending on how it relates to other material and ideational parts of the assemblage. The meanings of military objects are especially malleable since they can perpetuate either security or insecurity depending on the political context. For example, a rifle in the hands of a soldier may promote a sense of security in the population, but in the hands of an enemy soldier, it represents insecurity.

The Boundary between Security and Insecurity

The malleability of objects of security highlights the political nature of the boundary between security and insecurity. Conceptualizing the difference between security and insecurity as a human-made limitation places the focus on sociopolitical processes that produce this difference. Abbott’s (1995) work on “things of boundaries” as material expressions of difference forms a theoretical bridge to the material-focused CSS literature. The materiality of boundaries has been examined, for example, in the context of border fencing (cf. Andreas & Snyder, 2000; Jones, 2012) or fortified aid compounds (Duffield, 2010).

Boundaries demarcate an “inside” from an “outside” and are drawn with a political purpose. While often expressed through materialities, how, when, and where boundaries are drawn is determined by political practices. Hofius (2016) used the term “boundary work” to describe these practices, maintaining that boundaries “become sites of exclusion and inclusion depending on their use in context” (p. 947). She highlights how boundaries can fluctuate, constantly being re-constituted and re-negotiated. They can be thought of as malleable delineations based on political circumstances.

Boundaries as Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminality is key to understanding malleable boundaries. It describes the transitory state between two stages and thus gives boundaries spatial and/or temporal qualities. It challenges the idea of boundaries as line-like thresholds. Liminality was initially coined by Turner (1969) to describe the process of going through rites of passage but has since been used in many different contexts as “a prism through which to understand transformations” and in-betweenness (Horvath, Thomassen & Wydra, 2015). Applied to international security, liminality can describe the transitory state between security and insecurity. This transitory state may take on different forms: it can entail building physical or ontological security in a community or describing a soldier en route to their deployment into a combat zone.

In the security context, liminality can thus be experienced in different ways. Building on the idea that objects can enact security, they can also be conceptualized as vessels of liminality between security and insecurity. Their materiality embodies the transition between the two by creating a liminal space. Certain material qualities render some objects especially suitable for creating liminal spaces. Notably, objects of mobility, i.e. objects that move through space, can encapsulate the *movement* needed to cross a boundary. At the same time, things surrounding enclosed spaces can harbour *continuity*, which captures how limitations can have spatial qualities as zones of liminality.

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The C-17 in Afghanistan

A military object with these material qualities is the Boeing C-17 Globemaster III, a four-engine transport plane used by the U.S. military. The following case study considers this plane's role as an object of security in the Afghanistan War, specifically how it served as a material expression of the boundary between security and insecurity. Furthermore, it examines the security politics that determined how, where, and for whom this boundary was drawn at different points in the war, as well as the politics produced by the plane's deployment.

A Brief History

The C-17 was omnipresent throughout the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, from the invasion in October 2001 to the abrupt withdrawal in August 2021. Although officials discussed using it as a makeshift bomber, it played a strictly logistical role in the war (Insinna, 2020). But the kind of cargo the C-17 transported over its nearly 20 years of deployment in Afghanistan reflected the political trajectory of the war. Throughout Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2014), when the U.S. pursued major military objectives in Afghanistan, the plane carried U.S. soldiers into combat, evacuated casualties, delivered supplies and weapons, and airdropped humanitarian packages (Bolkom, 2007; Moless, 2011; Schanz, 2009). The C-17 was used in critical combat missions, performing high-risk airdrops in remote combat zones to supply U.S. soldiers and transporting the Navy SEALs who killed Osama Bin Laden to Bagram Airfield in 2011 (Napier, 2021). As the U.S. began limiting its mission in Afghanistan to focus on strengthening the Afghan military, the C-17 helped "realign assets" (Evenson, 2018). During Operation Freedom's Sentinel (2015-2021), it conducted fewer combat airdrops and instead delivered more weapons to the Afghan military (Tolo News, 2016; Insinna, 2017).

Despite its crucial role throughout the war, it was during the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 that the C-17 came into its own. The plane evacuated not only the remaining U.S. troops but also tens of thousands of Afghan civilians who had aided the U.S. and were under threat from the advancing Taliban (Gaouette et al., 2021). The airlift produced dramatic images of civilians huddled in the plane's cabin and people running alongside the plane as it was taking off, with some hanging onto it and falling to their death after takeoff (Harding & Doherty, 2021; U.S. Air Force, 2021). The evacuation marked an anticlimactic and chaotic end to the war. Underscoring the plane's omnipresence, the iconic image of the "last American soldier" leaving Afghanistan pictured a soldier walking up the ramp of a C-17 (Ahmed, 2021).

The C-17 was one of the first and last U.S. military objects on Afghan soil, and its various deployments can be used to trace political shifts in the war. At the same time, the plane's materiality did not change, providing a thread of continuity and making the C-17 an especially intriguing object to study. The aircraft served as a stable node linking security and insecurity in several different contexts, allowing it to be conceptualized as a boundary between the two. In this view, the shifting deployment of the C-17 highlights how the boundary between security and insecurity changed over time based on political factors.

A "capsulized boundary" between security and insecurity

Considering the C-17 as an objectified boundary between security and insecurity hinges on its capacity to "transport" people from security to insecurity or vice versa. During the invasion, the plane brought U.S. troops to Afghanistan, linking the dangerous battlefield with safe military bases abroad: soldiers deploying to Afghanistan boarded the C-17 in a place of security and disembarked in a place of insecurity (Allen, 2008). Conversely, for soldiers returning to the U.S., departing on the C-17 signalled the dawn of the "golden moment" of coming home, back to security (Eide & Gibler, 2018, p. 12). The plane's cabin can thus be considered a liminal space between security and insecurity, embodying the transition between the two stages.

But U.S. soldiers did not have to occupy the plane for it to act as that boundary. Through its airdrops of supplies to troops, the C-17 also acted in a similar capacity. While it did not transport human passengers, the plane held and released essential supplies to soldiers. Security emerged from the aircraft in the form of airdropped supplies. The plane, in this view, was a kind of capsule releasing security — the goods emerged from a liminal space that

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connected security and insecurity.

For Afghan civilians, the C-17 can be seen as having acted both as a source of security and insecurity. While airdrops of humanitarian supplies helped alleviate medical and food insecurity, the plane also transported invading U.S. troops to the country, and this invasion placed Afghan civilians at great risk (Conetta, 2002; Sifton, 2004).[4] In both cases, the plane's role as a "capsulized" boundary stayed the same, but the cargo (humanitarian supplies/invading soldiers) had different consequences. As the U.S. shifted to Operation Freedom's Sentinel, delivering military supplies to the Afghan army sought to promote security by stabilizing the country. Stabilization was never achieved, however, and security for the population remained elusive, as the Afghan military did not become sufficiently effective despite the supplies (SIGAR, 2022; Peshiman, 2021).

During the U.S. withdrawal, the C-17 went from being a distant object primarily visible in the sky to being accessible to parts of the civilian population. The plane became a safe haven many were desperate to reach: it marked the line between those who would get security, being airlifted out of Kabul and those who would remain in Afghanistan, facing the insecurity of renewed Taliban rule. The hopeless attempts of people clutching to the C-17's exterior indicated its status as a security symbol. An Afghan refugee described his experience after reaching the plane in a media interview: "Everyone got hope. People were happy. They were clapping for the Americans because they said they're not leaving us behind" (Salim, as cited in Seddiq, 2021). Those inside the C-17 had reached the aircraft's liminal space, while those outside the plane were left on the other side of the boundary, with no chance to make the transition toward security.

In these different accounts, two qualities of the plane stand out. First, as an object of mobility, the C-17's ability to facilitate movement allows it to capture the fluid transition between security and insecurity by bringing people and goods from one place to another. Second, the C-17's cabin provides an enclosed space, enhancing its ability to express the boundary between the two materially. The almost windowless cabin can be seen as a kind of capsule containing a stable liminal space (the inside of the plane does not change during the flights) while the movement through the transitory state continues (the aircraft flies toward security/insecurity). The transitory state passes once the plane unloads its cargo, be it passengers or supplies. Once the enclosure of the liminal space is breached and its movement has stopped, the boundary has been crossed and liminality ends.

Moving the boundary through politics – and the politics of moving the boundary

Considering some of the different ways the C-17 acted as a material expression of the boundary between security and insecurity in Afghanistan, what determined how the plane was deployed to act in that capacity? As an object owned by the U.S. military, the C-17's deployment depended upon U.S. political objectives. Security politics thus determined where the boundary between security and insecurity was drawn at any given moment, illustrated by the different deployments of the plane.

First, the plane's use to bring U.S. soldiers into a dangerous war zone was based on the political decision to invade Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban. U.S. security politics aimed to defeat the "radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them," referring primarily to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Bush, 2001). President Bush (2001) stressed that this objective required subjecting soldiers to insecurity: "We ask a lot of those who wear our uniform. We ask them to leave their loved ones, to travel great distances, to risk injury, even to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives." The subsequent use of the C-17 to transport U.S. troops to Afghanistan saw the plane being deployed based on this political objective.

In the same speech, Bush (2001) emphasized that the soldiers would have "every tool you need to carry out your duty," explaining the political rationale for a different deployment of the C-17: airdrops in combat zones. This deployment enhanced soldiers' security, yet it came in pursuit of the same political objective that exposed troops to insecurity (invading Afghanistan). The same security politics, therefore, produced different deployments of the plane, "drawing the boundary" between security and insecurity for soldiers in two different directions.

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Regarding Afghan civilians, the U.S. political objective after the invasion was to stabilize the country. This was pursued by working to strengthen Afghan security forces, especially during the Obama administration (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013). This political agenda informed using the C-17 to deliver resources to the Afghan military. In this case, the plane's capabilities were supposed to enhance civilians' security by promoting stability, although the objective was not achieved due to issues in the Afghan military (an additional factor in the security assemblage).

The airlift to evacuate civilians during the U.S. withdrawal also reflected security politics. Turning the C-17 into a safe haven for Afghan civilians resulted from President Biden's political decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and take along only selected allies. Biden said he considered evacuating partners and U.S. citizens "equally important" (Knickmeyer et al., 2021). By using the C-17 to fly out certain Afghan civilians, the security-insecurity boundary was drawn in yet another way, illustrating a further shift in security politics. The evacuation also came with many micro-level political decisions about who would be allowed to board the plane (Watson & Rosen, 2022).

The C-17 can thus be seen as a material means to enact different kinds of security politics. It is a military object that works within a security assemblage that may alter its intended effects. But the consequences of the security politics are still substantial: the C-17 can aid in saving or taking a life. Whose security or insecurity the plane perpetuates depends on political choices. But producing security or insecurity for different groups is not only the result of political decisions; it also comes with political consequences.

The C-17 produced politics around the Afghanistan War by symbolizing the same political objectives that guided its deployment. In regard to the U.S. invasion, the insecurity brought upon both U.S. soldiers and Afghan civilians resulted in political fallout. The C-17, as a logistical cornerstone of the war, helped produce these insecurities. While initial public support for the invasion was high, calls to "bring the troops home" (presumably on C-17s) grew louder through the years (CNN & Opinion Research, 2010). These calls influenced decisions first to reduce and ultimately end U.S. involvement in Afghanistan (Sanger & Shear, 2021).

The plane's political impact was more direct during the U.S. withdrawal when the C-17 became a crucial part of ending the war. The graphic way in which the materiality of the plane drew the dividing line between security (on the inside of the plane), and insecurity (on the outside) garnered substantial media attention and elicited strong political reactions. Not only was the U.S. seen to be failing to meet its political objectives in Afghanistan, but the withdrawal was also characterized as chaotic and uncoordinated (Watson & Rosen, 2022). President Biden's approval rating dropped significantly after the departure, indicating the political impact of the events, which was corroborated by public opinion polling that showed overwhelming disapproval (73 percent) of the handling of the pullout (Silver et al., 2022; Van Green & Doherty, 2021). The C-17, therefore, had a notable political impact by serving as a widely seen material expression of U.S. failure in Afghanistan.

Contributions of the Research

Interpreting the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan using the materiality of the C-17 transport plane drives home two important points. First, understanding the aircraft as a capsulized boundary between security and insecurity allows for an empirically focused yet conceptually complex examination of the politics of materialities. The case study highlights that every political decision about how to use an object of security can change whose security is enhanced or threatened. The analysis thus connects the effects of political decision-making on a large scale (by political leaders and commanders) to its consequences for people's security in their everyday lives (the lives of soldiers and civilians). Making this connection visible is a key analytical advantage of materially focused CSS, as observed by Voelkner (2013):

Tracing the workings of security through the material objects it produces or appropriates allows for (better) appreciating the variability and contingency as well as the complex interplay between differently levelled security flows. It is possible to see the way the micropolitics of security and macropolitical rationalities and processes relating to international and global security are intimately related. (p. 206)

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As a versatile object with a clear political affiliation (to the U.S.), the C-17 helps elucidate the connection between political decisions and security outcomes. The aircraft's different roles capture the complexity of international security and highlight the malleability of materialities depending on their place and function within a security assemblage. The analysis illustrates the ubiquitous connection between politics and security by stressing how even a mundane object (a transport plane) takes on different meanings and can even produce politics itself. The analysis emphasizes how politics is all around us and deeply interlinked with security.

Second, this paper makes a theoretical contribution to ISS by conceptualizing the demarcation between security and insecurity as a boundary with its own spatial characteristics. This conceptualization is novel and makes use of another advantage of materially-centred scholarship: its ability to illustrate theoretical concepts using materials or spaces. Similar to how objects can be studied to reveal ideational phenomena (e.g. political objectives) on an empirical level, they can also be used to illustrate concepts on a theoretical level. The C-17 as a material object highlights how the production of security or insecurity occurs in a boundary space, and attributing liminality to that space posits the existence of an ambiguous transitory state between security and insecurity. This line of reasoning presents a theoretical perspective that could provoke studies of other objects that materially express the boundary similarly or differently.

Conclusion

This paper has explored new empirical and theoretical ground while maintaining a link to existing concepts in ISS. The analysis of the C-17's role in the Afghanistan War captures how different deployments of material objects can enhance or diminish the security of certain groups, thereby revealing some of the entanglements of international politics and security. The analysis was approached through a complex conceptualization of a transport plane as a material expression of the boundary between security and insecurity — a boundary that is not only drawn based on security politics but that itself produces politics.

One intriguing avenue for further research involves the connection between objects of security and the ideological underpinnings of the political objectives guiding their deployment. After the Cold War, U.S. security politics was largely driven by liberal interventionism and neoconservatism, two ideologies advocating an aggressive interpretation of security (Parmar, 2009). But the end of the “forever war” in Afghanistan and the C-17 airlift (protecting allies but not fighting enemies) could indicate an ideological shift toward a more passive interpretation of security. These decisions suggest a turn toward a kind of “fortress liberalism,” whereby the U.S. does not “push” the security-insecurity boundary but rather draws it closer to home in hopes of fortifying itself against security threats instead of eliminating them (Beauchamp, 2021).

Notes

[1] This view has its roots in actor network theory, which considers objects as “actants,” developed by Science and Technology Studies scholars (Callon, 1986; Law & Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2005a).

[2] Many different views have been proposed. Clausewitz (1832/1982), for example, sees war as politics by other means; Tilly (1990) sees state-making and war-making as co-constitutive; Kaldor (2010) sees war as “a form of political mobilisation” (p. 278).

[3] The distinction between security politics and the politics of security was developed by Huysmans (2014), who argued that “security readings of global politics” focus on the nature of global insecurities and political responses, while “political readings of security” focus on why certain insecurities are prioritized over others.

[4] The Costs of War project estimates the civilian death toll of the war at 46,319 (Crawford, Lutz, & Savell, 2021).

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