Review - International Security

International Security: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)
By: Christopher Browning
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013

Christopher Browning of the University of Warwick has penned number 369 in highly successful Oxford University Press' Very Short Introduction series. His *International Security* joins a long list of other titles and I should admit straight away that I have authored two others, Geopolitics and The Antarctic. I mention my association because I know first hand how hard it is to condense a complex field into 35000 words (and that word limit is now more rigorously enforced – Geopolitics for example was actually around 50,000) and armed with only 9 illustrations.

So has Browning succeeded in conveying to both academic and general readers some of the core issues and themes surrounding the term, international security? For me, I would say yes even if it is clear that he, like many UK-based academics working in this field are strongly informed by critical security studies rather than say a more realist-informed understanding of security as idea(s) and practice(s). His intellectual sympathies are made reasonably explicit within the first paragraph, which reads to my mind like something a critical geopolitical writer would have penned about the inter-relationships between formal, practical and popular geopolitics. He asks us to imagine a multitude of situations in order to make the point that security is not simply 'out there' but intensely embodied, experiential and always situated. And while he conjures up a number of 'images', there are no illustrations to help the general reader orientate themselves.

The chapter structure thereafter is a sensible one – Browning invites us to consider some of the traditional preoccupations with international security. In a light touch way, he rightly takes the reader on a theoretical tour and addresses how we might 'theorise security' and sets up a debate between realism and critical theoretical approaches

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to such matters. Although it is clear that he is not a realist himself in these matters, I do think it is important to remind readers that realists think they are also being 'critical' about security albeit with a focus on states and their (in)securities. Feminist scholars continue to play an important role in contesting that focus and highlighting how the state and its security politics is always gendered.

Chapters 3-5 are the traditional stuff of international security – the nature of war, the international system and world order, and the nature and scope of armed conflict. There is some good material here. The discussion on security regimes is very helpful and I liked the map on page 28 which reminds us about the geographical distribution (and scale) of nuclear weapon capabilities. When you see a map like that you can also better imagine why a country like Iran might be tempted to develop a nuclear weapon capability and why others developed WMD capacities albeit in chemical and biological weapons. But as Browning works his way through these areas, we also get insights into how humanitarian intervention (and principles like the right to protect) have disrupted the territorial sovereignty and security of states. Political geographers such as Stuart Elden have written persuasively on this topic as well. Security, configured in humanitarian terms, is a very different beast compared to one preoccupied say with WMD. One reason often cited why 'great powers' intervene in places (e.g. Serbia and Afganistan) rather than others (e.g. North Korea) is that they are worried about a desperate regime hitting the proverbial nuclear button. In the case of Iraq in 2003, it was the spectre of WMD (however manufactured) that was used to justify intervention safe perhaps in the apparent knowledge that no one really expected Iraq to launch a WMD attack 'within 30 minutes'. The 'dodgy dossier' was always just that – dodgy.

Chapter 5 is the pivot chapter (to use a good geopolitical phrase). It takes us into the final part of the book, which tackles those areas of newer concern from human security to climate change and resource scarcity. Browning navigates his way through this material and deftly raises the issue that states and corporations might hijack the word 'security' to promote their own interests. Without using the term military-industrial complex (and you can add more words to that if you like – media, entertainment, pharmaceutical, and so on), he leaves the reader with the strong impression that the word 'security' can be put to work in all kinds of productive ways. His polite refrain that the language of security being used to discuss climate change might be problematic is I think a wonderful example of his delicate under-statement (page 89). In that sense his style is continuously suggestive rather than emphatic.

The last two chapters were my favourite and sadly tragically topical. Addressing territorial borders, he shows us that the border (in all its complex manifestations) is an incredibly powerful object of security concern. The terrible loss of life off Lampedusa illustrates only to well the security dilemmas for those trying to head for southern Europe and for those Italian authorities responsible for policing islands and coastal waters. How to reconcile concerns with human rights, immigration control, border administration is never straight forward. What we should be able to hope for, however, is that where at all possible those who can (e.g. fishermen, coastguards and emergency workers) respond with humanity. It is a truly shocking thought to imagine scores of people drowning in a boat literally packed so tightly within a hull that one immediately conjures up images of the slave trade. Human security and territorial security are terms that are never disembodied. But the final chapter provides a link to this tragedy and that is through the prism of fear. How does a geo-politics of fear inform security ideals and practices? How has the spectre of terror been used to mobilise populations in favour of ever greater investment in security infrastructure and restrictions on citizens inside and outside particular states. The relationship between big data and security projects is clearly one thing that individuals such as Edward Snowden have brought to greater public attention. If security is thought of increasingly in algorithmic terms then should we worry that, in our names, ever more areas of social life is simply been seen as fundamentally extractable, calculable and actionable. Where does that leave our understandings of security as something more embodied and experiential? For those who fall foul of the algorithm it surely will continue to be so.

Browning's final section is entitled 'the threat to liberty' and I think that is an appropriate point to conclude. He warns, as others have before him, that liberal democratic states increasingly turn in on themselves. They 'hollow out' the very things we are supposed to cherish in the name of 'security'. Those revelations on big data make us think that films like *Enemy of the State* were not far-fetched but actually rather more prophetic but perhaps what they do is sell us false hope that characters and disgruntled CIA agents will expose the inner workings of the military-industrial-communications complex. Strikingly, there has been remarkably little push back by the British public. Perhaps we are persuaded that there really is a large number of bad people, bad ideas, and bad networks intent on doing us harm in

the UK and beyond.

All of this leave us with a dilemma. Critical geopolitics and critical security studies scholars and I include Browning in this category have work to do. This VSI to International Security is I think a response to contributing to public debate about this immensely powerful word 'security'. Note I have dropped the international. That matters of course but I think it is the word 'security' that will continue to demand excavation and interrogation. And as academics we should not be afraid to propose alternatives – what should the liberal democratic state do? Should we demand, for example, that our authorities at the very least get a sense of perspective – far more people in the United States will die this year of gun-related crime rather than terrorist assaults. And far more people in the UK will die of car-related accident than at the hands of extremists.

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