A Critical Analysis of Walt's Concept of Security

Written by Veronica Kate Coates

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Whilst not the first attempt at a survey of the field, Stephen Walt's 'The Renaissance of Security Studies' fired the first shot in a debate, which came to render the concept of security "a battleground in and of itself."[1] Surprisingly, the intense controversy surrounding this widely cited article does not stem from the presence, but instead from the apparent omission of innovative prescriptions for the future of security studies. Walt arguably falls victim due to being in the wrong paradigm at the wrong time; published in 1991, in the aftermath of Soviet collapse and the wind-up of the bipolarity of the international arena, Walt's article not only adheres to a strictly traditional, narrow, and controversially neorealist concept of security, but also advocates its continuity as the best means "for managing the field in the years ahead."[2] At a time of significant change, Walt came under fire for epitomizing an approach that seemingly fails to appropriately take into account the waning of traditional military security priorities and the simultaneous emergence of a plethora of new security threats. Intrastate conflict, terrorism, cybercrime, environmental degradation, infectious diseases, and poverty were seen to replace conventional interstate military threats. Tied to the state and stuck in the military realm, Walt's approach has therefore been deemed regressive and dangerously inadequate. Pluralists, Social Constructivists and Critical theorists target Walt's article as the antithesis of their plea to 'broaden' and 'deepen' the concept of security and replace the state as its referent object. This review will therefore focus primarily on Walt's definition of and prescriptions for security studies. It will scrutinise Walt's ideas

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against alternatives whilst assessing their relevancy to current security threats, in order to reach the opinion that whilst Walt's concept of security may be limited in scope, he nevertheless offers valuable and sobering guidance to security studies.

Firstly, before analysing his concept of security, it is important to note that Walt seeks to examine the evolution of security studies and intends "to provide a survey of the field and a guide to the current research agenda."[3] Whether he objectively achieves this aim is open to scrutiny. According to Krause and Williams, Walt's "historical rendition is far from a neutral survey of past and present trends"; "his choice of the word renaissance is indicative"[4] in that Walt is portraying his neorealist view as the pinnacle of linear scientific progression: "I concentrate primarily on the works that meet the standards of logic and evidence in the social sciences."[5] Booth also notices that the perspective of the article is largely biased. Not only is it overtly neorealist, it is also US-centric. Walt offers a weakly one-sided survey of the field, which strongly endorses the 'norms and ethos' of security studies without mentioning their "statism, ethnocentrism, masculinism and positivism to scrutiny."[6] According to Booth, this traditional approach is in itself dangerous: due to its state focus it legitimised nuclear deterrence as a valid security strategy, and has no hesitation in justifying the destruction of human life. Booth's arguments, of course, can easily be refuted, but they do highlight that Walt needs to be more questioning of the biased nature of his standpoint or at least attempt to firmly uphold his prior premises.

The main point of controversy in Walt's article is his widely quoted definition of security. He states that "the main focus of security studies is easy to identify […] it is the phenomenon of war",[7] and in a definition borrowed from Nye and Lynn-Jones, he goes on to describe security studies as "the study of the threat, use and control of military force."[8] These claims, however, are not as 'easy' to identify or uncontroversial as Walt implies. If Walt really is limiting his definition of security and security studies to the study of military force and warfare between states, this is highly restrictive. If we read Walt strictly, this would mean that security studies could only include military wars between states and military attacks against the state.

Walt's view, however, could be read differently as including any other dimension that directly increases the likelihood of war. This alternative interpretation, however, will seem implausible if we are to understand Walt as a strict neorealist, who views the normal state of international relations as that of war—due to the structure of the system—thereby omitting any domestic causes altogether. On this neorealist logic, states are 'black boxes' and considerations of security are cut off from a number of contemporary security threats, decreasing its validity and applicability for today's world. Nevertheless, it is not explicit whether Walt sticks to such ideas of security in his article. Rather, he argues that security studies "explores the conditions that make the use of force more likely, the way the use of force affects individuals, states and societies, and the specific polies states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent or engage in war."[9] We could therefore read Walt as offering a more inclusive concept of security.

Indicatively, Walt recognizes that "military power is not the only source of national security, and military threats are not the only dangers that states face (though they are usually the most serious)."[10] Specifically, within the study of security, he includes 'statecraft', which involves arms control, diplomacy, and crisis management. Accordingly, Walt's concept of security and security studies may be more encompassing than previously thought. For example, crisis management could refer to many types of crises, including natural disasters, technological crises, and terrorist attacks. Here technological crises could be interpreted to include cyber attacks. Moreover, even if one objects that this is stretching Walt's concept of crisis management too far, these issues could still be included within Walt's concept of security on a second level; for Walt, anything that bears "directly on the likelihood or character of war"[11] is clearly relevant to the focus of the field. Therefore, if terrorism from non-state actors bears directly on the likelihood or character of war, which it arguably did after 9/11, and if a cyber-attack on state security apparatus compromises state security and could directly force a state to become involved in military combat, these could arguably fulfil Walt's criteria for inclusion within the field.

Relatedly, it should also be noted that, as Lynn-Jones points out, many scholars within security studies have always addressed a broad range of issues. Even within a narrow, traditional framework like Walt's, economic threats and "broader questions of diplomacy and statecraft"[12] are considered. He uses the example that examinations into the effectiveness of economic sanctions on Iraq during the Gulf War formed part of discussions on security policy.

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Moreover, it could be argued that other areas are always strongly linked to war and therefore, where necessary, are always included. For example, the patterns of history show that intense financial crises and poverty directly correlate to a rise in support for right wing regimes. In the case of Nazi-Germany, financial instability created an environment, which allowed National Socialism to flourish, which led to expansionist ideas and thus war. This could arguably highlight that some criticisms of Walt merely build straw men notions out of his article, in order to more easily destroy the feasibility of his approach. Accordingly, if Walt's traditional approach underwent a slight broadening with regards to what is considered causal to war and violence, there is no reason why Walt's approach cannot become broad and remain analytically coherent.

The development of the human security framework by the Human development report (HDR) 1994, however, shifted the focus of security from the protection of the state from military threats to the protection of the individual from multiple threats to their well being. Moving the referent object to the individual level is arguably necessary to deal with the broadest threats. Unlike Walt, this concept of security acknowledges the fact that states can sometimes oppress their own people; also individuals come under attack from a range of threats such as hunger, crime and, environmental degradation which are taken into account more effectively by 'human security'. "Because non-military phenomena can also threaten states and individuals, some writers have suggested broadening the concept of security to include topics such as poverty, AIDS, environmental hazards, drug abuse and the like."[13]

In response, Walt acknowledges that "military power does not guarantee well-being"[14] and that such issues deserve "sustained attention from scholars and policy makers."[15] However, he believes that these should be given the utmost attention within their own area of studies, "not through a sort-of stealthy redefinition of an existing sub-field."[16] Adding all of these other areas to security studies "runs the risk of expanding security studies excessively; by this logic, issues such as child abuse, or economic recessions could all be viewed as threats to security."[17] Here Walt has a valid and sobering point. Whilst it is all good and well to want to add all the threats to human well-being onto the high politics agenda "defining the field in this way would destroy its intellectual coherence and make it more difficult to devise solutions to any of these important problems."[18] In a more recent interview, he confirms that he is not dismissing the importance of other issues, stating, "what I was arguing against in 1991 was making the term 'security' so inclusive that it included virtually anything that might affect human welfare."[19] Many agree with Walt in that alternative approaches that have sought to broaden and deepen security, fail to even provide a firm definition of what security is and thus fail in providing any form of policy coordination. As R.J.B.Walker argues, "a word once uttered in hard cadences to convey brutal certainties has become embarrassingly limp and overextended."[20] This would support heeding Walt's advice to limit the concept of security, in order to have a workable definition. "If everything that causes a decline in human well being is labeled a 'security threat', the term loses any analytical usefulness and becomes a loose synonym of bad."[21] Overall, then, despite its limitations, Walt's approach, remains stronger in that it can offer at least some focus and guidance to security studies.

Lynn-Jones agrees, arguing "these issues, however important, should not be incorporated wholly into the domain of international security studies, except when they are linked to problems of international conflict and the potential use of force."[22] This is due to the divergence in the strategies needed to respond to such differing threats. He strengthens his point by providing three reasons why environmental threats should remain separate from security threats. First, he argues that there are "few analytical links between these topics and the problems of war and peace."[23] The causes of war and the causes of environmental degradation are usually far removed. Moreover, these causes are usually unintentional and analysts who study war and strategy "will not necessarily have the intellectual tools"[24] to solve environmental problems. Secondly, 'scholarly communities need boundaries,"[25] if security studies was to include anything which affected the well being of individuals this could include anything from mental depression to economic poverty, yet this does not require the 'intellectual cross-fertilization' of economics and psychology. Thirdly, making the environment an issue for security studies could be counterproductive, by creating an unsustainable sense of urgency and panic. Deudney agrees, arguing that "[n]ot all threats to life and property are threats to security."[26]

In addition, Peterson points to three flaws in linking security and disease: firstly "it invites the question whether any serious health, environmental, economic or other problem automatically constitutes a security threat."[27] Secondly, she argues that the issue has remained on the fringes, implying that the international security elites are cold to the

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idea of human security and thirdly, and arguably most importantly, "it is not clear what is gained by linking epidemic disease and human security." Peterson also highlights that significant work in normalizing the experience of HIV/AIDS suffers could be damaged by raising the issue to the level of a security threat. Encompassing all other vulnerabilities to human life as threat to security would amount to "confuse the issues by wrapping these problems in the security blanket."[28] If this were the case, it would be better for both these areas and that of security to stick to the more broad interpretation of Walt's approach and keep security studies limited to all the issues, which threaten the security of the state by increasing the likelihood of violence and warfare. Walt thus keeps us aware of the need for at least some level of discrimination within the field.

For Walt, the referent object of security studies is the state rather than individuals. This, however, is not as problematic or detrimental to the well-being of humans as portrayed by critics. Buzan claimed, "the referent object is that to which one can point and say 'it has to survive therefore it is necessary to….'"[29] Whilst this is definitely the case for individuals, it can also apply to the state. Moreover, it could be strongly argued that the individual is not the best referent object for security studies. The state is still responsible in most cases for the well-being of its citizens and remains the most effective means by which their lives can be protected. Especially in liberal democracies, the state remains the first port of call in times of emergency and is held accountable for its failures to provide security. Even Buzan acknowledges, "[t]he state is the actor most adequately equipped to deal with security tasks."[30] The state remains the most important mechanism to ensure that individuals can go about their daily lives without constant fear. As long as the international system continues to be a system of states and states remain the most powerful actors in the upholding of stability in other areas, the protection of its position automatically in most cases ensures the protection of the individual. Also warfare remains a constant threat as Walt clearly notes and military force continues to play a significant role in the interaction between states. Combatting terrorism often does depend on military force by states. For example, the deployment of US and UK forces in Afghanistan was seen as the only way to free the country from being a breeding ground for Al Qaeda. Therefore, both the state and the military still play a significant role in world affairs and effectively protect individuals from contemporary threats. In this way Walt's approach remains significant.

In conclusion, Walt's approach should not be dismissed solely on its traditional grounds. It reminds us that security studies must have a focus, something which alternative accounts are yet to provide. It does, however, require broadening and clarification on the issues, which are seen to lead to the use of force and war. If Walt frees himself from too close an attachment to neorealist premises in this regard, acknowledges the significance of intrastate warfare, and explains what his approach will consider as conditions that increase the likelihood of war, it could come to provide us with a field of security studies which analyses a broad range of issues all within the framework of 'threats to the state, violence and warfare'. Walt could then reach the golden mean between a too broad and too restrictive theory.

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Written by: Veronica Kate Coates
Written at: University of Glasgow
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