# What do International Relations Academics think about Security Threats?

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MATT MCDONALD, MAR 27 2017

In the lead-up to the start of teaching my large undergraduate course at the University of Queensland, Global Security, I decided to conduct a survey. I had elected to open the first lecture by asking my students what they considered to be the greatest threat to global security. After writing some ideas on the board and encouraging discussion, I then asked students to take note of their response- we'd come back to it in the final week to reflect on that original choice, and to see if they still held that view. While hopefully sending the message that they should actively participate in class, I reasoned that the different answers to this question across the student body would allow students to recognise the range of choices made about how to prioritise threats.

**The Politics of Security and Threat**

As securitization theorists have long argued (Wæver 1995; Buzan et al 1998), defining threats is not about objectively measuring issues against universal criteria. Rather, the way political communities define threats to their security reflects a series of choices about who they are, what values are in need of being protected, how they perceive others and their actions and how successful some actors are in selling those visions of security and insecurity to relevant constituencies. In the case of nation-states' security agenda, these conceptions matter: they serve to define the political community itself, define urgency and priority attached to particular issues, and potentially (for securitization theorists at least) enable emergency or extraordinary measures to deal with those threats (on the politics of security, see Browning and McDonald 2013).

With the exception of the importance of selling a vision of security and threats to others, the same issues about defining security and insecurity apply to us: how we view security and threats to it reflects our own values, choices and perceptions (see Stevens and Vaughn-Williams 2016). It also, crucially, reflects different choices about whose security matters (do we focus on nation-states, individuals or the biosphere, for example?) and different timescales (do we focus on immediate threats or long-term ones, for example). And this is before we begin to rank threats even if we agree on these categories- how do we compare the mid-term national security threat posed by infectious disease to the possibility of major power conflict in our region, for example?

Ultimately, then, I hoped that my brief survey of students' perception of the key global security threat would constitute the first step in realising a core goal of the course: helping students to recognise the analytical, political and ethical choices involved in defining security in particular ways, and in prioritizing a certain set of threats. And it should lead them to recognise the more important implications of these choices at a political level: the often-drastic measures used to address them, from military force to blanket travel bans, from imprisonment of asylum-seekers to torture.

While an interesting and hopefully useful exercise, this got me thinking about how my colleagues viewed this issue. If we acknowledge the range of analytical, political and ethical choices involved, surely recognised security experts would be similarly split on their assessment of the key global security threat. And it would be a useful – and fun – exercise in the lecture to present those issues identified by colleagues to the students after they'd come up with their own: to count down, Family Feud-style, the top 10 most identified key global security threat by security experts.

So I emailed 79 academic colleagues in politics and international relations departments across the world, all of whom had published work on security, most of whom offered courses on security at their institutions. I received responses from the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey, Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark and South Africa. While largely a first world list of countries, this (sadly) reflects the academic world and the discipline in which I work. Ultimately, 59 (around three quarters) responded. There were three key 'findings' of this exercise.

**Herding Cats**

The first key finding of the survey was that academics are woeful at following instructions. Asked to identify- for teaching purposes- the single most pressing global security threat, respondents variously sent through a list; made distinctions based on timescale; or identified a 'single' threat so multivariate, multidimensional and complex that even the most creative educator would struggle to work out how to communicate it as part of a list of 10 displayed on a PowerPoint slide.

While frustrating, the reasons why many respondents failed to identify a single pressing global security threat were entirely understandable. Colleagues were right to note 'it really depends on how you define security', even if that was part of the teaching exercise. They also identified compelling reasons for distinguishing threats based on timescale- how do you weigh up the current devastation of disease and armed conflict against the future intensifying effects of environmental change? And it was hard to argue with those respondents drilling down beyond apparent immediate threats to the broader sets of ideologies, assumptions and institutional arrangements that gave rise to them. Neoliberalism, misogyny, populism and even the state system featured prominently in responses as drivers of more concrete and specific threats.

**What's Mentioned?**

While their responses were therefore hard to nail down in some instances, a few key threats were emphasized.

By a factor of almost three, the key threat to global security identified was climate change. While I hadn't asked respondents to identify why they'd made their choice or asked them to build a case for it, many did (see above). For many, climate change constituted the most fundamental existential threat, especially if our register is the global rather than the national. As one respondent put it, 'the globe can survive most other things'.

The second key threat to global security identified most often by respondents was poverty and inequality, the latter both social and economic. Respondents here noted the ongoing devastating effects of poverty, and the implications of growing inequality in terms of quality of life as well as its role in feeding destructive ideologies across the Western world in particular. After poverty and inequality, nationalism was the third most mentioned threat to global security, with respondents pointing to the dangers of a world of states turning inward, at a point at which genuinely global action to address genuinely global problems seems more necessary than ever (Burke, Lee-Koo, and McDonald, 2014)

Rounding out the top four threats to global security was the man himself, US President Donald Trump. Here, the dangers of a President apparently willing to unravel the post-World War II global order and pick a fight with other major (and nuclear) powers was a matter of immediate concern for many respondents (see Rachman 2016). In a particularly memorable response, one respondent indicated that on the basis of his own assessment and candid conversations with foreign policy officials, the largest present global security threat was to be found in the form of 'an ignorant, narcissistic, incompetent, misogynistic, racist, white supremacist-enabling, diplomatically naive, Putin-obsessed bore who has no idea what he is doing called Trump'.

**What's Missing?**

In some ways, the question of what was missing from the list of core global security threats follows naturally from the above. Essentially, it was those threats emphasized by the US President himself, not least in the context of enabling emergency measures to deal with them (see Cohen 2017). Of 59 respondents, not one identified terrorism. Not one

identified Islam. And not one identified asylum-seekers, refugees or immigrants, except to note the role of the refugee crisis in feeding an insular and aggressive nationalism. Clearly, the distinction between this assessment, the attitude of the broader public and even the position of political leaders reflects the nature of public debate and the willingness of powerful actors to play on fears and anxieties to encourage these attitudes (see Jarvis and Lister 2016; Stevens and Vaughan-Williams 2016). But when assessed against the nature of current public and popular debates, and the recent statements of world leaders like the US President, you would be forgiven for thinking IR academics lived on a different planet.

**The Wash Up?**

Clearly, mine wasn't a water-tight methodology. No ethical clearance was sought (I'm hoping University administrators aren't reading this, my hunch is that it's unlikely), and the list of email recipients was limited to colleagues whose work I knew. I tried to reach out to colleagues working in strategic studies, but as someone who (cards on the table) has self-identified as a critical security theorist, and who works in a department known for its contribution to critical IR theory, a critic could feasibly suggest the odds were always stacked in favour of responses pointing to the concerns of the 'Left': climate change, inequality, nationalism and the imperative of challenging the poster-child of the post-truth, nationalist world: President Trump.

But the survey did serve to confirm that informed and thoughtful experts continue to have an eye firmly on the bigger picture of global politics, despite alarmist rhetoric and limited popular debate. Indeed, as the results attest, those advancing such rhetoric (and the forces that gave rise to them) were most likely seen as threats to security rather than voices of authority on the nature of global security.

Asking smart people to reflect on key global security threats is not necessarily the most heart-warming exercise. While at times I wondered whether I'd helped bring out the angst, bitterness and anxiety in some of my colleagues, at others threats were identified that I hadn't even considered. The long-term threat of 'radical and under-regulated technological disruption (artificial intelligence + additive manufacturing + runaway advances in biotech)' anyone? Haven't we got enough to worry about?

But amidst it all there were glimpses of hope and beautiful, unexpected responses. Respondents identifying apathy and fear as key threats served to remind me, at least, of the capacity for human agency and resilience. We can challenge or contest the way security is used to justify illiberal measures, and through our actions (however limited) we can choose to recognise and respond to the suffering of others. It's not all out of our hands.

But if smart people continue to focus on the bigger picture and give us grounds for hope, it doesn't necessarily follow that this will inform the politics of global security. Indeed if those respondents identifying the key global security threat as the assault on facts and reason- or the rise of populism – are right, the opinion of political science academics doesn't mean a great deal. Except, perhaps, to our students.

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