Assessing the Impact of Hybrid Threats on Ontological Security via Entanglement

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A growing body of scholarly work has used the concept of ontological security to explain the ways through which political actors in international politics exhibit certain traces when it comes to how they understand security. In simple words, ontological security at the state level is ensuring a sense of routinised continuity, order, belonging, as well as the survival of the self-image and identity states wish to project at home and in the wider international political scene (Giddens 1991: 37; Steele 2008; Innes and Steele 2014: 15). Not only does the subdiscipline of Ontological Security Studies (OSS) raise questions beyond the confines of physical security and materiality, but it also asks difficult questions about how we live and what it means to feel and be secure and safe. Is security merely about securing ourselves from a threat? Is it the state in which we are secure and free to pursue stability in our lives? These questions are equally posed to states and societies when exploring their daily operations across time and space.

Nonetheless, the insights obtained from this highly engaging approach are largely conceptual in nature; in practice, critical approaches to security are often not easily understood by policymakers and decision-makers. Even though the policymaker is not concerned with academic debates, they should be concerned with how key concepts in academia can transform their own work. From a policy perspective, OSS has strong practical applications that are discussed within academic spaces, yet not so easily understood within policymaking circles. For instance, the discipline addresses the importance of continuity in states' routine operations as a means of securing society. However, what happens when state action (or inaction, for that matter) is a security threat on its own? As such, an important question that has been left largely unaddressed is the capacity for political actors to secure themselves from themselves. In other words, how do we, in our present form and capacity, ensure that we protect our stability in the future from our current actions and discourse? To what extent do state institutions and society plan ahead of large, disrupting crises? Finally, how resilient are our institutions across state and society in the face of less predictable and irregular dangers in the hybrid threat era?

In this short piece, I puzzle with the concept of entanglement in OSS and what it means for future policymaking and decision-making in the fields of foreign, defence, and security policies. For one thing, entanglement is understood as the act of taking precautions to 'secure ourselves from ourselves', due to the enmeshed, perplexed nature of security referent objects resulting from growing insecurities and vulnerabilities in the face of hybrid threats (Hamilton 2017; Donnelly and Steele 2019). The problem with hybridity in International Relations and Security Studies is a trifecta targeting the following areas: attribution, stagnation, and uncertainty. This means that (a) it is often difficult to attribute the exact threat to a specific actor with concrete evidence, even if a suspected political actor is the likely origin of such a threat; (b) coming up with clear policies to combat hybrid threats is often a painstakingly slow process that may even come to a complete standstill due to infrastructural constraints; and (c) there are limited techniques in which states and political actors may choose a certain policy with confidence and certainty that it is the appropriate or best course of action for future threats.

The puzzle that is pieced together, therefore, puts together an analytical interpretation of the role and/or disruptiveness of entanglement in transforming ontological security. The insights developed here in this approach are largely drawn from my own PhD thesis, which looks at the role and capacity of hybrid threats in disrupting ontological security in Cyprus and Estonia. The argument herein is that it is in the nature of hybrid threats to disrupt the political

process, not least at the societal level, but also across state institutions as well. While this conceptual approach should not by any means constitute a predictive model that would completely alleviate us from experiencing crises and hybrid threats in the microcosmos of our respective communities and beyond in the international political scene, the chief purpose is to understand our own limitations as practitioners and strategists in the policymaking and decision-making spheres.

Ontological Security – How and For Whom to Secure?

One of the starting points on non-traditional security approaches other than pure coercion and military combat, the Copenhagen School's Securitisation Theory first began discussing security framing across different sectors that also engage and affect society, while connecting the dots between the politicisation of objects and entities and their transformation into security referent objects through actions inter alia speech acts (Waever 1995; Buzan et al 1998). Thereafter, in his famous piece "Security! What do you mean?" Professor Jef Huysmans (1998) laid out his bewilderment with regards to what we mean by the term 'security'. His contribution to the field throughout the years has had a lasting impact, which helped formulate other concepts and spurred debates that dealt with non-traditional security methods. This helped scholars move towards a more holistic understanding of security, one that deals with becoming resilient and adaptive to disruptive patterns and invasive events in societal routine, while being in a position to understand and acknowledge the possibility of risk and danger (Croft 2012; Subotić 2016; Gustaffson and Krickel-Choi 2020).

The need of understanding and acknowledging what the risks are contributes towards avoiding ruin and demise. Even so, the slightest awareness and realisation of threats can also fundamentally trigger change within oneself. The presence of strongly embedded and disruptive processes like hybridity may trigger systematic, or according to Freud, 'morbid'anxiety in those exposed to the foreign, the 'Other', the object, event, or entity they are not accustomed to (1919: 231-232). Even though this is known within OSS and its quest to address ways through which political actors build resilience to overcome anxiety, not much has been done to address how the issue of complex security issues like hybrid threats transcends both physical and ontological security. There is a growing need to understand how both state and society can choose appropriate long-term routes that ontologically secure themselves without jeopardising themselves in their course of action (Hamilton 2017: 579).

For instance, certain approaches have approached crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic from an OSS lens and the impact the pandemic has had on the ontological security of the state and society, as well as the anxiety it has spread around the globe due to the uncertainty and the lack of appropriate policy that was, by late 2019 and early 2020, at an embryonic stage when it comes to dealing with crises of such magnitude (Kirke 2020; Petrikkos 2021). Despite the pandemic itself not directly being a hybrid threat on its own, its spill-over effects are largely disruptive across state institutions and society. Therefore, this empowers hostile political actors to use the chaos and uncertainty brought forth in the pandemic setting, to launch their own assault and to deliberately exploit vulnerabilities that are now even clearer in the face of a pandemic.

Hybrid Threats and What We Make of Them

Hybrid threats are, by default, an essentially contested concept. A political agent, be it a state or a non-state actor, is the initiator of such attacks. According to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, their ultimate purpose, while being exceedingly disruptive, is to blend conventional and unconventional types of threats in warfare and during peace, with the aim of undermining and/or harming political actors (Hybrid CoE). This is done by exploiting vulnerabilities and security gaps found across both traditional and non-traditional security sectors, including the military, information centres, critical infrastructure providers, the cyber realm, and within the political life. Thinking critically about hybrid threats allows us to see that the term is a political assertion that helps policymakers securitise and group threats and policy together. It leads to a situation where security referent objects of a so-called hybrid nature conveniently exacerbate discussion by using hybrid threats as a label, thereby utilising them as a political instrument. This critique is particularly helpful in highlighting the limitations of policymaking in this domain itself, which is a contributing factor to the rise of contesting definitions in grouping various threats under a common umbrella (including cyber-attacks, attacks on critical infrastructure, diplomatic tactics, disinformation, and others).

While definitions vary and the term itself being a construct of political convenience, the incorporation of hybrid threats into daily language has transformed policy and is now an acceptable term. As such, despite this critique, it is important to engage with the term, whether we like it or not. For instance, in policymaking, conceptualising hybrid threats has been an important priority for regional actors such as the European Union, where security and defence policy formulation is found in frameworks such as the Common Security and Defence Policy – CSDP (Brandão 2020). As this is widely used across institutions, the objective here is not to steer away from the conversation on hybrid threats, but to ensure that practitioners understand that there should be a holistic approach to this security bundle.

One of the very few contributions to the literature that bridges ontological security with hybrid threats, thereby initiating an important conversation within OSS, is Maria Mälksoo's 2018 paper on "Countering Hybrid Warfare as Ontological Security Management". In this piece, Mälksoo argues that institutions like the EU and NATO may utilise the hybrid threat narrative in pursuit of ontological security across their blocs. In order to build resilience over the "known unknowns", the unidentified, possible perceived threats that may emerge in the future eventually may trigger a paradox of how this narrative itself, in pursuit of defending democratic institutions, may instead harm them, due to the blur between the practical application of politics and warfare in this hybrid setting (Mälksoo 2018: 374, 376, 386).

Consequently, it remains a problem for practitioners to distinguish between immediate threats in the short run and the potential ominimity that might spill over in the future. Not only that, but in some cases, the practice of policy vis-à-vis hybrid threats is indistinguishable from policy dealing with other security issues. For instance, during a range of interviews conducted with Estonian policymakers, it was revealed that cybersecurity issues explicitly targeting the state are, in fact, grouped together under hybrid threats instead of being viewed as individual security issues. This was also reflected in ad hoc practices in Cypriot security stakeholders at the state-level, who do not have a comprehensive document in the public realm that defines hybrid threats, yet also engage with them on a daily basis. This blurry line actively encouraged by hybridity brings forth uncertain prospects for the future application of policy.

Entangled Spaces: State and Society

Going beyond the institutional context, hybrid threat initiators aim at systematically disrupting societal functions and routinised processes: from financial transactions to water supply, electricity, or telecoms, the prospect of such threats taking out vital systems of daily societal use might be terrifying. This leads to the paradox of policymakers' and decision-makers' quest of taking measures to pre-emptively deal with the potential damage. However, what happens when these practitioners themselves do not have the full package of information and cannot predict how their actions might shape society's future? In this scenario, stakeholders rush to take action to secure ourselves from ourselves, with the prospect of leaving the possibility of future threats unaccounted for either due to the lack of action in the present or ill-decision-making leading to greater perils that cannot always be determined through quantifiable nor predictive models (Hamilton 2017; Harrington 2020).

In this context, entanglement within ontological security is the deep, perplexed, blended mesh of uncertainty where present actions impact future outcomes. While physical security is always listed high on the political agenda, ontological security is something that has only been recently listed as a priority in the last few decades. The importance of protecting society from disinformation and misinformation, as well as raising awareness over the perils of these 'unconventional' risks are now chief policy objectives (Linkov et al 2019). Despite this acknowledgement, little has been done to actively investigate the extent to which policy is simply addressing short-sighted ambitions instead of longer-term threats. Similarly, others have pointed out that the extent to which scholars, researchers, and experts identify possible risks is often irrelevant unless policymakers and decision-makers themselves find it relevant (Steele 2008: 12). This is a good example of how facts and concepts on security and related approaches can be interpreted and re-interpreted in the eye of the beholder: from the researcher's scope, object X can be a potential risk; from the scope of the policymaker, there is an agenda to be upheld, thus object X does not need to be securitised.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the policymaker is not concerned with academic debates. Policymakers require quick suggestions to put forward into a bill. The decision-maker is also not concerned with such debates, yet

often recognises the contribution of experts, while still expecting the quick and most appropriate course of action to be followed. In critical, upsetting situations where these political actors become overwhelmed, their faults are spilled over the public sphere and anxiety and disorientation impacts discourse and policy (Ejdus 2018: 891).

Reflections

This short contribution—while not aimed at offering tangible solutions to the persisting problem of hybridity and the entanglement across policymaking spaces—pushes forward a conversation that needs to take place in the field of security. The chief purpose of dealing with critical approaches and those within OSS is, first and foremost, to understand the causes of things, and in particularly, the reasons why there is insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. One of the many reasons for this is the lack of appropriate infrastructural design, including the use of expertise, as well as the exceedingly grouping of terms and security processes under one uniform template that does not always foster universal solutions to security problems. The pursuit of security, as already mentioned, shapes institutional decision-making and societal day-to-day functions. As such, the pursuit of security is not linear: various pathways towards securing ourselves should be acknowledged even when our own actions as practitioners may indirectly jeopardise our security in the future.

Although this argument merely scratches the surface of conceptualising the ways through which entanglement brings additional paradigms for OSS, it is the beginning of a timely conversation. The rapid rise of innovation and technological advances has shown that the prospects of security breaches across states and societies are also increasing. This equally requires rapid adaptation to such changes, and one way of securing this is by fostering resilience across institutions and society. The problem of uncertainty, however, persists. With that being said, there is no comprehensive model that fully predicts and fully protects from perceived threats and potentially dangerous endeavours in the future. At the same time, the practice of introducing resilience should not be with current short-term visible threats in mind, but it should indeed be a constant process embedded in the daily pursuit of ontological security. For this, nonetheless, it is emphasised that policymakers should take into account any relevant expertise other specialists may have in the field. Although both the decision-maker and the policymaker have an important role to play in statecraft, such role should be complemented by proper guidance from specialists working in the field.

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