

-Is it more 'objective' to base security strategy on risks rather than threats?

Deconstructing Risk: Miscalculation and the False Promise of Objectivity in Security

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The question at hand of whether a security strategy rooted in risk is more objective than one based upon threats presents an interesting conundrum. This essay will take a critical approach by delving into the semantics and the philosophy behind this question. Analysis will seek to first define several key terms which are semantically crucial to the question, this will be followed by a deconstruction of a few concepts, with a conclusion that objectivity in security studies is an overvalued trait, however that a threat focused approach is more objective if objectivity is called for as it is in the original question.

Positively Objective

The use of the term 'objective' would seem to suggest that objectivity is preferable to its counterpart, subjectivity, in security studies. Merriam-Webster provides a definition of objectivity which reads "expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations" (Merriam-Webster p. 1). However, this dictionary definition does not always fit the use of the word as the term 'objective' arguably has many different meanings, making it very difficult to define and therefore use in an academic context (Douglas 2004 p. 454-455). In security studies and the practice of decision making in security, there is a great sense that a concept such as objectivity is rooted in a positivist strain of thought, where objectivity is both attainable and desirable (Nussbaum 2001 p. 884). Positivism sees that reasoning must be grounded in knowable facts which are shown to be empirically true,

this is especially suited to the hard sciences (Miller 1992 p. 85-87). This perspective though has become a large factor in social sciences as well and could be particularly described as being behind the push for a more 'scientific' approach to studying social phenomena which involves emphasis on what are seen as objective facts and the discarding of subjective, inferential, or falsification-based approaches. However, there is debate as to whether social studies can truly be 'scientific' pursuits given that the study of humans is both contentious and often unpredictable (Kurki 2006 p. 194). A key precept of positivism focuses on causality which is rooted in empiricism and observable occurrences only; this has led to a great deal of contention in the field of international relations (Kurki 2006 p. 190). This practice is limiting to the scope of discussion in the field and is a source of contention between positivists and post-positivist scholars as the debate over the importance of objectivity continues.

Defining the Duality

Now this binary between threats and risk must be fleshed out. A few more definitions of terms like 'threat' and 'risk', as well as 'vulnerability' and 'asset' need to be outlined before real analysis can commence. An asset is simply the object of security concern such as people, information, property, and perhaps in expansive cases identity or culture. A vulnerability is an area where a security apparatus is underdeveloped to meet a potential challenge and is therefore a target for exploitation which could cede an asset. A threat is the person, place, or thing which could exploit a vulnerability to access or prevent access to an asset. A risk is an anticipatory calculation which involves all three of the prior terms through a sort of equation: $\text{Asset} + \text{Threat} + \text{Vulnerability} = \text{Risk}$ (Lakoff and Klinenberg 2010 p. 517). So, a risk looks at the value of an asset, the assumed power and will to act of a threat, and the vulnerability of a security system to

determine the relative risk that is posed in a particular security situation. This requires a great deal of value attribution which despite an emphasis on qualitative measurement, is largely unable to escape qualitative derivatives as well. In other words, risk assessment is more predicated on the value of a potential target being considered, rather than simply if that target is realistically under threat, however the hitch lies in sorting out what exactly is 'valuable' in any given scenario.

Subjective Risk

However, in risk assessment there is always an inherent, underlying level of subjectivity; namely that in order to gauge what is at risk in a given situation, one must place that which is to be secure or at risk in opposition to that which is a potential threat, in other words it often leads to 'us vs. them' or 'ours vs. theirs' logics. These sorts of decisions cannot be made in a purely objective manner because of politicization of issues and decision-makers will nearly always have something which they value, such as personal safety, national pride, economic assets, etc. in any sort of risk, or for that matter, threat calculus (Lakoff and Klinenberg 2010 p. 507). Lakoff and Klinenberg find that bureaucratic risk analysis is largely accepted as being more objective, however due to the ambiguous nature of defining risk, the process becomes highly political and therefore not objective. They go on to find that many politicians may have improperly assessed risks as a means to gain more funding via pork barreling. In another way of thinking about this issue, the concept of 'security' in itself is inherently a charged term which presupposes that there is something in need of securing and if action is not taken, then a loss of some sort may occur, which is likely generally agreed upon to be a negative case for the concerned party. This demonstrates the inescapable subjectivity of decision making in security issues as decisions are

at least in part spurred by a fear which exists out of a value assigned by the individual or society at hand. Based on this case, it could be reasoned then, that an emphasis placed on objectivity is perhaps a bit misplaced given the core need to protect which presumes higher value on a referent object over other subjectively determined 'less-valuable' objects. On the topic of 'us vs. them' logic and national security, one will likely have loyalties to their country of national or ethnic origin which they will place as more valuable than the interests of a country or group which may be seen as the opposer or threat, making them the other. In a case such as nuclear disarmament it could be said that it would be objectively better for the world if nuclear weapons no longer existed because of a reduced risk of detonation whether intentional or accidental. So, by that logic are the leaders of nuclear states acting or even expected to act in a way which sets aside subjective national interest in favor of making an objective decision without regard to what is arguably best for themselves? This sort of a decision puts many factors in limbo such as the preservation of personal security i.e.: the leader's own life, their personal power in the structure of a strong state with themselves at the helm, and the national security environment which they live in. These and other factors could all be upended if they are no longer valued by a given decision maker who ignores his own subjective interest in pursuit of an idealistic objectivity, this quite literally makes no sense in the basic terms of self-preservation if it were even possible to become wholly objective. Furthermore, a given decision maker is likely to ascribe subjective value to an object which may not be considered as valuable by another source of analysis, creating discrepancies over what particular value may be at play in a situation.

Threatening Conventional Thinking

With the case of threats in security issues the process for identifying a threat is perhaps more straightforward than ascertaining a risk. That is not to say that threats are easy to acknowledge or deal with, rather the process is more streamlined. A potential threat is typically identified through direct observation i.e.: declaration of war, troop build ups which are reasonably concerning, intercepted communications, etc. Once this threat becomes obvious, then action can take place; one could describe threat-based security as more reactionary than the more anticipatory risk analysis. However, this paper is not meant to debate the effectiveness of reaction vs anticipation, rather the unit of analysis is the relative objectivity of each approach. As pointed out previously, threats often require less interpretation because they are typically more obvious. Risks on the other hand necessitate more careful consideration as to establishing each level of the equation; value of an asset must be determined, then the likelihood of the threat occurring, while also evaluating flaws in the system which may be vulnerabilities. This process has much more room for interpretation and prioritization based on an analyst's personal concerns, whereas a threat merely needs to be determined valid or not. A risk-based approach may indeed be a more effective way to deal with security, though claims of its greater objectivity are dubious. Which leads one away from the question of 'which is more objective' to 'is real objectivity even attainable in security studies'? Despite the move in social 'sciences' towards becoming more science-like this paper argues that in the study of human action unpredictability and emotion are largely inescapable even if many wished that were not the case. Security studies is no exception to this claim which makes the pursuit of objectivity considerably more difficult than in another field such as chemistry which could be considered a true science because human action plays less of a role. It is very difficult to identify a spy, terrorist, or school shooter in a global context and despite advances in technology, attacks are still perpetrated because of their

inherent unpredictability. Lakoff and Klinenberg point out that in the study of these risk analysis decisions “it seems that everyone is engaged in ‘politics.’ But on the other hand, it is a distinctive kind of politics - one that is structured by the problem of objectivity” (Lakoff and Klinenberg 2010 p. 266). Based on this, it would seem that objectivity has simply become a buzzword in the battleground of politics and the bureaucracy involved in risk assessment without regard to its actual application. To some degree, risk assessment can find insecurity in areas that are not really threatened which perpetuates the culture of fear and feelings of insecurity in a nation. This leads to a range of problems from misappropriation of public sentiment, misallocation of resources, and potential harm to groups in or outside a society which could be deemed as potential risks, such as how Muslims may experience discrimination in the United States due to perceptions over risk as an example. This near ‘impulse’ to securitize risks is a factor that is highly susceptible to the potential failures of objective tedium falling prey to subjective values and interests whether accidental or purposeful. Threats could similarly be misinterpreted or improperly responded to, this is a situation which is unavoidable to some degree with any approach in security, there will always be miscalculations and poor decisions. Though, it is much more difficult to imagine a scenario where threats can be so misconstrued as to securitize an entire previously un-securitized sector, or at least without concrete evidence to do so.

Risky Securitization

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a line which may be applicable to thinking about risks and threats, saying “against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only facts,’ I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations” (Nietzsche 1886 p. 139). By this token are risk and threat not simply educated interpretations of a given

situation? It would seem that each approach logically relies on a great deal of subjective interpretation to ascertain the intentions of a potential enemy. In the same passage Nietzsche goes on to write that “it is our needs which interpret the world: our drives and their for and against. Every drive is a kind of lust for domination, each has its perspective, which it would like to impose as a norm on all the other drives” (Nietzsche 1886 p. 139). Perhaps it could be said that this lust for domination based on driven need relates to security as the need for safety driven by fear leads to this securitization-domination dynamic, where all that is perceived to be at risk must be securitized. This move towards securitization would seem to be more likely in a risk-based logic as new fears could easily be ascribed to outgroups or areas which are deemed to be insecure, despite not being actual threats or threatened. An example of this could be the Southern border of the United States, where Donald Trump has said that an insecure border is a risk which could lead to terrorists entering the US disguised as immigrants from Latin America (Erickson 2017 p. 1). To combat this perceived risk, Trump has called for increased security measures such as the construction of a border wall, national guard presence on the border, and increased surveillance, despite there being no (publicly known) imminent threat of insurgents entering from the Southern border (Nelson and Lima 2018 p. 1-2). It is these sorts of incorrect interpretations which lead to fear and coupled with too great of a focus on risk that areas of life which have historically not been securitized may come up for debate such as health with the Ebola crisis, education with school shootings in the US, and speech with the advent of intelligence leaks such as the Snowden case. Guzzini makes the case that “the explanatory theory used in securitization research de facto relies on causal mechanisms that are non-positivistically conceived. Using the appropriate methodological literature renders this explanatory status explicit, exposing the theory’s non-positivist causality” (Guzzini 2011 p. 329). Essentially his

argument is that securitization theory itself uses logic, which is not explicitly positivist, that contributes to this idea that subjectively constructed phenomena such as risk, threats, and indeed security in general need not be confined to positivist objectivity. A more threat-based focus may allow for less subjective decision making, which could in turn lead to less mass-securitization and more objectivity therein.

Conclusion

So, this paper would like to caution against holding objectivity in too high a regard, otherwise analysts may become ignorant to the subjectivity that underlies all of the decisions which must be made on a daily basis regarding security. As Biersteker points out, positivism has been a fixture in academia post-World War II with ideological remnants still embedded in the intellectual landscape today as he says “the narrow positivist behavioralism that characterized much of American international relations theory in the 1960s and 1970s... I begin to have doubts about how widespread post-positivist tendencies really are in the emerging discipline of international relations” (Biersteker 1989 p. 264). This has been attributed to a move in the American liberal hegemonic order to refrain from becoming too ideological or political and so positivism and objectivity have sought to mediate. Though at some point a dogmatic adherence to empiricism and false objectivity begins to undermine this attempt at restraint and it limits crucial academic discussion away from questions of effectiveness towards questions of which is more objective as though it were assumed to be inherently a better theory or approach as long as it meets the criterion objectivity. However, based on the provided perspective, it has been concluded that risk analysis is not anymore objective than threat-based reasoning, and a case has

been made that indeed the opposite is true, though the relevance of that issue is still up for debate.

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