

Regional security complex theory



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This chapter will provide an in-depth look at a range of theoretical approaches to the concept of energy security. It is expected by examining several theoretical approaches we will be able to determine a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes 'energy security.' A range of academic approaches exist which can be utilised in order to understand the origins, prerequisites, and consequences of any given type of security. Throughout this chapter we will be taking the concept of energy security and firstly examining approaches to understanding it as part the existing theoretical framework. Secondly, efforts will be made to comprehend the securitization of energy as a part of broader and more contemporary political architecture. The scope of this literature review will extend to the work of founding theorists, as well as contemporary literature, journals, and reviews.

2. 1 Understanding Security

Since the eventful oil disruptions of the 1970s, energy security has slowly but surely assimilated itself into the key debates of IR theory (Bohi and Toman, 1996: 32). Energy security discourses are varied and volatile at the best of times. If we are to comprehend energy security, we must first have a clear understanding of how security can be approached and conceptualized. Is it a response to threat or a strategy to evade threat? Or perhaps neither? Security is a both a highly contended and heavily debated concept. Owing to its inherently multifaceted premise, it is rare now for a political article not to refer to security in some form or another (Neocleous, 2000: 11). Irony lies in the fact that our present inability to define security has, as a result, caused the international society and our interpretation of it to be less secure as a whole (Booth & Wheeler: 2007: 94). What is exceedingly clear, however, is

that our understanding of security and what it entails has moved well beyond the claim that security studies should focus only on 'the threat, use and control of military force' (Nye and Lynn-Jones in Walt, 1991: 212).

It is interesting that our understanding of security has only relatively recently been contested. We can classify security either as defensive (a response to a threat) or offensive (interaction with other actors for state gain) (Grafstein, 2002: 139-165). Traditional thinkers have conventionally classified security primarily as a defensive mechanism (i. e. power measured by war and military strength). Kenneth Waltz built further on this assumption in his book, *Theory of International Politics*. By suggesting that, in an anarchic international system, the incentive of every state is 'to put itself in a position to be able to take care of itself since no one else can be counted onto do so,' he suggests security will remain an inherently defensive mechanism. Barry Buzan, on the other hand, took this further and attempted to dissect this highly complex term by questioning the very legitimacy of security itself (1997: 5-21). Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde form the foundations of the Copenhagen School of security studies, which focuses on the process of securitization, regional security complexes, and sectoral security. This has conversely been criticized by those of the Critical Security Studies school of thought, which itself is set in contrast to the assumptions of neo-realism and realism. As such, we can see how security has undergone - and will continue to undergo - analytical re-evaluation thanks to recurrent contestation of this concept within the field of IR.

As a result of this unremitting confrontation, the scope for what constitutes 'security' has broadened significantly and developed into a dynamic yet still

unbalanced concept. Thus, how might we define begin to security, and at what point does a state's action, agenda or thinking become a security concern? It is useful here to refer to Buzan et al.'s definition of security:

' It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object (traditionally, but not necessarily the state, incorporating government, territory, and society). The special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them' (1998: 21).

Conceptualizing security as such posits that if a concern is deemed to be a security issue, it must be presented to and subsequently accepted by an audience: indeed, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde further clarify that ' securitization is not decided by the securitizer but by the audience' (1998: 31). In adopting their understanding of securitization as a speech act, we can see how this process creates rights, obligations and responsibilities which are decided not by the securitizer but by an audience (Buzan et al. 1998: 25-31).

Taking this approach, we can apply this framework in understanding why the need to find, secure and diversify energy supplies has been construed as a leading security concern for many states. As Luft and Korin note, energy security is very much ' in the eyes of the beholder' (2009: 1). By having a succinct critical framework for analysis, we are better able to understand the actions, reactions, and needs of states who consider their energy security to be threatened. What follows is a range of theoretical and analytical approaches for conceptualizing energy security.

2. 2 A Realist Scope

No IR theory accentuates the position of security more than realism, yet there is rarely a critical analysis by realists to explain what security actually means (Baldwin, 1997: 21). The presence of realism simply cannot be ignored when trying to frame the concept of energy security, and although it fails to address some of the key reasons as to why energy is a contemporary security concern, it is nonetheless a theoretical standpoint which has been synonymous with mid-twentieth century security studies (Baldwin, 1997: 9). Sustained by centuries of progressive and traditional thought, the realist stance is backed by great intellectual contributions from Rousseau, Thucydides, Hobbes and Machiavelli to name but a few (Deudney, 2011: 18). Realism is not a single theory, but a cluster of progressive theories with shared core values:

Realism focuses on power struggle, national interests, competition between states, and conflict over resources. To realists, international politics is characterised by a zero-sum game: one side's gain is the other side's loss. Therefore, relations between states can only produce competition and conflicts (Bathily, 2009: 185).

Realism is a state-centric theory, the classical premise of which declares that the international system is anarchic and within this system states strive for 'survival' and cannot rely upon other states, since every state has the potential to harm through use of military force (Mearsheimer: 1994/95: 9-10). Hans Morgenthau's contributions to the realist paradigm discuss the inherently flawed nature of humans, suggesting that our innate selfishness and desire for power leaves no room for moral principles when

understanding the behaviour of states (Morgenthau in Donnelly, 2000: 15-16). Donnelly further emphasises that, “ realism emphasizes the constraints on politics imposed by human nature” (2000: 9), demonstrating that if energy security is accepted as a realist security concern, states will strive for survival by resolving this issue without concern for moral or human principles.

Kenneth Waltz’s development of structural realism (also referred to as neo-realism) explains the international system by identifying a central and anarchic state, then subsequently relating this object to the interaction between constituent elements of the system (e. g. states in search of survival). These components are further characterised by the balance and distribution of power; in this context, their capability and proficiency in terms of seeking survival and energy security (Waltz in Booth, 2001: 5). The fundamental approaches to energy security under Waltz’s structural realism are summarised by Luft and Korin as follows:

- 1) States are inherently predisposed to egotism, and will therefore pursue hegemony through use of whatever powers they may possess.
- 2) Structural realists stress that energy commodities have historically held value beyond simply that of commercial pricing – they emphasise how resources have repeatedly been used strategically as means of directing foreign policy and asserting dominance.
- 3) Although realists will take into account the influence of mutual cooperation and independent institutions, they also maintain that culture, history, and economic tendencies and trends do play a crucial role and

cannot be ignored when understanding energy security needs and concerns (2009: 340).

Approaching energy security in such a manner allows us to see why states might prioritise energy security over other concerns; however the realist paradigm has always prioritised military security in their understanding of security as a whole. Engaging with strands of realist thought explains why self-interest of states and the struggle for dominance is an occurring theme in the international system, but the critical flaws of Waltz's structural realism lie in the fact that he largely discounts the importance of geography and geographical regions, while also paying little attention to technology as an influential shaping force (Deudney, 2011: 29-30). When endeavouring to find a position for energy security in a theoretical framework, it is evident that realism does not offer a fully logical and explanatory approach to the concept.

As mentioned earlier, Buzan (of the Copenhagen School of security studies) deems anarchy to be the key feature within the international system, and splits security concerns into 5 categories (political, military, societal, economic, environmental); energy security, however, is not explicitly identified within these categories (Buzan, 1991: 19). Although this categorization is evidently broadening the approach to security, a prominent weakness of the theory is its inability to account for the impact of other actors and structures on securitization, while giving too much attention to how international anarchy is constructed politically. The main critic of Buzan's work is Bill McSweeney, who claims that the key flaw within Buzan's

work is his inability to break away from the neo-realist assertion that the state is always the main object for analysis (2004: 123).

2.3 A Liberal Understanding

Liberalism and security are concepts which have in recent times both clashed and contradicted each other. Hyde-Price understands this to be a result of liberalism ' misunderstanding the nature of power' (2007: 16). The core value of classical liberalism are neatly summed up into four components up by Kelly:

All individuals are of equal and ultimate moral value.

This individualism is ethical and not sociological or psychological.

Equality of concern and respect is cashed out in terms of a set of basic rights, civil liberties and economic entitlements. These rights entail accompanying responsibilities and duties.

Ethical individualism and equality of concern and respect does not entail moral scepticism about objective values. It is instead concerned with the moral limitation of coercion or political power (2004: 13).

What can liberalism offer in terms of conceptualizing energy security? Bathily forms a coherent and persuasive argument for approaching it from a liberal perspective. They assert that liberalism in fact challenges the very notion of security in any form and suggest that the realist egocentrism, struggle for ' survival' and innate fear of external threat could be substituted by a so-called ' liberal logic,' wherein states maximise absolute gains and generally prioritise economic development over that of political. In doing this, they

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predict that traditional elements of security will become sidelined and therefore the security agendas will eventually become redundant. Liberals view naturally occurring resources such as oil to be strategically unimportant, given the frequent rate of discovery around the world. This consequently turns oil from an economic fortune to an ordinary commodity. They further believe that resource management is not the responsibility or the right of the governing body, and that management should be decentralized and democratized to multiple, non-governmental actors (2009: 183-184).

In some ways, the liberal take on energy security is a valid and applicable one. It explains why actors controlling the resource industry have freedom and independence from government decree - which is true in many states - and explains why the need for peaceful cooperation and mutual reliance is present in the international system today. What it fails to address, however, is the rising concern for resources in resource poor nations, which in turn has caused political instability, egocentric policy making, and the rise of resource nationalism (this will be examined further on). When trying to understand energy security, liberalism places too much emphasis on the importance of moral human nature in relation to political and resource-based relations, and does not provide enough focus on the importance of geographic, economic, regional and political involvement.

2. 4 Energy Security and the Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) offers a somewhat more contemporary and relevant approach to conceptualizing energy security. The

founding academic linked to this particular theory is Buzan, with further contributions from Wæver. “ A regional security complex has been defined as a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1991: 190). It is argued by Buzan and Wæver that the security complexes of states depend primarily on the pressures deriving from geographic proximity, and the interplay between the anarchic structure and how balances of power play out in the system. They view the world as regional clusters, whereby security complexes are magnified within these clusters (2003: 45-46).

Buzan and Wæver further clarify the central ideas of RSCT as follows:

“ The central idea in RSCT is that, since most threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones, security interdependence is normally into regionally based clusters: security complexes. [...] Process of securitization and thus the degree of security interdependence are more intense between actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and outside of it” (2003: 4)

Here, it is supposed that both mutual and rival interests can contribute towards the formation of such a region, and in this case, ensuring energy security would be one of those interests. A major benefit of RSCT is that it allows analysts to confront common conceptions and thus discuss security concerns between members of a given security complex - this dispels the overly generic assumptions of liberalism and realism, and suggests that the concept of energy security can be analysed and approached by varying

methods, but all within the scope of RSCT. Furthermore, applying Buzan's theory gives an explanation as to why security concerns vocalized by one state are frequently echoed around neighbouring states with a relatively short time frame (Sheehan, 2005: 49-50). The strengths of RSCT also lie in its ability to be adaptable and logical - RSCT, unlike the traditional theoretical approaches, does not rely on sweeping generalization of defining concept such as 'human nature.' RSCT confidently explains the occurrence of energy complexes and relations between two or more states within a region, and further demonstrates how energy has become 'securitized' within a given geographical area (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 31).

To classify an energy security complex, however, it is necessary to understand the nature and level of energy dependencies through studying the energy profile of a given state: e. g. the extent of external dependence, diversification possibilities, trade levels, domestic supplies etc. This in itself highlights the problematic nature of RSCT - if a state is said to have 100% dependency for, say, oil, this contributes to the securitization of energy. On the other hand, if oil only constitutes 10% of the state's energy profile, this brings about an entirely different view. Therefore, in order to analyse energy security from this standpoint we must choose whether it is more beneficial to group together major energy sources, or to base our understanding upon aggregate energy reliance of a given state. Further to this, it is crucial to acknowledge that energy security also entails a need for supply security and demand security. In addition, dependence can be both positive and negative between two or more states. While RSCT presents a plausible and applicable framework in terms of understanding energy security, it is limited in that it

does not address the interaction of states at a global level. With the possibility and indeed reality of constructing long energy export pipelines and transport energy by land and sea, we can see that energy (inter)dependence between states from different regions is both real and developing. Furthermore, it is undeniable that with the rise of globalization, the integration and transfer of knowledge, and the power of technology, energy security is not confined solely within regional complexes.

2. 5 Critical Security Studies (CSS)

Increasingly, IR theorists have been left searching for a concept to shed light on why structures and responses within the international society are increasingly determined by “ shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given in nature” (Wendt, 1991: 1). In contrast to the realist and neo-realist assumption that security is primarily defensive, traditional and in pursuit of hegemony, CSS significantly broadens the concept of security. It brings in the notion of ‘ instability-of-the-object’ within the international system, and conceptualizes security not as an absolute feature but as a constructed quality which is dependent on shared ideas rather than state-centric gain (McSweeney, 1991: 1). CSS has already been subject to diversification since its appearance in the 1990s, but several key aspects characterize this school of thought. They are summarised by Vaughan-Williams below as follows:

- The focus of analysis within CSS is called the referent object - this can be an actor, sector, or concept which requires securitization

- The broadening of security. This refers to the move away from narrow and traditional views of security defined in terms of military strength, and posits concerns within other sectors as security issue
- The normative approach suggests what must or ought to be secured and analysed.
- The derivative nature of security. This idea speculates that our methods of understanding the world have a profound effect on the way we approach and conceptualize security (2010: 4).