



The Evolution and Contested Nature of Security in International Relations: From Cold War Statism to Post-Cold War Interdependence

Abdelsalam Mohamed Elhudairi *

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Economics, University of Benghazi, Benghazi, Libya

تطور الأمن وطبيعته المتنازع عليها في العلاقات الدولية: من الدولة في الحرب الباردة إلى الترابط في مرحلة ما بعد الحرب الباردة

د. عبد السلام محمد الحضيري*
قسم العلوم السياسية، كلية الاقتصاد، جامعة بنغازي، بنغازي، ليبيا

*Corresponding author: abdelsalam.mohamed@uob.edu.ly

Received: June 23, 2026

Accepted: August 25, 2026

Published: September 09, 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract:

This paper examines the theoretical evolution of the concept of security within International Relations (IR), tracing its shift from rigid Cold War paradigms to broader post-Cold War realities. It analyzes how classical definitions were strictly state-centric and military-focused, primarily driven by Realist and Neo-Realist theories. The author explores the "essentially contested" nature of security, arguing that its definitions are often biased toward specific academic theories. By integrating Arnold Wolfers' standard definition and Johan Galtung's concepts of peace, the paper advocates for a neutral, comprehensive definition: "immunity from threats and threat perceptions". Finally, it outlines how modern forces—such as rapid globalization, the rise of non-Western powers, and power diffusion to non-state actors—have shifted the security focus from interstate military conflicts to complex, intrastate, and multi-dimensional threats.

Keywords: Contested Concept, Realism & Neo-Realism, National Security Post-Cold War Era, Globalization, Referent Object, Threat Perceptions.

المخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية التطور النظري لمفهوم الأمن في العلاقات الدولية، متتبعةً تحوله من نماذج الحرب الباردة الجامدة إلى واقع ما بعد الحرب الباردة الأوسع. وتحلل كيف كانت التعريفات الكلاسيكية تتمحور حول الدولة والجيش بشكل صارم، مدفوعة في المقام الأول بنظريات الواقعية والواقعية الجديدة. يستكشف المؤلف الطبيعة "المتنازع عليها" للأمن، مجادلًا بأن تعريفاته غالبًا ما تكون منحازة لنظريات أكاديمية محددة. ومن خلال دمج تعريف أرنولد وولفرز والفرز القياسي ومفاهيم يوهان غالتونغ للسلام، تدعو الورقة إلى تعريف محايد وشامل: "الحصانة من التهديدات وتصورات التهديدات". وأخيرًا، يبين البحث كيف حوّلت القوى الحديثة - كالعولمة المتسارعة، وصعود قوى غير غربية، وانتقال السلطة إلى جهات فاعلة غير حكومية - التركيز الأمني من الصراعات العسكرية بين الدول إلى تهديدات معقدة، داخلية، ومتعددة الأبعاد..

الكلمات المفتاحية: مفهوم متنازع عليه، الواقعية والواقعية الجديدة، الأمن القومي في حقبة ما بعد الحرب الباردة، العولمة، موضوع مرجعي، تصورات التهديد.

1. Introduction

Most complex, highly debated, and ambiguous ideas in the study of International Relations (IR). Derived from the Latin term *se-curus*, which historically signifies a state of being "without uneasiness" or liberated from risk, the modern application of the concept has been continuously fragmented by competing academic frameworks. Scholars have long struggled to establish a universal definition, primarily because most historical interpretations have been strictly tailored to fit specific theoretical agendas rather than capturing the holistic nature of the term. During the Cold War era, the intellectual discourse surrounding security was heavily dominated by traditional Realist and Neo-Realist paradigms.

Thinkers like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz established a state-centric framework where security was treated as strictly synonymous with military power, state sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Within this anarchic international system, the nation-state served as the sole "referent object" that required protection, and threats were viewed almost exclusively as military aggressions coming from external state actors. This reductionist approach championed concepts of statism, survival, and zero-sum self-help, enforcing the idea that national interest could only be preserved through competitive military capabilities. However, this conventional framework sparked intense academic debates, leading scholars like Barry Buzan to categorize security as an "essentially contested concept".

This designation implies that security is inherently value-laden, subjective, and lacks a fixed, universally agreed-upon definition. While some analysts argue over whether security should prioritize the individual over the state, or encompass economic and environmental dimensions, others—citing the critiques of David Baldwin—caution that its contested nature should not be an excuse for analytical vagueness. To overcome these theoretical biases, alternative definitions have sought neutrality; notably, Arnold Wolfers' landmark definition measures security objectively as the absence of threats to acquired values and subjectively as the absence of fear, ultimately simplifying the term as a general "immunity from threats and threat perceptions" across all levels of analysis.

The geopolitical shift following the collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally exposed the limitations of Cold War reductionism. In the post-Cold War era, the forces of rapid technological change and globalization have dramatically re-shaped the global landscape, transitioning the world into an interconnected global village.

This period has witnessed what Fareed Zakaria terms "the rise of the rest"—the economic emergence of non-Western powers—alongside a significant diffusion of power away from nation-states toward non-state actors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and transnational terrorist networks. Consequently, the traditional boundaries of national security have eroded; interstate wars have noticeably declined while complex intrastate conflicts and identity crises have surged, forcing modern security studies to expand its scope beyond military defense to incorporate political, economic, and social interdependence. Ultimately, this paper argues that while the core conceptual meaning of security—as immunity from threat—remains unchanged, the historical conditions of the twenty-first century have expanded the referent objects that security must encompass. By systematically exploring the conceptual definitions of security, analyzing its contested nature, and tracing the paradigm shift from Cold War military statism to post-Cold War multi-dimensional interdependence, this study provides a comprehensive overview of how international relations adapts to an ever-evolving landscape of global threats.

(1) Concept of Security

The word security is complex in nature and cannot be easily defined. It means different things to different people using different theories to define it. Attempt shall be made to examine the view of different scholars on the meaning of security in order to find out the weaknesses of their definitions and how they are theory-oriented definitions.

The English word "security" originates from the Latin word "*se-curus*". "Se" means "without" and "curus" means "uneasiness." That is, "security" originally meant liberation from uneasiness, or a

peaceful situation without any risks or threats. The English word "security" comprises of different meanings such as "to feel safe," and "to be protected" and is used to describe a situation without any risks or worries (Mesjasz C. 2004, p.4).

According to Berkowitz and Bock (1965, p.x) National security can be most fruitfully defined as the ability of a nation to protect its internal values from external threats. This is completely a realist idea of how security should be conceived. Security is viewed as a nation-state security (national security), how it can protect its internal values from external threat, which means that only state should be protected and threats only come from external sources.

Cohen and Tuttle (1972, p.1) security maybe defined as a protective condition, which statesmen either try to acquire or preserve in order to guard the various components of their polities from either external or internal threats. This is also a reductionist meaning of security where by only statesmen has to be protected. This is a realist meaning of security and this definition can only be meaningful during the cold war era. Security is broader in scope, level of analysis and sectors.

Ken Booth (2007) defined security as a 'survival –plus' the 'plus' being some freedom from life-determining threats, and therefore some life choices. This is more liberal meaning of security whereby the life of individual becomes the referent object to be protected alone. It is a reductionist meaning of security. Security' meaning should be simple and applicable to all theories and all sectors. In order to understand the meaning of security, it must not be a single theory-oriented in order to avoid the argumentative nature of the concept. Most of the given definition of security are borrowed from theories of international relation most especially realist approach, which makes the definition of security seems impossible. Security cannot be seen from the angle of nation-state alone (national security) but it must encompass all the level of analysis and all the different dimensions of threats.

In my own idea, security can be made similar to the meaning of peace. Looking at the meaning of peace not from liberal or neoliberal perspectives but from a general view. Johan Galtung proposed an important distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' peace. 'Positive' peace denotes the simultaneous presence of many desirable states of mind and society, such as harmony, justice, equity, etc. 'Negative' peace has historically denoted the 'absence of war' and other forms of wide scale violent human conflict. To be secured is to be at peace from every level analysis and all the sectors. Just as total peace is not possible, full security is not possible as well.

I will conclude the concept of security by preferably support a more comprehensive definition of security that was proposed by Arnold Wolfers (1962). This definition has become a "standard" in IR theory (Møller 2001): "Security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked". Security is the absence of threats and threat perceptions to the stability of the international system, state or countries and individual. These definitions are considered to better than others because of their nature of neutrality from theories and they are applicable to every sector of security and all the levels of analysis. In a simple term, security can be defined as immunity from threats and threat perceptions.

2. Is Security a Contested Concept?

The term 'contested concept' means a value-laden concept that refers to the idea that a particular concept (in this case of security) doesn't have an agreed, fixed, definition. On the contrary, different individuals and groups may define the concept in different ways, depending on such factors as how they want to use the concept, whether they are aiming for an objective or subjective definition. Barry Buzan points out in his article titled; People, States and Fear, that security is an "essentially contested" concept. Since then, scholars who try to clarify the meaning of security in order to understand changes and continuities in terms of security practices have generally accepted this Gallie-inspired definition. However Buzan's assumption by itself obscures the meaning of security for the sake of analytical clarity (Korkmaz V, 2007, p.24).

Every concept in social science is contested considering the meaning of a contested concept. There has never been a universal meaning of a concept in social science whereby we have different meanings by

different scholars on a single concept. Maybe security as a concept is more contested in nature than others is argumentative. But the fact that the concept of security is contested in nature doesn't make it exceptional in social science. Security is contested because of a broad meaning and ambiguous nature of the concept. There are countless of definitions of security from different authors using different theories of international relations to justify their postulations. According to Baldwin (1997, p.10) argues against contested nature of security using two facts;

Firstly, a contested concept must be appraisive which means; it must accredit some kind of valued achievement. Gallie WB was cited by Baldwin to explain this point using a Champion in sport as an example. To be a champion among many in the competition means the team plays better than the rest. This is regarded to be a neorealist idea of security whereby every state contest for security and the one with highest security is the champion. According to Wolfers as cited by Baldwin, state has different values they place on security and while some state are interested in acquiring more values than protecting the present values in the state. This illustration shows that for a state to have more security than the others does not make it better than the rest, it just explains how much value such a state place on security. "For Wolfers international politics is not a 'game' in which all states play by the same 'rules' and compete for the same championship" (Baldwin, D.1997, p.10-11).

Secondly, to regard a concept as contested, it has to do with the defining characteristic of such concept which means it must create many disputes and challenges in its nature and its applicability to various cases. According to Gallie as cited by Baldwin, essential contested concept involves more than a concept having different views by many authors. And the contemporary public policy that debate whether environment, budget deficits, crime or drug traffic should be considered as national security does not make the concept to be contested. In another word, even if security is regarded as a contested concept, that should not be an excuse for anyone not to have his/her own conception of security as clearly and precisely as possible (Baldwin, D.1997, p.11).

There are many reasons of considering security as a contested concept. Security as a political idea that can be used to protect and foster political interest. The ambiguous nature of the concept itself, which has two contradictory meaning that is security, is known in the state of insecurity. Buzan buttressed more on this by explaining whether security should include between individual and the state, national and international security, violent means and peaceful means etc. Korkmaz V. (2007, p.25) the debate on the understanding of security is not simply supposing that security is one of the essentially contested" concepts. Rather, the task is to eliminate the vagueness by giving a definition of the term that will permit a decision as to its applicability in a given situation"

3. Traditional Conceptions Of Security During The Cold War? (Realism And Neo-Realism).

Security was overwhelmingly a matter of the state's sovereignty, its territorial integrity and its political autonomy during the cold war. Realism focuses on inter-state conflicts and all through the cold war era security was conceived as being coterminous with military security as against other states' military power (Booth, 2005, 2). Realism argues for military power as the main tool of maintaining state's sovereignty and security is basically nation-state, which is national security. According to realism, the main duty of a state is to protect its citizen from external threats. National interest of a state is what that matters and this is about military power of a state. The military strength of a state is further explained as the state' political instrument of demonstrating strength, fostering counter threats, guarantee of domestic security, deter external attack, maintaining territorial integrity, preserving peace, and acquisition of prestige. Military power is also an instrument using in diplomatic negotiations, and as political propaganda. In other words, 'war and military violence are seen as being rational tools of foreign and security policy' (Sheehan, 2005, 44) cited by (Saleh, A. 2010, p.230).

In terms of level of analysis, only states are the principal actors in the world politics and there is no authority higher than them. This is the absence of hierarchy in the state system known as anarchy, which does not necessarily means violence or war but simply means that states are sovereign political entities. Power is the main goal that dominated states' thinking and compete for power (military) is the main target of states within international system. And there is zero-sum quality to the competition. States corporate with each other within international system but on the fact that they have conflicting

interests and not harmony of interest. War is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. Hans Morgenthau a classical realist scholar and Kenneth Waltz a neorealist scholar are both prominent scholars in these ideas. According to Morgenthau, states are hardwired with an insatiable lust for power, which makes them seek to maximize their share of power. And according to Waltz, neorealist idea, which is the new form of realism, explains that the structure of the system causes states to compete for power but states should not strive to maximize power. Instead, they should aim at controlling an appropriate amount of power (Mearsheimer J.J 2002, p.25).

In conclusion, Realist conception of security, which is also known as conventional security or traditional meaning of security that dominated security studies during the cold war can be summarized as follows; Statism; the idea that nation-state are the principal and unitary actors of international politics (state-centric approach). Survival; the idea that international system is maintained by anarchy, which means that there is no centralized authority. And Lastly Self-help, the idea that a state cannot rely on any other state for help so a state would do everything possible to survive by itself within international environment. There cannot be cooperation among states but competition alone.

4. Security After the Cold War

At the aftermath of the cold war, there is a general consensus in the literature and world community that the meaning of security has changed dramatically. It is a fact that focusing on state as main referent objects of security and military power as the only national interest of state had been challenged. Anderson N. (2012) presents an interesting analysis about the emergence of the new threats that led to the decline of military threats in the aftermath of the cold. The wave of globalization has led many analysts to challenge the traditional conception of security (Baldwin 1995, 118; Buzan 1984, 109; Mathews 1989, 162). These authors argued that the conception of security during the cold war is not sufficient to deal with the modern world's security problems. They buttressed on the fact that, in order to deal with the twenty-first century, there is need for a more comprehensive and broader meaning of security that will encompass the increasing number of threats to an increasing number of actors.

This requires the need to ask the question of what changes took place at the aftermath of cold war that incapacitated the traditional conception of security? The first point to discuss is the influence of globalization. This can be defined as the “widening, deepening, and speeding up” of economic, political, and social interconnectedness among individuals, groups, organizations, states, and other important actors in the international system (Naím 2009, 28; Brown 2008, 45). It is a technology-driven phenomenon, that is, the rapid rate of technological change that facilitated the explosion of connection across the globe (Naím 2009, 29). From these definitions, we can outline the influence of economic, political and social whereby globalization has been defined by a rapid expansion of global economic interconnectedness, with trade, investment, global production, and international aid bringing states, organizations, firms, and individuals closer together than ever before. And while some argue this is a positive force for peace (Brooks 1999; Koo 2009).

Globalization has reduced the world to a global village, whereby people around the world are connected in one-way or the others. And conflict in one state can affect the neighbouring states as well international environment in general. People around the world have been brought together through travel, trade, academic exchange, and the explosive growth of transnational nongovernmental organizations. This is the reason why Samuel Huntington wrote his on clash of civilization, which explains that the coming together of different cultures in the world will lead to cultural conflict. Globalization changes the nature of threats from military interstate war to individual identity crisis.

The second point to discuss is what Fareed Zakaria (2009) has termed, “the rise of the rest”: the economic emergence of a number of non-Western powers, from Brazil to Indonesia, South Africa to Turkey. After the fall of Soviet Union, the world entered into the unipolarity system whereby United States only dominated the military, political, and economic power. But in the present era, according to the National Intelligence Council's Global Trends 2025 report, we are witnessing a global shift in relative economic power, “roughly from west to east,” and are approaching a truly multipolar economic order (NIC 2008, 7, 12).

The third point to discuss is the changing nature of power, which Joseph Nye (2011, xv) characterizes as “a power transition among states and a power diffusion away from all states.” While the more-historically-familiar power transition is resulting in an entirely different distribution of capabilities (Gilpin 1981; Zakaria 2009), the more-novel power diffusion has led some to talk of “shrunk sovereignty” (Barber 2009) and others of a reactionary, state-centric “return of history” (Kagan 2008; see also Bremmer 2009). The rise of a variety of non-state actors, such as multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and terrorist networks, has also led Richard Haass (2008) to describe the twenty-first century as the “age of nonpolarity,” one in which many centers of power exist that are not and need not to be nation states (cited by Anderson N. 2012, p.30).

These factors explained the reasons for the shift in security studies, which put an end to realist and neorealist conception of security during the cold war. Theorists and practitioners now tend to think of security internationally, recognizing that much of the modern world is defined by complex political, economic, and social interdependence (Baldwin 1995, 131). In conclusion, the era, at which security is considered as national security, which is state-centric and stable borders have passed. Threats are no longer coming from the external attacks or aggressions anymore but now emanated within the state. This led to the decline in military power whereby inter-state conflicts reduced and intra-state conflicts increased. The increase of intrastate conflicts led to the need for peace operations as a mechanism of solving global conflicts.

The definition of security has not change whether during the cold war or at the aftermath of the cold war. If security is defined as immunity from threats and threats perception then this explains the nature of threat during the cold war and at the aftermath. The reasons why definition of security is considered to change after the cold war is based on theoretical oriented definition of security, which was majorly realist or neo-realist. What has really changed is not the basic meaning behind security but the referent object at which security needs to encompass is broaden due to some conditions explained above.

Conclusion:

this paper has systematically demonstrated that while the foundational essence of security—conceptualized as immunity from threats and threat perceptions—remains fundamentally unchanged, its application, scope, and referent objects have undergone a dramatic transformation over time. Throughout the Cold War era, the discourse was rigid, reductionist, and thoroughly monopolized by Realist and Neo-Realist paradigms. This traditional approach restricted security to a state-centric and military-focused dimension, where sovereign states operated under the rules of anarchy, survival, and zero-sum self-help to protect their territorial borders from external state aggressions. However, as the historical analysis highlights, evaluating security solely through a single theoretical lens inevitably trapped the concept within intense academic disagreements, obscuring its broader analytical clarity. By exploring the ontological question of whether security is an “essentially contested concept,” the paper underscores that the term is inherently value-laden and subjective, yielding multiple definitions across different scholars and political agendas. Yet, as argued through the critical perspectives of David Baldwin, the lack of a universal consensus must not serve as an excuse for analytical vagueness or conceptual ambiguity.

To transcend these deep-seated theoretical biases, a more comprehensive, objective, and neutral definition is achieved by synthesizing Arnold Wolfers’ standard formulation—which balances the objective absence of threats to acquired values with the subjective absence of fear—alongside Johan Galtung’s vital distinction between positive and negative peace. Under this integrated view, achieving true security requires looking past the nation-state alone to encompass every level of analysis, from the individual to the international system as a whole. The geopolitical realities of the post-Cold War era ultimately catalyzed the necessity for this paradigm shift. The multi-dimensional forces of rapid technological advancement and dense globalization have transformed the international arena into a highly interconnected global village. The contemporary era is no longer defined by a rigid unipolar or bipolar order, but rather by “the rise of the rest”—signaling a massive shift in relative economic strength from West to East—and a profound diffusion of power away from states toward volatile non-state actors

like multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and transnational terrorist networks. Consequently, traditional physical borders have eroded; interstate military wars have steadily declined, giving way to a sharp increase in complex intrastate conflicts, identity crises, and structural threats that originate from within state boundaries. Ultimately, the traditional, militaristic, and state-centric security framework of the twentieth century is completely inadequate for handling the complex vulnerabilities of the modern world. What has evolved is not the core meaning of security itself, but the broad variety of actors and diverse sectors—political, economic, environmental, and social—that must now be safeguarded. To navigate this age of non-polarity and complex global interdependence, both international relations theorists and policymakers must permanently abandon the reductionist views of the past, embracing a holistic, multi-level approach to security that recognizes peace and human survival as deeply shared, globally interconnected responsibilities.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mearsheimer, J.J (2002) "Realism, the Real World, and the Academy," in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey, eds., *Realism and Institutionalism in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 25.
- [2] Baldwin, D. (1997). *The Concept of Security*, *Review of International Studies*, 23, 5-26.
- [3] Saleh, A. (2010). *Broadening the Concept of Security: Identity and Societal Security*. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Volume: 6, No 4, p.230.
- [4] Anderson N. (2012). "Re-redefining" International Security: Bringing Intent back In. *The Josef Korbel Journal of Advanced International Studies*, Volume 4, p.28-32.
- [5] Mathews, J. T. (1989). "Redefining Security." *Foreign Affairs*, 68, (2): 162-177.
- [6] Baldwin, D.A. (1995). "Security Studies at the End of the Cold War." *World Politics*, 48: 117-141.
- [7] Naím, M. (2009). "Think Again: Globalization." *Foreign Policy*, pp. 28-32.
- [8] Zakaria, F. (2009). *The Post-American World*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- [9] National Intelligence Council. 2008. *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- [10] Korkmaz V. (2007). How the Understanding of 'Security' Changes over Space and Time: The Role of Identity in International Relations (IR). <http://www.mgimo.ru/fileserver/books/rami4konvent/t2-korkmaz.pdf> p.24-25.
- [11] Mesjasz C (2004). Security as an Analytical Concept. Paper presented at the 5th Pan-European conference on International Relations, in The Hague, 9-11 September 2004. p.4
- [12] Edmunds T (2006). What are armed forces for? The Changing Nature of Military Roles in Europe. *International Affairs* 82: 6, 1059–1075.
- [13] Buzan B; Waever O. & Wilde J.D (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner.
- [14] Tsai Y.T (2009). The emergence of Human Security: A Constructivist View. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Volume 14, Number 2, 20-21.
- [15] Oberleitner, G. (2005). Human Security: A Challenge to International Law? *Global Governance*, Vol. 11 (2), p. 185–203.
- [16] Pairs, R. (2001). Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air? *International Security*, Vol. 26 (2), p. 87–102.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of JIBAS and/or the editor(s). JIBAS and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.