NATO, Security and Risk Management. From Kosovo to Kandahar

Corry, Olaf

Published in:
International Political Sociology

Publication date:
2010

Citation for published version (APA):
in addition to the role of the external environment, a common notion of political community or *demos* is necessary for democratisation to proceed and not to produce ethnic conflict. Drawing on John Burton’s human needs theory, she also argues that the impact of democratisation depends on whether the conflict is interest-based or needs-based, with the development of democracy unlikely to resolve the latter. Given that her study is based on only two case studies, these are some fairly bold generalised conclusions. That said, Engström makes clear that the case studies are intended to act as theory-generating devices (p. 137) and one presumes, although she does not explicitly state this, that her intention is that these conclusions be tested on further cases. In this vein, her book could usefully be recommended to postgraduate or advanced undergraduate students planning research projects.

In addition to her theoretical contribution, Engström’s investigation of the Bulgarian and Macedonian cases is valuable in itself, providing a welcome insight into these under-studied cases. With many scholars opting to research cases characterised by the outbreak of violent conflict, it is refreshing to read about instances where the ending is happier, even if the good story comes with caveats. Engström’s study makes an important theoretical contribution to the literature and advances our understanding of the Bulgarian and Macedonian cases. As such, it is highly recommended.

LAURENCE COOLEY

Laurence Cooley is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Michael J. Williams, *NATO, Security and Risk Management: From Kosovo to Kandahar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 160 pp., $140.00 hbk).

Applying risk-society ideas to the business of war and security is an obvious thing to do – if ‘world risk society’ is one in which manufactured risks and the management of possible futures become central to politics, then this has obvious implications for the politics of war and security. In this volume, the author builds convincingly on a growing body of risk-security literature to produce a recent history of NATO that explains and comments on the organisation’s difficulties and changes since the end of the Cold War.

The problem faced by NATO in the 1990s was not only that its main enemy had crumbled, but also that a wholly different way of thinking about security was emerging – one that did not chime well with the traditional military alliance structure and rule book with which NATO had remained encumbered. From Kosovo to Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO set about not so much dealing with a direct or imminent threat from a
foe with a stable geographical base, as managing amorphous risks in a fluid and nebulous environment. In Kosovo, there was vague unease at the potential for future ‘instability’ in Europe. NATO members had differing interpretations of this, and varying risk cultures led to damaging disagreement on policy and tactics. After 9/11, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan posed no conventional military threat but represented a risk, having harboured the mentors of the perpetrators of the World Trade Center attacks. Again, risk management is NATO’s aim but widely differing perceptions and strategies continue to hamper its major defining mission in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the author argues that war was based on a precautionary principle of proactively preventing the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) being developed by a hostile regime. From a traditional realist perspective, the attack on an effectively contained Saddam Hussein always looked rash and unnecessary. From a risk perspective, it made sense, the author argues: there could have been a threat from the Iraqi regime and although time has shown that the threat was effectively contained, the uncertainty was real at the time. But, as a defensive pact, NATO was not geared to acting proactively and out of area on the basis of risk and uncertainty, which was consistently interpreted in widely differing ways by NATO members. In Kosovo, it was impossible to agree on common terms of engagement. In Iraq, NATO was split on whether to engage at all. Williams concludes that, given the arrival of the risk paradigm, NATO is in terminal decline unless new norms and rules for action geared towards flexible risk management can be agreed upon.

This book works well both as an introduction to risk security and as a study of NATO and recent trouble in the transatlantic relationship. While it does not claim to develop an IR theory of security as such (p. 7), it is an impressively systematic application of the risk-society concepts to a major security actor. In fact, the newly appointed secretary-general of NATO would do well to read it. Williams makes very clear the major challenges NATO faces: managing hazy clusters of risks in faraway locations, involving a set of actors with differing cultures and risk perceptions locked into an organisation designed for another era. The boomerang effect – when risk management efforts generate new risks, like the terrorism and chaos in Iraq after Saddam – is also an important problem for NATO that risk theory highlights admirably.

If there is one weakness, the book could have reflected more critically on the intellectual basis on which it relies. For instance, how much does ‘old-fashioned’ threat-deterrence logic actually persist, for example in arguments put forward for the maintenance of nuclear arsenals? Why, if security is now thought of in terms of risks not threats, was Iraq presented to the world as an imminent and impending threat to the West? It seems that, rather than replacing the idea of threats, risks have joined the fray in the security field.

Secondly, there is a risk that risk discourse emanating from political actors is taken at face value by risk theorists. Risk discourse could instead be seen as self-justification rather than historical explanation. For Williams, ‘(t)he logic of the war against Iraq in 2003 is only difficult to understand if one uses an outdated framework for analysis’ (p. 101). Citing President Bush’s rhetoric as evidence of the risk paradigm, he
argues that ‘the scenario of what could happen becomes the impetus for action in the present’ (p. 103). This assumes that the public legitimation of war put forward by Bush and the ‘impetus for action’ are roughly the same. What if Iraq was about oil, not the constructed risk of WMD?

More generally, there is a potential problem concerning the level and ambition of explanation. Explaining specific policies as the result of a general sociological shift into ‘risk society’ involves a jump from meta-societal discourse to policy level that inevitably relies on intermediate factors affecting foreign policy. The author is therefore right to say that the risk-security perspective is not a theory of international relations in itself. But in terms of getting a handle on what states are making of anarchy at the moment and how military action is justified, it is a powerful set of ideas fully deserving of more attention.

T. O. Corry

T. O. Corry teaches at the universities of Copenhagen and Cambridge.


According to Barry Buzan (‘Peace, Power, and Security: Contending Concepts in the Study of International Relations’, *Journal of Peace Research* 21, no. 2 [1984]: 124), security has been viewed as a synthesis of two old concepts, power and peace, in the study of international relations. Compared to either concept, security is a more comprehensive term that can embrace both ideas, creating a common ground for the understanding of problems in international relations (ibid., 109). However, despite the remarkable contribution it could make in the ongoing debates, security remains a contested concept due to the fact that its scope can be widened and the referents can be deepened. In this sense, security encapsulates an inherent tension between explaining everything and nothing. Also, as Neack frequently describes, security has a highly elusive nature: the concept remains dominated by state-centric theorising (national security being the primary level of analysis in the international system) even as human security gains greater legitimacy (p. 1).

With a comprehensive illustration of security at the national, international and human levels throughout the chapters, the author skilfully debates the problem of national-centric security coexisting with international or human security concerns. The state remains the ‘first’ actor in the system, and the international system and human beings are relegated to serve the interests of the state. Drawing on peacekeeping operations undertaken in the 1990s, Neack demonstrates how the United Nations protects the security of the great power states at the expense of lesser states. In addition, the idea of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) fails to promote the state and international responsibility to protect people