The Politicisation of Security: Controversy, Mobilisation, Arena Shifting

Introduction by the Guest Editors

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Abstract: While security has always been political, it has for the most part been considered a special kind of politics that closes down political activity and debate. This introduction reviews recent theoretical and empirical developments to argue that a research agenda that re-engages security through the prism of politicisation is better able to elucidate the growing range of actors, arenas and arguments visible in contemporary security governance. Based on recent literatures from Political Science and European Studies that—so far—have been largely ignored by Security Studies, it develops an analytical framework around three dimensions: controversy, mobilisation and arena-shifting. It showcases the relevance of this perspective through brief empirical illustrations on the post-Snowden controversy, public participation on security strategy-making, and the role of parliaments in security policy. The overall aim is to reopen conceptual questions on the relationship between security and politics, inspire innovative empirical work to study the diverse politics around security, and allow for more differentiated normative inquiries into the ambivalent consequences of politicisation.

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Introduction

Security is often seen as a special kind of politics, given its apparent tendency to close down public debate, rely on exclusive expert knowledge, and empower exceptional measures. However, recent empirical developments have challenged these assumptions. There has always been periodically intense political activity around security, especially in relation to temporary spikes in public debates and clashes related to the use of military force, large-scale military spending or highly-publicised security and intelligence scandals. Yet, with the widening and deepening of what it means to speak ‘security’ and the increasing value that states and societies attach to the concept, security themes have become more prominent in a wide range of political activities and arenas, including the agendas of parliaments, courts, and NGOs. These have become more vividly debated by parties, civil society groups, newspapers and broadcasters, and are given increasingly polarised and viral spins on social media platforms. For example, parliaments in many countries have published reports and held inquiries on some of the more controversial aspects of the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’, such as ‘enhanced interrogation’ or the ‘blacklisting’ of terrorist suspects. The revelations by Edward Snowden on mass surveillance by Western intelligence agencies led to intensive public debates. European courts at different levels have ruled against new laws for the retention of telecommunications data and the transfer of passenger name records. In the United States, President Trump’s executive order of the ‘Muslim travel ban’ ignited intense public protests at airports and elsewhere. At the same time, many right-wing populist movements have also challenged security elites, arguing that security authorities were not doing enough, rather than too much. These movements usually demand even harsher security measures, including the targeting of minority groups. This is part of a broader trend. Security has been a central and controversial concern in recent elections, including in Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands, and during the ‘Brexit’ referendum. Beyond such political drama, a growing range of diverse actors now deal with security on a regular basis, for example in parliamentary committee work or public consultation processes, thereby resembling familiar patterns of ‘normal’ democratic politics seen in other policy-fields.

These observations go against the accepted scholarly understanding that security is necessarily a domain of sovereign decision, professional prerogative or control technology that marginalises more ‘normal’ forms of (democratic) politics. Earlier

research in Political Science and Public Policy had occasionally flagged up the potential link between security and wider political debates and processes, such as the extent of parliamentary control on military deployments, the influence of public opinion and protests during the Cold War, or the local, national and international political economies of defence procurement. However, these debates remained marginal, and studies tended to focus on ‘traditional’ issues of national security and did not engage with wider conceptual discussions about ‘security’ and its political effects. Among security studies researchers there is a strong understanding that, generally speaking, security narratives have powerful effects on political and social life; weighing the normative components of observed security politics, many contemporary security scholars equate security with inevitable constraints on democratic politics, public debate and political struggle. In this sense, security as a dominant framing is, by and large, considered a problem for, or even removed from, democratic politics. As a consequence of this scholarly view, surprisingly few studies exist today on how security articulations are or can be contested, engaged across different political arenas, and taken up by diverse political actors, such as courts, parliaments, NGOs and individual political leaders. Taking a cue from empirical developments and focusing on European contexts, this special issue seeks to draw attention to a broader universe of actors, arguments and arenas of security politics that extend beyond securitised exceptions, technocratic risk management or executive prerogatives. Rather than focusing on the diverse ways in which security limits politics, the contributors address the varied forms and modes of politics that increasingly emerge in and around security. Instead of looking at security as closure, we propose an understanding of security as a field of political activity occupied by diverse actors mobilised in different kinds of struggles, and in which political conflicts can shift across arenas. Seen this way, political closure might be one possible outcome, but it should not simply be presumed and taken for granted.

In order to capture a broader range of political controversy, activity, and actors linked to security, this special issue suggests using the conceptual vocabulary of politicisation, rather than traditional security studies concepts such as securitisation, governmentality or control. In so doing, it connects security studies to political studies literatures often ignored by the subfield—especially research on politicisation and de-politicisation in liberal democracies and on the politicisation of international institutions and European governance—and explores their utility for analysing current

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8 Pieter de Wilde, “No Polity for Old Politics? A Framework for Analyzing the Politicization of European
security-related political phenomena. Taken together, the politicisation perspective advanced by this special issue thus endeavours to make three contributions to current theoretical, empirical and normative debates on security politics: First, it seeks to reopen conceptual questions about the relationship between security and politics. Acknowledging the historical legacy of ‘security’ as domain of sovereign decision, influential critiques of national security as a tool of social and political exclusion, and the expansion of security governance technologies and expertise, it foregrounds overlooked developments of increasing and diversifying political activity around security. Rather than starting from security studies perspectives emphasising the marginalisation of politics by security, it point to the literature on politicisation as alternative vantage points for analysing recent dynamics in the security field. Second, it aims to empower original and contextualising empirical work. Apart from the question of whether security is politicised or not, we need to understand when, why, how and by whom security is made more controversial, opened to debate by different actors, and shifted to different political arenas. Third, the politicisation perspective seeks to de-centre the focus from an a priori view on security as a loss of democratic ideals; ideals that are often presupposed and yearned for, but whose precise past and potential configurations are rarely investigated in detail (and are sometimes quite romanticised). Rather, it calls for more differentiated inquiries into the ambivalent consequences and normative implications of politicisation in its different guises, which cannot simply be presumed to be a normatively preferable option.

To these aims, the introduction first summarises existing arguments that tend to associate security with depoliticisation. It then draws on different approaches from political science to develop a framework for the study of politicisation in the security field emphasising three aspects: controversiality, mobilisation, and arena-shifting. These dimensions are illustrated with brief case studies on public controversies surrounding the revelations by Edward Snowden, the mobilisation of lay publics in the making of national security strategies, and parliaments as an arena of ‘normal’ security politics. The introduction concludes with a short preview of the special issue’s six research articles and their contributions to the analysis of security and politics.

Security versus Politics: The Depoliticisation Argument

Contemporary security analysis often links security to strategies of depoliticisation. Depoliticisation essentially refers to processes that seek to deny the political character of a topic and move the issue out of the realm of contingent and controversial discussion. Depoliticisation itself is a deeply political act that can be contested and

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