Premises, Policies and Multilateral Whitewashing of Broad Security Doctrines: A Southeast Asia-Based Critique of “Non-traditional” Security

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Abstract: This article highlights the formulation of comprehensive conceptions of security in Indonesia, Malaysia and within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), well before their academic conceptualisation. These security doctrines have been the basis of the consolidation of state and military apparatuses in the region. They tend to be overlooked by analyses praising the recent conversion of Southeast Asian political elites to the “non-traditional security” agenda. This latter development is perceived as a source of multilateral cooperation and a substitute for the hardly operationalisable concept of human security. However, in the region, non-traditional security proves to be a semantic evolution rather than a policy transformation. At the core of ASEAN’s security narrative, it has provided a multilateral anointing of “broad” but not deepened conceptions of security, thus legitimising wide-ranging socio-political roles for the armed forces.

Keywords: Southeast Asia; Non-traditional security; ASEAN; security studies

Introduction

The security concept has been among the most permeable to the conceptual and practical innovations that have renewed the practice and the study of international relations over the past two decades. Invigorated by a variety of critical approaches, the study of security has been “structured, systemized, broadened, deepened, gendered, humanized, constructed, and privatized”; with each new contribution inviting us to rethink its ontology, epistemology and methodology. As for the actors and reference objects of security policies, they have evolved under the combined influences of

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globalisation and the expansion of the agendas of international organisations, which have prompted the emergence of new concepts of collective security, comprehensive security, non-traditional security and human security, in addition to the conventional notion of national security. Nevertheless, while the concept of security can only be fully understood in the light of its socio-historical context and the meaning actors bestow upon it, few studies provide a non-Western perspective on these developments and their theoretical implications. The Westphalian lens is presented as the starting point for approaches conventionally focused on the state and military protection of its borders, including in work calling for the broadening of this perspective.

The Eurocentrism of the field has of course been widely criticised, through invitations to take into account issues specific to the Third World and the South, and calls to renew the conceptualisation of security by integrating the contributions of postcolonial or global perspectives. But the recurring calls to “provincialize Europe”, to include “non-Western” perspectives or to “globalize” the study of international relations, have had but a marginal effect on the core of security studies, which are essentially grounded in European and North American references. The numerous studies addressing security issues in Asia, Africa and Latin America thus tend to stick to a sequential pattern according to which the formation of the state and the territorialisation of its sovereignty determine the conceptualisation of security and precede its possible widening.

This unilinear perspective has a performative effect, including for approaches that call for a “widening” and “deepening” of security’s referent objects and actors.

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4 On the conceptual reversal brought about by human security by focusing on the individual as its referent-object, see Basty F., “La sécurité humaine: Un renversement conceptuel pour les relations internationales”, Raisons politiques 4/2008 (n° 32), pp. 35–57.
9 Chakrabarty D., Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007 (2nd ed.).