Technology, Non-State Actors and the Crisis of Liberal Governance: Security and Conflict Studies in the Twenty-First Century

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Security and conflict have long been central concerns of political science and international relations. Initially, scholars approached security studies from a top-down perspective, looking either at the global systemic level and its power relationships or at the level of states and their strategic interests, material resources, and military or policing capabilities (e.g., see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979). Yet newer works have moved the focus away from global trends towards securitization processes unfolding within states, and from state-centric approaches to the role of non-state actors (e.g., see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War*, 2010). Today, non-traditional security threats—such as cyberattacks, economic instability, terrorism, and far-right extremism—occupy a central place in academic inquiry. New technological advancements, the emergence of local actors with global reach, and the crisis of liberal governance at home and abroad require a renewed scholarly effort that transcends traditional paradigms within the study of security and conflict and embraces interdisciplinary approaches.

Many books reviewed in this issue pursue these lines of inquiry, examining the interactions between macro- and micro-level actors, as well as the securitization occurring both within and between states. These works contribute novel insights into the multifaceted nature of security today, addressing the complex realities of conflict in "glocal" contexts. They revisit the traditional concept of deterrence in light of new technologies, gauge the likelihood for cyberwarfare, open the black box of non-state actors to dig deeper into their global networks and local roles, and reexamine practices of securitization against perceived external and internal threats in the context of an emergent crisis of liberal governance.

Technology, Deterrence, and Cyberwarfare

A particularly pressing area of investigation is the intersection of technology, security, and conflict. From the weaponization of artificial intelligence to the use of social media as tools for propaganda and military mobilization, the digital age has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of conflict and the possibilities for securing populations, territories, and assets. The integration of novel technologies into the fabric of conflict, including AI, autonomous weapons systems, and surveillance technologies, is changing how states approach security, and how scholars think about securitization. Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay's *The Elements of Deterrence: Strategy, Technology, and Complexity in Global Politics*—the subject of a symposium in this issue—broadens the concept of deterrence at the backdrop of complex technological developments in modern war. For them, deterrence encompasses a multitude of political effects not traditionally associated with deterrence, reaching across the domains of land, sea, air, and, notably, cyberspace. As Roseanne W. McManus notes in the symposium, Gartzke and Lindsay seek "to change how we fundamentally think about deterrence". Per Jan Ludvic's review, the authors' central argument—that "deterrence is not a simple, monolithic strategy but rather a bundle of different goals and practices" (p. 5)—shows the trade-offs inherent to deterrence strategies. Janice Stein, Lauren Sukin, and Stephen L. Quackenbush highlight in their reviews the value of exploring the tension between "winning" and "warning". The tools that states need to win a war are not necessarily equivalent to those they need to deter one. As a result, the optimal "integrated deterrence" strategy is bound to fail, and policymakers are advised to consider these trade-offs.

Moving from deterrence to escalation, Erica D. Lonergan and Shawn W. Lonergan in *Escalation Dynamics in Cyberspace* challenge the prevailing belief that cyber attacks inevitably provoke escalation or outright cyber warfare. They make a compelling argument that state responses to cyber attacks tend to be delayed, measured, and non-military, often employing economic or legal tools instead. Finally, in a novel

contribution to existing cyber security frameworks, Lonergan and Lonergan offer a more optimistic perspective on how cyber operations can be utilized to manage tensions in international politics without the need for military conflict. As Jon R. Lindsay observes in his review, "if cyber threat activity is a symptom of strategic stability rather than a harbinger of disaster, then cyber strategy may be overdue for an overhaul."

Finally, James Johnson's book, *AI and the Bomb: Nuclear Strategy and Risk in the Digital Age*, addresses what reviewers Erica D. Lonergan and Shawn W. Lonergan identify as "perhaps the most dangerous and important aspect of AI's integration into military capabilities: its implications for nuclear deterrence and escalation." The integration of AI technologies into government capabilities and processes has introduced significant uncertainty regarding its impact on international conflict and stability. AI transforms the volume, speed, and scale at which states collect and process information, with potentially profound implications for decisions and capabilities that historically relied on human intervention—particularly those involving the use of lethal, and potentially nuclear, force. Johnson's book puts forward novel hypotheses of how AI may influence strategic stability, deterrence, and escalation, inspiring further research on how AI is reshaping traditional concepts in international security.

"Glocal" Non-State Actors in Conflict

Twenty-first century wars and conflict in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria all underscore the multifaceted nature of modern warfare. In these contexts, geopolitical rivalries, asymmetric tactics, and humanitarian consequences are deeply intertwined. An increasing number of books account for these complex social dynamics while navigating the interplay between global and local tensions, the "glocalization" of conflict actors, and the context-specific considerations of securitization.

The three books reviewed in Raphaël Lefèvre's essay on "Armed Groups in the Middle East and Conflict Research" highlight crucial distinctions between different types of actors and diverse glocalization processes, effectively exploring what Lefèvre characterizes as the "black box" of armed groups. By examining the case of nationalist and leftist Palestinian guerrilla organizations, such as Fatah, Sarah Parkinson's *Beyond the Lines* illustrates how everyday ties, informal structures, and "alternative organizational hierarchies" sustain such groups, even in the face of state repression. In turn, Jérôme Drevon's *From Jihad to Politics* uses the case of Syria to analyze the creation of jihadi groups' ideology and the informal external and internal hierarchies that shape both their radicalization and moderation. Drevon demonstrates that jihadis are not merely religious zealots, but are also individuals driven by personal ambitions often shaped by rivalries with other jihadi groups and internal divisions within their own organizations.

Similarly, Alexander Thurston's *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* provides insights into how local contexts have reshaped these groups. He argues that they are no longer elitist, vanguard organizations, but have instead become "mass-based" armed groups, mobilizing "thousands of fighters" and controlling vast territories for extended periods, during which they have established "proto-states" (p. 2). Lefèvre argues that together, these books challenge the assumptions of macro-level, quantitative research in conflict studies, which tend to treat militant organizations as unitary, top-down entities. Instead, they reveal "the traits of and even tensions within armed groups," adding nuance to discussions about conflicts and providing insights into the behavior of militants and rebels.

Equally, in *Death, Dominance, and State-Building*, Roger D. Petersen offers a meticulous and insightful analysis of the intricate relationship between military intervention, state-building, and organized violence in Iraq. As Lorenzo Zambernardi notes in his review, Petersen situates the U.S. military intervention within the context of local agents, political structures, and social dynamics, arguing that "there are no general laws underlying interventions or insurgencies" and therefore, it is "a mistake to search for them" (p. 445). Each context is specific and thus must be analyzed on its own terms. While Petersen focuses on the U.S. military intervention in Iraq, Samuel Helfont, in *Iraq against the World*, examines Iraq's role as a "rogue state" that disrupted the post-Cold War international order. By employing Ba'th Party files, the book uncovers previously unknown actors and strategy at the heart of Iraqi foreign policy under Saddam Hussein (see the review by Glen Rangwala in this issue).

Moving between the macro- and micro-levels, Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca examine armed groups and their decisions to resort to terrorism within the context of broader power asymmetries. In *Underground Violence: On the Nature of Terrorism*, reviewed by Richard English, they highlight terrorism's distinctive feature: the underground nature of its violence. Rebels resort to terrorism over other armed strategies due to the constraints imposed by asymmetrical power relations; where they lack territorial control, they must carry out violence covertly. Like the other studies reviewed in this section, De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca emphasize the complexities of different conflicts and armed groups, shifting from macro-level analyses to a more nuanced exploration of micro-level dynamics. They focus on the organization, agency, and structures of political violence, shedding light on how these factors shape the nature and strategies of insurgent groups.

Global Governance, Multilateralism, and the Crisis of the Liberal Order

The effectiveness of existing international institutions and frameworks in securitizing the global order is increasingly under scrutiny. From the paralysis of the United Nations Security Council to the inadequacies of many regional organizations in preventing crises, there is a pressing need to rethink global governance structures. Hendrik Simon's book, *A Century of Anarchy? War, Normativity, and the Birth of Modern International Order*, reviewed by Eric Sangar, contributes to this critical reassessment of international practices of guaranteeing peace and security by critiquing the myth of *liberum ius ad bellum.* Historically, European states relied on this legal doctrine to claim that they had a natural right to wage war, beyond those waged in territorial self-defence. In reflecting on the extent to which such ideas were widely accepted or contested in the nineteenth century, Simon delves into the origins of an unequal world order and blind spots within the discipline of IR regarding whose security matters internationally, and at whose expense.

The Western-centric nature of the global order and the discipline of IR persists also into the twenty-first century. Mohammed Ayoob's *From Regional Security to Global IR: An Intellectual Journey* draws attention to the conflicting realities between the Global North and the Global South in a series of essays (reviewed by Arie M. Kacowicz in this issue). Ayoob argues that while the UN's collective security system never fully materialized in practice, it gave rise to humanitarian intervention as a form of "organized hypocrisy" by the hegemonic West, aimed at imposing its normative frameworks upon the Global South. The author thus contends that the UN efforts to establish a global security framework reflect the harsh realities of power distribution and place serious security constraints on countries in the Global South.

Geopolitical rivalries around securitization also feature in the analysis of the United Nations presented in Fadi Nicholas Nassar's *UN Mediators in Syria: The Challenges and Responsibilities of Conflict Resolution.* His book digs deeper into the UN's central role as a security actor and mediator in complex conflicts such as Syria. Through a meticulous analysis of the records of UN mediators, Nassar provides valuable insights into the dynamics that influenced their decision-making. As Rahaf Aldoughli notes in her review, "the book forces readers to rethink the foundational assumptions that underpin international mediation. It urges readers to critically examine the terminology of mediation and how this framing alone dictates the strategic options available to mediators and the international community at large."

Rita Floyd's book, *The Duty to Secure: From Just to Mandatory Securitization*, delves into the moral imperatives surrounding securitization, the process by which states and other actors identify and address existential threats. Floyd's book, reviewed by Cornelia Baciu, addresses two fundamental questions: first, who has the duty to securitize—whether states, non-state actors, or international organizations—and second, when does securitization become morally mandatory? *The Duty to Secure* adds to a critical dimension of security studies that investigates how, in the name of preventing large-scale norm violations and atrocities, the global community of states and non-state actors construct what she calls "must causes," that is, causes that render securitization not merely permissible but morally obligatory. With her framework, Floyd challenges existing international norms and practices, such as NATO's Article 5 and the UN's Responsibility to Protect (R2P), to consider a wider range of threats that warrant security interventions. For their part, Rachel A. Epstein and Oliver Caplan emphasize that policymakers commonly implicate academics in practices of securitization, including in such sensitive domains as foreign military interventions and sometimes even to facilitate human rights abuses. Their edited volume, *Speaking Science to Power: Responsible Researchers and Policy Making*, reviewed by Matthew Flinders, explore the varieties of ethical dilemmas academics may face when dealing with policymakers, and pathways to navigate them.

Securitization and "Liberal" Governance at Home

While the liberal international order is increasingly subject to scrutiny, liberal systems also face challenges at the domestic level; rising trends of ethnonationalism and polarization have critical implications for state practices of securitization. These internal tensions are central to Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler's *Partisan Nation: The Dangerous New Logic of American Politics in a Nationalized Era.* They show how, as Nolan McCarty puts it in his review, the "mediating guardrails" of the U.S. system have broken down over the past half-century "at the hands of an increasingly nationalized political system" characterized by racial polarization. Pierson and Schickler find that the idiosyncratic demands and cross-cutting coalitions of local politics no longer place a brake on partisanship, which has worrying implications for governance. The polarized intensity of American racial politics is also explored by Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King in *America's New Racial Battle Lines.* Smith and King identify two emerging policy alliances: the "protect" and "repair" coalitions. As Jacob Hacker highlights in his review, their distinction illustrates how American racial politics have shifted "from a struggle pitting conservative color-blindness against liberal race consciousness" to a conflict between groups invested in the project of "protecting," that is, securing U.S. institutions and the social advantages they codified, versus those that seek to

"repair" the historical inequities that racial slavery and white supremacy have produced.

In *The Rage of Replacement*, Michael Feola turns explicitly to the problem of far-right white nationalism by examining the violent imagery, discourse, and insecurities that these movements mobilize. Capitalizing on anxieties about demographic replacement—a moral panic fueled by the idea that racialized populations from the Global South are systematically replacing white majorities within Western societies—this version of right-wing politics poses new threats to the liberal-democratic norms of mutual tolerance and respect. As David McIvor notes in his review, these forces "herald a post-liberal future characterized by a belligerent ethno-nationalism, reinforced by orthodox interpretations of religion and strict norms of gender expression."

The U.S. security apparatus, of course, does not just tackle external threats, but it also uses militarized strategies and technologies to police populations at home. The growth of the U.S. carceral state has been well documented (see, e.g., Elizabeth Hinton's 2016 book, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*), but recent books explore new sites of U.S. police power. In *The Power of the Badge: Sheriffs and Inequality in the United States*, Emily M. Farris and Mirya R. Holman critically examine the role of local sheriffs. They demonstrate that sheriffs, despite being elected officials, exercise significant power with minimal political accountability while reproducing and maintaining the racial, gender, and class status quo (see the review by Lisa L. Miller). In turn, Max Felker-Kantor examines the history of the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, which was initially launched in Los Angeles in 1983 during Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs to bring police into schools to discourage youth drug use. Felker-Kantor argues that the DARE program should be understood as a "police project" rather than merely a drug prevention initiative. Reviewers Erica Meiners and Andrew Chenohara note that DARE functioned to "legitimize compliance with coercive state power" by presenting the police officer as "both mentor and teacher" to racially minoritized youth. Yet Felker-Kantor shows that the state and like-minded philanthropic actors, under the guise of promoting social welfare, supported these DARE programs even when the evidence proved them ineffective. Both works provide compelling analyses of the U.S. carceral state's development, emphasizing the different state and non-state actors involved in these projects of securitized population management.

Finally, Anthony J. Grasso, the author of *Dual Justice: America's Divergent Approaches to Street and Corporate Crime*, and Anthony Gregory, the author of *New Deal Law and Order: How the War on Crime Built the Modern Liberal State*, reflect on the historical expansion of the U.S. carceral state, with a particular focus on the intertwining of political power, broader liberal interests, and the enforcement of law and order. In their Critical Dialogue, they highlight that security for some communities has come at the expense of state repression or neglect for others. Anthony J. Grasso's *Dual Justice*, as Gregory notes, masterfully examines the tensions between what he terms "regulatory ideology" and "rehabilitative ideology" that underpinned U.S. responses to crime and criminality over the twentieth century. Grasso shows that the state tended to adopt a regulatory approach to corporate crime while seeking to punish and rehabilitate street criminals. In his own book, Gregory traces this contradiction back to what he calls a "carceral liberalism" which emerged out of the New Deal compromises made by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Gregory argues that attempts to balance the project of social discipline with an interest in rehabilitation institutionally linked welfarism and law-and-order concerns within the American political system. Whether in the United States or on the international stage, these works inspire further research into who is considered as a "security threat" and which forms of state power and governance can be legitimately deployed to manage them.

Securing an Interconnected World in a "Post-Liberal" Age

Technological advancements, the emergence of non-state conflict actors, and shifting global power dynamics with a concomitant crisis of liberal governance have prompted scholars and practitioners to reevaluate the concept of security and the practices of securitization. The books reviewed in this issue critically reexamine the demands of security with liberal principles in a changed environment at home and abroad. They offer a nuanced reassessment of the interplay between the local and global, while exploring the capacity of non-governmental actors and grassroots movements to shape contemporary security agendas. Their emphasis on the micro-foundations of security and conflict inspires future research that underscores the importance of localized knowledge within the discipline of IR, elevating the voices of affected actors and communities. Equally, the growth of the domestic security state necessitates critical further research into the relationship between state coercive power and security, particularly in an environment of growing social inequalities and re-emergent ethnonationalisms. As authors navigate the intersections between macro and micro-level analyses to shed light on the multifaceted challenges confronting security studies today, it becomes evident that securing an interconnected world that is rapidly advancing through technological developments presents significant challenges. At the dawn of a digital, and potentially "post-liberal" era, security and conflict take on new meanings, signalling profound shifts in global, national, and local practices of securitization.