Introduction

As a species, we spend a great deal of time, energy, and money on security. The world's military budgets alone totalled more than $1.9 trillion U.S. dollars in 2020, an average of 6.0 percent of government spending and 2.0 percent of Gross Domestic Product.[1] The United States accounts for more than a third of the total all by itself and spends upward of $70 billion on foreign and military intelligence (a figure that excludes black budget expenditures).[2] Add in spending on border controls, coast guards, and funding for national security–related research and development across a variety of fields, and it is clear that many countries invest very heavily indeed in protecting against foreign threats.

Most governments spend very heavily on domestic security as well. In the United States, the 2022 Department of Homeland Security budget alone is more than $90 billion.[3] China famously spends more heavily on domestic surveillance, law enforcement, and combatting real or potential dissent than it does on the People's Liberation Army.[4] While some governments do not maintain armed forces at all (Iceland and Costa Rica are notable examples), every government spends on policing, fire services, protecting critical infrastructure, enforcing building codes, and a range of other things involved in 'securing.' A more expansive understanding of security would allow us to include spending on such things as public health and medical care, both of which have as their goal protecting people against death and disease.

In recent decades, we have begun to think of novel problems as 'security' problems, too. Climate change is perhaps the most notable example. As the dire consequences of not restraining global temperature rise become more and more apparent, reducing greenhouse gas

[1] SIPRI 2020. [2] Miles 2016.
[3] Department of Homeland Security 2021, p. 1. [4] Zenz 2018.

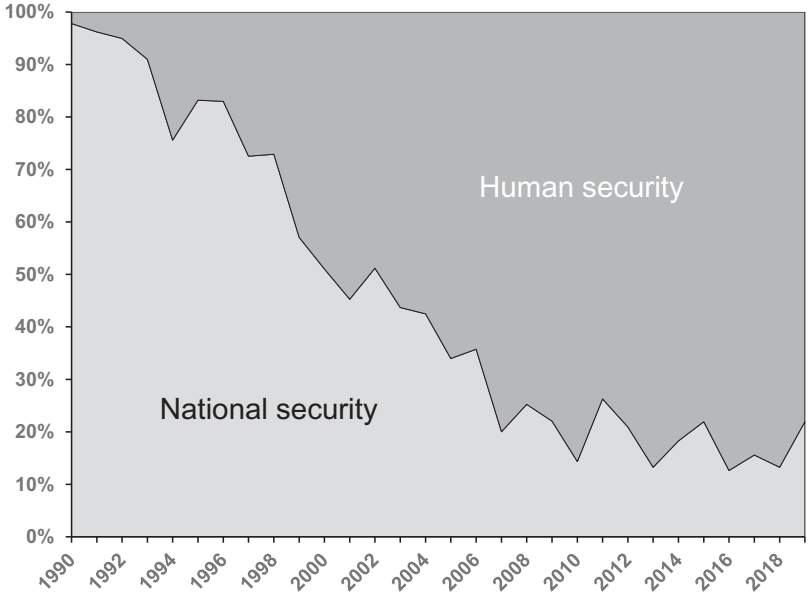

Figure 0.1 Relative frequency of 'national security' and 'human security'
Source: Calculated from Google Ngram Viewer, 1990–2019 (English corpus), case insensitive, no smoothing

emissions takes on greater and greater urgency. Investing in mitigation and adaptation efforts, then, may also be thought of as investing in security. In addition, we increasingly think and write about such things as 'food security,' 'health security,' and so forth – understood generally as elements of 'human security' – that have been garnering greater attention vis-à-vis traditional security terms such as 'national security' (see Figure 0.1). Clearly, the agenda of the field of security studies has expanded considerably over the years. It continues to do so.[5]

How do we know when we are investing in security wisely? This is the practical question I seek to address in this book. I do so by attempting to answer a series of related questions: Are we trying to protect the right things? Do we have a good sense of what it would take to do so? Do we allocate resources appropriately, or are we spending far too much on certain problems and not enough on others? What are the appropriate criteria for making judgments such as these?

[5] Buzan & Hansen 2009.

These questions seem straightforward, but I will argue that we do not have very good answers for them at present, and as a result we perform rather poorly on resource allocation. My hunch is that we do not have good answers because we do not understand these questions well. We do not know how to decide which things deserve to be secured, or why. We are often unsure about what it would take to secure something even if we did know that it was worth securing. For perfectly understandable (and largely natural) reasons, we are not particularly good at perceiving or gauging threats, and we tend to react more strongly and with a greater sense of urgency to certain kinds of threats than to others.

By 'we' in this book, I mean scholars, policy makers, and the general public, but I am interested here only in the resource allocations of states. To some extent this is an arbitrary circumscription. After all, people individually or in groups – families, communities, organizations, corporations, and so forth – also spend time, energy, and money on security. A lot of it. Everything from a door lock to an alarm system to an insurance policy counts as an effort to protect something of value. I might well pose my overarching question to anyone. But I will concern myself here only with states, for two reasons. First, sovereign territoriality gives the state a unique capacity to muster and allocate resources. No other actor has the ability to set laws and enforce them, to tax, or to extract rents on such a massive scale. This vision of the state is, of course, an ideal type, and in the real world various other kinds of actors can exercise these capacities de facto if not de jure, if perhaps typically on much smaller scales. In some parts of the world, militias, mafias, terrorist groups, drug cartels, or civil society organizations step in to fill the voids left by weak, divided, corrupt, bankrupt, or otherwise dysfunctional governments.[6] Even the richest, best organized, and most well-run states must deal with actors of this kind. But, to a first approximation, if you are going to concern yourself with the actors who most influence resource allocation, you are inevitably going to concern yourself with states. Second, allocating resources appropriately to provide security may well require – I would suggest that it most definitely often does require – cooperation on both a regional and global scale. For this, states are key players. There is no significant regional or global security governance challenge that can be

[6] See, e.g., Ahmad 2017.

managed without the willing participation or acquiescence of states, which, as the daily headlines teach us only too well, can also be the ultimate spoilers.

In seeking to answer my questions, I have theoretical aspirations as well as practical ones. My first theoretical goal is to discipline and clarify the concept of security in such as way as to promote rigorous analysis and identify fruitful new research directions. In the academic world of security theory, I submit, the word 'security' is poorly theorized and over-contested. As David Baldwin famously put it, 'Writers often fail to offer any definition of security. And if one is offered, it is rarely accompanied by a discussion of reasons for preferring one definition rather than others.'[7] With too many ill-specified meanings competing for primacy – rarely in conversation with each other – research programs in security studies tend to resemble siloed echo chambers. I will attempt to make the case for a single generic and portable meaning of the word and show that alternative meanings in the literature are best thought of either as context-specific conceptions or different concepts (related or unrelated). In so doing, I will challenge the common view that security is – or at least should be considered – an 'essentially contested concept.'[8]

My second theoretical goal is to show that it is possible to put the concept of security on relatively sound philosophical foundations that could plausibly command widespread, if not universal, assent. To do this, however, we need to subject our current views of security to radical scrutiny. We must strip them to the ground, as it were, and open our most basic assumptions to questioning, so that we can reconstruct a defensible understanding that may or may not correspond to any particular set of conceptual priors. We must, in short, query the ontology – the very *being* and *nature* – of 'security.'[9]

My most important practical aspiration is to inform thinking about security policy in a way that encourages more appropriate and more effective resource allocation. Acutely conscious that policy makers – not scholars – make decisions of this kind, I will seek an understanding

[7] Baldwin 2001, p. 11.
[8] 'Security is more appropriately described as a confused or inadequately explicated concept than as an essentially contested one.' Ibid., p. 12.
[9] The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'ontology' as 'The science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence'; OED 2121.

of 'security' and the philosophical pillars upon which it rests that is both accessible and broadly acceptable. This places two crucial constraints on the analysis: first, it must avoid parochialism as much as possible; second, it cannot be esoteric, arcane, or too far removed from common sense. Together, these constraints require making an argument that (a) rests upon the fewest possible assumptions, (b) rests upon assumptions that would command the assent of as many as possible, and (c) avoids relying upon controversial religious or metaphysical doctrines. This last requirement means, of course, that I will fail to persuade everyone. Millions of people subscribe to such doctrines and are unwilling as a matter of principle to suspend belief even if only for the sake of argument. I see no workaround to this, but I take it as an article of faith that the alternative is to persuade even fewer.

I will begin in Chapter 1 by exploring the meaning of security, arguing that some of the more prominent understandings in the literature are problematically idiosyncratic or confuse approaches to security provision with security per se. I will argue that security is best thought of as a condition; that it is always a matter of degree that can vary over time; and that it can only be estimated contextually, i.e., with respect to a specific potential source of harm to a specific object of value – or, as the Copenhagen School of International Relations would helpfully call it, a *threat-referent pair*.[10] In contrast to a prominent strand of Copenhagen School thinking, however, I will argue that security is both logically and empirically independent of the rhetorical or political processes of 'securitization' (i.e., publicly establishing something as a security problem); that securitization is not, in fact, a 'speech act'; that security threats are not necessarily existential; that there is a meaningful distinction between real and perceived security threats, such that we can be objectively wrong about whether something is threatened at all, let alone threatened in a particular way; and that while both referent objects and threats can be socially constructed, not all are, and in fact some of the most important are not. What in many academic circles would be dismissed as a 'naïve [ontological] realism' about the world performs better, in the grand scheme of

[10] Buzan et al. 1998. Throughout I will follow Hollis and Smith's useful convention of capitalizing International Relations when referring to the discipline, but using lower case when referring to its subject matter; Hollis & Smith 1991, p. 10.

things, than an alternative metaphysics in greater tension with common sense, for the purpose of understanding security.

In Chapter 2, I tackle the conceptual challenge of determining what is worth securing and why, setting up later arguments that we often overvalue certain security referents and undervalue others. Here the crucial task is connecting the concepts of security and value. We should only ever invest in securing things of value, but what makes something valuable? What kind of value does it have? To whom? Who counts as a relevant 'valuer' for purposes of determining how we should allocate resources for security? Here I will argue that of the two generally acknowledged types of value – intrinsic and extrinsic – nothing that has neither intrinsic value nor is directly connected via a causal chain to something of intrinsic value can in principle be worth securing. I will also argue that there are only three things that we can know with high confidence to have intrinsic value without reference to a controversial metaphysical or parochial religious backstory, and that as none of the three can be 'secured' directly, security policy can only be directed to referent objects of extrinsic value.[11] I will also argue that neither human beings as individuals nor humanity as a whole can be said to have intrinsic value and that there is no reason to believe that the three things that we can know to have intrinsic value are uniquely human. Accordingly, humans are not the only relevant 'valuers.' While my argument will be profoundly non-anthropocentric, however, it will not be misanthropic. I prefer to think of it as 'non-myopic,' and I hope readers will agree.

Chapters 3–6 examine in the light of the discussion thus far a selection of candidate security referents with a strong prima facie claim to particular concern, working from the macro to the micro level. The purpose of each chapter is to provide a complete workup of each referent, exploring the nature of its value and to whom, prominent threats to it, the possibility of securing it from these threats, and the strength of the claim each can make to security resources.

I begin in Chapter 3 with the ecosphere – i.e., that part of planet Earth that harbours and sustains life, together with the life that it sustains. I argue that 'ecospheric security' is the most fitting moniker for this concern, preferable to more familiar terms such as 'environmental

[11] I prefer not to name the three just yet, as I would like to set the analytical stage properly before doing so.

security,' and that no security referent is more important. Moreover, I argue that one does not have to resort to quasi-mystical or New Age views such as Deep Ecology or Gaia spirituality to make the case. But while the ecosphere must enjoy pride of place in the hierarchy of security referents, it is not the only referent of concern. Nor can everything that threatens it be meaningfully securitized. A few, however, can, and must be – urgently.

In Chapter 4, I address the state, which has had pride of place among security referents in both the study and practice of international relations since the beginning of both. Here I argue that there is no inherent reason to privilege the modern Westphalian state over alternative forms of political community, be they historical, purely theoretical, or as yet unimagined. Ultimately, one makes the case for or against any institutionalized political form on the same basis as one would for or against any other kind of security referent. I will argue, however, that the modern Westphalian state is better adapted to the current material and ideational context of world politics than commonly articulated alternatives such as world government, heterarchy, or deterritorialized (e.g., neo-medieval) models. But this does not mean that just any state will be worth securing. Nor does a state's general worthiness of security unproblematically translate into that of its government. Sometimes, through action or inaction, regimes undermine their own *raison d'être*. This means that any general norm against conquest or intervention will have to rest upon modified rule-utilitarian rather than deontological foundations, opening space for well-regulated exceptions.[12] Even regimes that can claim a right to exist, however, commonly misgauge threats, squandering vast resources on minor issues and grossly underspending on major ones. In that sense, they are often, unwittingly, major threats to the security of their own states.

Chapter 5 takes up cultural security, a term I prefer to 'ontological security' – the psychological sense of safety having to do with the stability and predictability of one's identity – largely because it

[12] Rule utilitarianism is the view that we should obey rules that tend on balance to promote the greatest good whether or not they do so in any given case. Act utilitarianism, in contrast, is the view that we should always promote the greatest good whether or not doing so is consistent with a rule. Both rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism are consequentialist ethics. A deontological ethics, in contrast, insists that duties, not consequences, determine what is right. Brandt 1963; Kant 1993.

subsumes it, at least in an International Relations context. Noting the historical challenge of attempting to define 'culture' and rigorously identifying specific cultures, I nevertheless offer and defend an understanding that obviates the identification challenge because it embraces fluidity and blurred boundaries. Here I will argue that culture is everywhere and always subject to change; that, accordingly, it cannot be 'secured'; that there is no such thing as 'deculturation'; and that while the destruction of key elements of culture (the phenomenon of language death, for example) can be and generally is tragic, the tragedy lies not in loss of culture per se, but elsewhere. I will argue, however, that while culture cannot be 'secured,' cultural change and cultural loss both being inevitable, the rate at which these happen, and the mechanisms behind them, make a very great deal of difference from the perspective of the book's operative theory of value. I will argue that, with few exceptions, it is generally worth investing in measures that (a) moderate the pace of cultural change and (b) discourage coercive meddling or overly energetic social engineering. I also argue that these are among the performance considerations that determine which states and regimes are worthy of security.

In Chapter 6, I examine human security, an idea with a troubled conceptual background, but one that nevertheless increasingly resonates. I begin by attempting to disambiguate the operative referent, arguing that the term only makes sense when applied to individuals rather than groups. I then distinguish human security from human rights, discussing possible logical and empirical relationships between the two concepts. I proceed to argue that human security is best understood narrowly, not broadly, as applying only to basic human needs. I conclude that one can make a strong case for human security on a non-anthropocentric basis; that human security is best promoted in concert with efforts to secure certain other referents; and that promoting human security also requires embracing measures to promote depopulation. Rightly understood, human security also serves as a means to ecospheric security. It also provides yet another performance benchmark for worthy states and serves as the final strand binding all four referents under close examination in this book.

Having completed a tour of macro to micro security referents, I attempt in the Conclusion to summarize the argument as a whole, which I believe is best seen as a tapestry of mutual dependence turning on a shared theory of value. Despite this mutual dependence, I argue

that it is possible to assess the relative worth of various referents and the relative severity of threats; that attempting to secure one referent often has implications for the security of others; and that some of these implications are synergistic while others involve trade-offs. This raises several questions that I am not in a position to answer fully here but that strike me as urgently in need of further research. Two stand out: first, is it possible to prioritize, let alone optimize, allocation of resources for security? Second, are the complex interactions of threats and referents at different levels of analysis insurmountable obstacles to policy, practice, or governance? But while my discussion here sheds more light on problems than solutions, I attempt to make a case for optimism about the possibility of identifying virtuous and vicious cascades, pointing the way toward specific measures strongly to be encouraged or strongly to be avoided.

Finally, I step back from the parameters of my discussion to address the challenges that value pluralism and doctrinal metaphysical commitments pose to my analysis. I see these as severe. Arguably, they temper the (moderate) optimism that I earlier evince. But I note empirical trends that suggest that these challenges may weaken over time. Meanwhile, we can begin mapping out an appropriate research agenda for promoting 'security' properly understood.

1 The Meaning of 'Security'

Defining 'Security'

Before we can explore the ontology of security, we must establish a preferred meaning of the word and purge it, as far as possible, of ambiguity. This preliminary task is especially important when one's subject is a term in common currency and deployed in a wide variety of contexts for a wide variety of purposes.[1] The more familiar a word, the more likely we are to take for granted that our own particular understanding of it is widely shared and that its meaning goes without saying. This is as true of the word 'security' as it is for almost every other key concept in the study of world politics.

A good place to start, when attempting to narrow and refine meaning, is with a dictionary of record. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* entry for 'security' is more than 9,000 words long and includes nine major senses and 20 minor ones.[2] Ignoring rare, archaic, or technical definitions, and also those that define the word with respect to a specific referent or threat,[3] we are left with the following:

1. The state or condition of being or feeling secure.
   1a. Freedom from care, anxiety, or apprehension; absence of worry or anxiety; confidence in one's safety or well-being.
2. Freedom from danger or threat.
   2a. The state or condition of being protected from or not exposed to danger; safety.
   2c. The condition or fact of being secure or unthreatened in a particular situation . . .

[1] See, e.g., Welch 2013. [2] OED 2011d.
[3] E.g., 2b. 'The safety or safeguarding of (the interests of) a state (or, sometimes, a coalition of states),' or 2d. 'The safety of an organization, establishment, or building from espionage, criminal activity, illegal entrance[,] or escape, etc.' Ibid.

There are several notable features of these definitions when taken collectively. One is that they denote both objective states of affairs (e.g., 'The state or condition of being secure') and subjective impressions ('feeling secure'; 'freedom from care, anxiety or apprehension; absence of worry or anxiety; confidence in one's safety or well-being'). A second is circularity – i.e., defining the noun in terms of its corresponding adjective. The circularity is not resolved by consulting the entry for 'secure,' which also includes objective and subjective definitions (e.g., 'Protected from or not exposed to danger; certain to remain safe and unthreatened'; 'Free from care, apprehension, or anxiety; carefree, untroubled').[4]

Our first task is to decide whether, in articulating a full ontology of security appropriate to the study of international politics, we wish to embrace both objective and subjective meanings. There are compelling reasons to shun the latter, the most obvious of which is that one can feel secure without actually being secure, and vice versa. Most of the passengers aboard the 1912 maiden voyage of RMS *Titanic* were convinced that the ship was unsinkable when plainly it was not.[5] Conversely, people commonly underestimate the safety of commercial aviation.[6] Since 'feeling secure' can be written as 'believing rightly or wrongly that one is secure' while 'being [objectively] secure' cannot similarly be rewritten in terms of psychological states, the objective condition is clearly the foundational concept. Moreover, embracing a fundamentally psychological understanding of security would justify allocating resources on the basis of irrational phobias, putting into jeopardy – if perhaps only through neglect – important referent objects.

A third notable feature of these definitions is that they invoke both 'safety' and 'absence of danger or threat.' Consulting the *OED* entry for 'safety' quickly reveals that these are synonyms (safety is 'The state of being protected from or guarded against hurt or injury; freedom from danger').[7] These invocations are reasonable insofar as they relate to the (preferable) objective understanding of security, but they are curiously absolute. One can only be confident of a complete 'absence of danger or threat' in the short term. *Titanic* was free of danger from icebergs on the morning of April 14, but this was no longer true just

[4] OED 2011c. [5] Davie 1987. [6] Möller et al. 1998; I. Savage 2013.
[7] OED 2011b.

before midnight. Taking the long view, *Titanic* was never perfectly safe from icebergs – or from collisions, a boiler explosion, a rogue wave, being torpedoed by a submarine, or what have you. While the efforts that her designers and builders made to 'secure' her from threats such as these were considerable, they would have been less than perfect even had they been more conscientious. Nothing is ever absolutely safe.[8] 'Security,' therefore, must be thought of as a matter of degree that can vary over time. Risk analysis operationalizes this insight explicitly. No one gives away insurance policies for free.

Security, then, is best thought of as an 'objective' condition, but, as a matter of degree, it is always relative. Things can be more or less secure, but never absolutely secure. It is possible to imagine optimizing security – designing systems and procedures with practically unsurpassable prospects of protecting a referent against various threats – but it is not obvious that we could ever know with absolute confidence that we had done this, and in practice we generally aim for thresholds that we believe to be 'good enough.' Among the most popular ISO standards, for example, are the Information Security Management Systems standards in the ISO/IEC 27000 family.[9] These reflect the good-faith, well-informed judgments of technical experts on the minimal acceptable ways of protecting data. But there are even better ways. They would simply be too costly for most organizations to implement. So, the thresholds of security that we aim for in practice reflect not simply performance but cost as well.[10]

Ocean liners and aircraft are tangible and observable things, as many security referents are. But, as the information security example demonstrates, others are not. We can, and do, speak of and act to promote the security of things both natural and constructed, physical and social. States can and do pass laws and devote resources, for example, to protect wetlands, endangered species, critical infrastructure, heritage languages, democracy, and the rule of law. Ontologically, these security referents run the gamut. Many cross ontological categories. Data, for example, are only 'data' if both stored physically and rendered intersubjectively meaningful by systems of social practices. They can be destroyed by attacking either aspect.

[8] Sagan 1993. [9] ISO 2018.
[10] See also Baldwin 2001 (pp. 19–21) on 'the marginal value approach' to security.