

### The Governing of (In)Security: Politics and Securitisation in the Asian Context (Editorial)

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# The Governing of (In)Security. Politics and Securitisation in the Asian Context

## Editorial

Werner Distler

The consequences of threat constructions and security-dominated politics in many Asian states and regions have been all too apparent recently. Whether the escalating language between China and the US over the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the violence against opposition movements in Hong Kong, the fate of minorities in Myanmar or the ongoing violence in Afghanistan – the invocation of “security” and the often violent practices of security agents constitute a powerful “key mode of governing” (Bonacker 2018: 190, Hönke / Müller 2012). Security drives international and domestic politics and, at the same time, shapes livelihoods of citizens and the fate of individuals in often worrisome ways. In offering various empirical studies guided by the pragmatic frameworks of securitisation and Critical Security Studies, this Special Issue aims at deconstructing security as a governing mode in the Asian context, with articles ranging from the local and national levels to international relations.

## Debates on securitisation: Towards a pragmatic understanding of securitisation

Critical Security Studies has expanded immensely over the last three decades. Securitisation studies alone, one of the main subfields of Critical Security Studies, has developed several heterogeneous understandings of the construction, manifestations and normative and emancipatory dimensions of security. Together with the original and still influential Copenhagen School, with its main focus on security speech acts (Buzan et al. 1998) and second-generation

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securitisation frameworks (Balzacq 2005, Stritzel 2007), other contributions, for example on practice- and routine-oriented (Bigo 2014), feminist (Hansen 2000), emancipatory (McDonald 2008) and post-colonial (Amin-Khan 2012, Ketzmerick 2019) securitisation, constitute a most vivid field. The one shared point of departure is that security is not self-explanatory or given, but socially constructed – its meanings emerge in social and political processes, which are shaped by (asymmetric) power and agency.

Currently, securitisation studies is involved in a fierce debate on the Western-centrism and structural discrimination embedded in its early foundational texts (Bertrand 2018, Hansen 2020, Howell / Richter-Montpetit 2020, Wæver / Buzan 2020). Despite this challenging and uncomfortable, but hopefully productive debate (Aradau 2018), securitisation studies has long proven its value as an analytical tool to critically de- and reconstruct security in many thematic areas. Topics range from more state- and institution-focused issues (crime/policing, state-sponsored violence, border regimes and migration, international interventions) to environment and global health (Biswas 2011, Hanrieder / Kreuder-Sonnen 2014), also beyond Western societies (Bilgin 2011, Kapur / Mabon 2018).

Overcoming exclusionary logics of speech or the practice of security as the main analytical focus, pragmatic approaches to securitisation integrate the epistemological and methodological focus on speech *with* the practice and process of security, as merely different forms of enacting social meaning, with the goal of understanding the “politics of security” (McDonald 2017: 246) and its consequences (Balzacq / Guzzini 2015, Stritzel 2011). Such “middle-ground” frameworks have inspired this Special Issue. Constructing other groups or communities, ideas, or the behaviour of actors as threatening for a referent object (e.g. stability, the state, or society) not only calls for extraordinary measures (Buzan et al. 1998), but leads to security constructions becoming part of a broader political strategy and strategic moves, by which political actors try to defend or change government actions, claim legitimacy and authority in a political struggle, and even counter or resist previous securitisations (Vuori 2011, Stritzel / Chang 2015). So-called de-securitisation, “the move of an issue out of the sphere of security” (Hansen 2012: 525), can fulfil similar strategic goals. Furthermore, the analysis of context, even history (Balzacq 2005, Stritzel 2011), is of paramount importance to understanding why and how actors (de)securitise. As shown in studies on changing strategies towards criminal gangs in El Salvador (Van der Borgh / Savenije 2015), on the “security pluralism” at the border between South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Schoerner / De Vries 2014) or the stabilisation of “illiberal state-building” in the context of development (Fisher / Anderson 2015), (de)securitisation has to be understood as a creative, non-linear process in which political actors act and react, very much dependent on their position and interests, their opponents and supporters, and on the security practices available. With such a perspec-

tive, the political process of governing appears as non-linear and always relational – statehood itself, the monopoly of violence, or the nation are not set and given, but instead defined by spatial scales, emerging and disappearing agency, and permanent (re)negotiations and (re)constructions.

It is important to mention the limitations of conceptual perspectives: pragmatic securitisation frameworks with a focus on the politics of security are not necessarily helpful for analysing everyday security and the social emergence of security issues. Of course, these dimensions of security are crucial for a complete picture of what security is and how security determines the life of individuals and communities. The *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* broadened the debate in this regard with a highly innovative Special Issue in 2018, focusing on everyday security practices, social processes of security and the voices of the marginalised in an Asian context (Von Boemcken 2018). This Special Issue picks up the debate and carries it further into the realm of political and governing processes. While the observation that “everybody thus ‘does’ security in his or her everyday life” (Von Boemcken 2018: 10) is very true, I am convinced that the analysis of politics still greatly benefits from critical, non-essentialist and non-rationalist studies of securitisation. Nonetheless, communities and resisting actors are not overlooked in this issue. As I will highlight in the last section of this editorial, one of the articles deals with security on a communal level and two articles analyse securitisation as a strategy of conflict communication and resistance among political actors who face powerful opponents.

## Securitisation in the Asian context

Without othering “Asia” as a most different context, one can note that this global region offers complex and heterogeneous forms of governance, ranging from single-party and authoritarian states to liberal democracies and regional, international and globalised entanglements, which challenge and enrich Critical Security Studies in many particular ways. I want to discuss some of these challenges and ways of engaging with these in this section. However, it is important to realise that, as McDonald notes in his introduction to the Special Issue “Critical Security in the Asia-Pacific” (2017) in the journal *Critical Studies of Security*, security literature in Asia or on Asian case studies is still clearly dominated by the traditional security agenda, not by “critical security”. In fact,

the term has not found a significant foothold in scholarship in or about Asian security, especially when understood in terms of emancipatory politics. And the re-emergence of great power politics and geopolitical challenges in the region, with accompanied concerns about interstate conflict, has arguably made it difficult for broader security issues or non-state referent objects to find their way onto security agenda or into debates about security. (McDonald 2017: 248)

Nevertheless, critical security scholarship and securitisation studies in particular have produced important studies over the last two decades, and Asian case studies have helped to reformulate conceptual frameworks originating in the OSCE world. As Stritzel reminds us (this issue), it was, amongst others, Wilkinson's work on Kyrgyzstan (2007) that asked whether securitisation is of any use outside of the West and challenged the universal and Western-centric foundations of early securitisation frameworks.

One empirical centre of gravity is, unsurprisingly, China, with its domestic policies and regional / global relations. In his excellent modification of securitisation frameworks to the context of authoritarian governance in China, Vuori (2008) has shown how language-sensitive analysis can lead to a new understanding of the construction of security in a non-democratic order. His study of "a grammar of securitisation in the People's Republic of China" deconstructs in detail the strategies of securitisation and desecuritisation of the "party state" towards political opponents or groups such as the Falungong (Vuori 2011). Such securitised groups in China, e.g., the Tibetan resistance movements, can use counter-securitising strategies themselves, as Topgyal (2016) argues regarding the practice of self-immolation among Tibetan protestors since 2008 – without doubt, a terribly high price for such a strategy. In the field of foreign policy or regional relations, several studies focus on the securitisation of China, for example the regional securitisation of China by India and Japan (Chand / Garcia 2017, Schulze 2018), securitisation in the context of disputes in the South China Sea (Zhang / Bateman 2017) or the "securitisation/desecuritisation dynamic in Sino-Russian economic relations" (Wishnick 2017: 114). However, Chinese foreign policy offers examples of de-securitisation as well. In his more recent work, Vuori tackles the issue of desecuritisation as a foreign policy strategy of China (2018) e.g., in trying to prevent its own securitisation as rising power. Biba (2014, 2018) focuses on the de-securitisation strategies of China in the context of transboundary rivers and hydro politics in the Mekong region.

While securitisation studies on China dominate the field, there are many studies on diverse cases and issues in Asia, well represented by two volumes: *Non-traditional Security in Asia: Dilemmas in Securitisation* edited by Caballero-Anthony, Emmers and Acharya (2016, first published in 2006) and *Critical Security in the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Burke and McDonald (2007). Both offer an immense range and depth of studies beyond foreign policy or domestic governance, for example on the securitisation of migrant workers in Asian societies (Liow 2016, Upadhyaya 2016), the securitisation of HIV/Aids in Asia (Ramiah 2016) or gendered legacies of security from a feminist-emancipatory perspective (Lee-Koo 2007). Recent studies have focused on environmental security governance in Southeast Asia (Hameiri / Jones 2013) and the role of non-state security actors from a securitisation perspective (Barthwal-Datta 2012). Other contemporary work has studied the effects and logics of securitisation for par-

ticular groups and communities, for example the securitisation of youth in Timor-Leste (Distler 2019), the “impact of securitisation on marginalised groups” in the Philippines, Indonesia and China (Kim et al. 2017) or the societal securitisation of the Rohingya in Myanmar (Howe 2018).

As we can see, the Asian context has inspired many studies of security governance, ranging from social and non-traditional security phenomena to more traditional themes such as the social construction of great power politics. The few examples mentioned here show how promising Critical Security Studies and securitisation studies in the Asian context are, from a critically deconstructing or a normative-reconstructive perspective, and have helped to modify securitisation frameworks in a pragmatic way (Caballero-Anthony / Emmers 2016: 2), reminding us that discourses and practices of security have to be analysed carefully to avoid reductionist generalisations (Acharya 2006). At the same time, scholars have used Critical Security Studies to foster emancipatory research and highlight the fate of vulnerable groups – or as a means to deconstruct and criticise policies and politics of governments and international agents (McDonald 2017). The five articles in this Special Issue are representative for such a multi-dimensional approach of Critical Security Studies and securitisation studies on the Asian context, and can hopefully push the debate further, while presenting meaningful empirical insights on Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, North Korea and the Indo-Pacific region.

## The articles of this Special Issue

The aim of this Special Issue is to gain new comparative understandings of security constructions as the driving forces of politics and of attempts to govern by and through the construction of (in)security on various, interconnected levels. Taking up the focus on the domestic, even community, level of security as a governing mode, Lottholz and Sheranova ask what consequences the internationally and nationally introduced “community security programmes” in Kyrgyzstan have, in merely administrating or “producing” security for citizens, ten years after inter-communal clashes and violence in the southern Kyrgyz cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad. With the article, the authors add to research on everyday security in an internationalised “post-conflict” setting and challenge simplistic notions of the localisation and ownership of externally induced security reform programmes.

The domestic dimension of security is also in the focus of the article by Staar. He reconstructs the strategies of (de)securitisation for raising and maintaining legitimate authority in the domestic public communications of the North Korean government in its depiction of the United States. The analysis focuses on texts

from the North Korean newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* and on declarations made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea between 2017 and 2020 and shows how diverse the communicative strategies are, even in an authoritarian context, and how much the positionality of speakers matters with regard to the range of (de)securitising and resecuritising depictions of the “sworn enemy”, thereby adding to the existing debate on speakers and audiences in Critical Security Studies (Vuori 2008, Côté 2016). Furthermore, this opens up the alleged “black box” of the governing logic of North Korea – showing that scholars in fact have the chance to deconstruct the modes of governance, even in such a closed political setting.

Proceeding from the domestic context to regional and international relations, Chand and Garcia reconstruct how four key states – Australia, India, Japan and the United States – have shifted their foreign policy focus from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, in their attempt to react to China’s rise, they facilitate and stabilise the securitisation of China. However – and this is the broader significance of the article for debates on security and region-making (Buzan 2003) – all actors in fact differ in the concrete discourse of securitisation, due to their specific domestic ideas and views of China and of themselves.

Connecting a conflict of self-determination with international politics in a historically informed study, Bonacker and Distler analyse the strategic use of securitisation at the United Nations in the context of the de-colonisation struggle of East Timor from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. The article shows how the self-determination conflict was successfully constructed as a conflict system beyond the actual conflict region and as a matter of world politics by both securitising and desecuritising speech acts of the conflict actors, mostly Indonesia, the Timorese resistance movement and the latter’s allies at the United Nations. The article, in combining securitisation with world politics, pushes our knowledge of how Asian political actors co-shaped international politics and how securitisation can be used to silence or resist political strategies. Similarly, in his research note Stritzel revisits the conflict in Afghanistan through the lens of securitisation theory, particularly the very relational dynamics of securitisation and counter-securitisation strategies of external interveners, the Afghan government and the Taliban, as the latter sought to raise legitimacy for their role in the future governance of Afghanistan.

While the contributions are different in both focus of analysis and concrete use of securitisation frameworks, they all underline the need to learn more about how “security” is used concretely to govern the domestic, regional and international spheres, as well as to justify violence or offer pathways for resistance in individual cases. The articles suggest several future research avenues – for Asian Studies, Critical Security Studies and beyond. How do everyday experiences in societies interact with internationalised programmes on community



security? How can we explain the different, even counteracting “shades” of security discourse in the attempt to generate legitimacy for authoritarian governance? How do Asian agents, in formulating policies and using securitising speech acts strategically in regional and international spaces, shape international norms and relations? And finally, how do (Asian) actors resist international, hegemonic security discourse and practices? Further studies along these paths will help us to de-construct security as an influential mode of governance – and, hopefully, to appreciate the potential emancipatory dimension of this work.

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