The Influence of Globalization on Societal Security: The International Setting

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In most industrialized countries, the end of the Cold War marked a change in security focus – away from preparedness for war, and towards an increasing focus on civil society’s own vulnerability and safety. The Cold War had steered the security agenda into a rather narrow understanding in which the East–West axis structured thinking, protecting the sovereignty of nation-states along a bipolar axis according to which the threat of military force had been the primary threat. The end of the Cold War – and of this bipolar logic of threat – released the gaze of security, bringing society itself into view. Within Norway and Scandinavia, the concept of societal security was developed to address the new risk landscape facing society at the conclusion of the bipolar period. The term ‘societal security’ is used to refer to the robustness of a society to different accidents and crises. Societal security is not connected to specific threats or scenarios, but encompasses all possible strains and hazards that a society could face. Increasingly, threats of a global character play a significant role within the meaning of the concept.

Globalization has had a number of well-known positive impacts on life in Norway. At the same time, it has clearly led to the emergence of new threats both real and imagined (e.g. international terrorism, organized crime, use of weapons of mass destruction, global warming, global disease). In this sense, crisis and conflicts around the globe potentially have both imaginary and real impacts on Norwegian societal security. The impact of globalization on the risk landscape has led to an acknowledgement that Norway’s security depends not only on conditions within Norwegian society, but also on events and conditions far beyond the country’s borders. As a result, institutional approaches to societal security in Norway are dependent to some degree on increased cooperation with international organizations like NATO, the EU and the UN.

Societal security designates threats to society. Yet, as with any society, the nature of Norwegian society is determined by local properties, rather than global ones: particular cultural traditions, a distinct historical background, and a concrete geographical setting. In short, societal security is perceived and engaged in varying ways across the global village. The threat picture that any given society faces may be globally oriented, but a shared global experience of societal security is unlikely. Nonetheless, the goal of assuring societal security is a common project shared by the international community – primarily the EU, NATO and the UN. How, then, does the understanding of societal security that is prevalent in Norway compare with understandings that have currency within the international community? In this policy brief, we will discuss the use of the concept of societal security by Norway’s nearest international collaborators: the EU, NATO and the UN. We begin by examining the degree of shared meaning that the concept enjoys within the international context, and how international understandings relate to official Norwegian variants. Thereafter, we will investigate the impact of globalization on both the perceived threat landscapes and the official mandates of Norway’s security partners. Finally, we will discuss challenges connected with the broad Norwegian approach to societal security, asking whether the concept can bring new perspectives to the international setting.

Societal Security and International Academia

In both the Norwegian and international academic context, the concept of societal security is most
often used to denote society’s robustness – that is, its ability to endure and manage crisis situations. This basic understanding, however, has a number of international variants.

One academic understanding of societal security that differs from the Norwegian conception originates in the security theory of the so-called Copenhagen School. Here, ‘societal security’ is connected to threats to identity and the self-conceptions both of communities and of individuals identifying themselves as members of those communities. It refers to ‘identity-based communities’, instead of national communities, and focuses on the mechanisms by which society gains its core identity through the shared ethics or the religious or national identities of social groups living in communities. Such shared identities can, but do not necessarily, transcend state borders. Within this perspective, threats to societal security are threats to social identity. Though there is some degree of overlap between this use of the concept of societal society and its use within Norway, the Copenhagen School’s focus on identity results in a far narrower conception than that employed within the Norwegian context. Moreover, identity-based societal security also highlights on the construction of threats – that is, on threats stemming from media images and politically interested warnings of experts. In contrast, the Norwegian term, for better or worse, is most often used to describe factual or ‘objective’ features of society that render it more or less resilient to actual dangers. But, regardless of the theoretical perspective we adopt on the origin of threats, both ‘objective’ factual threats and constructed threats differ in nature from those that are articulated in international settings.

The Term ‘Societal Security’ Is Not Used By Norway’s International Partners

Globalization has led to blurred boarders not only between countries but also between the notions of crisis and war. This blurring effect has resulted in the need to increase focus on improving coordination between civil and military means, both in official Norwegian declarations and in the mandates of Norway’s partners. Acknowledgement that security threats against Norway can be rooted in other countries or in other parts of the world has resulted in a sense among Norwegian officials that international partnerships (particularly cooperative efforts established through NATO, the EU and the UN) are necessary for addressing issues of Norwegian societal security. However, these organizations do not use the concept of societal security in ways that match its use by the Norwegian authorities. Indeed, the concept of societal security is only rarely found in official NATO, UN or EU documents. Instead, one finds overlapping and more specific terms in use – for example, ‘disaster risk reduction’, ‘resilience of nations and communities to disasters’, ‘civil protection’ and ‘civil emergency planning’.

Globalization of Threats and Reorganization of the Mandates and Organizational Structures of Norway’s Partners

Though one does not find the concept of societal security in NATO, the EU and the UN documents, these organizations are in tune with the description of the new risk landscape that has emerged in Norway since the end of the Cold War. Both governmental and nongovernmental organizations alike have shifted from a perspective of protecting civilians in wartime to integrating awareness of new hazard areas – such as natural disasters, technological accidents and environmental issues – as part of their operations.

NATO

In 1999, NATO agreed on a New Strategic Concept that reflected the new threat landscape following the end of the Cold War. NATO’s New Strategic Concept is primarily concerned with the kinds of new security challenges outlined above. These new threats are very much related to increased globalization: international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and international crime. In accordance with the globalized nature of such threats, NATO now regards the entire planet as its operational field, not just the geographical territories of its member-states, as exemplified in the deployment of NATO forces in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Afghanistan.

The European Union

Since Norway is not a member of the European Union, it does not participate in the development of the EU’s shared foreign and security policy.
response mechanisms, the creation of crisis centres.

The extension of what is seen as relevant territory over territories of member-states, there has been an extension of what is seen as relevant territory owing to the globalized nature of threats.

The United Nations

The UN is a global organization. It deals with many safety- and security-related issues, while peacebuilding, combating poverty and protecting human rights play a central role in its activities. These activities include empowerment of local communities, as well as the building of critical infrastructure and the provision of critical services for their inhabitants. The threat of terrorism has been an issue for the UN since its very beginning, though terrorism has been increasingly important at all levels of the organization since 11 September 2001. The UN Security Council has also been active in countering terrorism, both through its resolutions and through the establishment of several subsidiary bodies. Since terrorism is a key issue for many different agencies, committees and programmes within the organization – for example, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (C-TED), the United Nations Development Programme and the International Atomic Energy Agency – the UN developed a global counter-terrorism strategy in 2006 to ensure coordination of counter-terrorism activities within the UN and its member-states.

Can the Norwegian Approach to Societal Security Contribute to International Approaches?

Norwegian authorities recognize that the threat posed by international terrorism has grown in significance for Norwegian societal security. International terrorism is a global threat, one that has also become an important dimension in the mandates of many of Norway’s international partners, as well as for NATO, the EU and the UN. The US concept of ‘homeland security’ (along with the US government department of the same name) is related to efforts to prevent terrorist attacks, reduce vulnerability to terrorism and recover from possible terrorist attacks. The concept of homeland security, however, has been criticized as being too narrow and too focused on military-type threats and solutions. By taking a wider and more societal approach to the threat of terrorism, Norway is already positioning itself both strategically and politically in relation to the USA.

The EU’s role in providing for the safety and security of the citizens is growing steadily in importance, but it lacks coherence and a strategic direction. Some scholars have suggested that the EU might adopt societal security as an overall strategy. A societal security approach does not prescribe a single, unified policy to manage modern threats. On the contrary, it directs attention to a variety of different policies, resources and capabilities that can be applied on a daily basis to protect the population. The key is to understand the commonalities among policies and to ensure that resources are mobilized to the greatest effect. The need for such a societal security strategy is rooted in the impact of globalization processes within the EU. As is well known, globalization has prompted a shift from state-centric, territorial-based notions of power and authority towards network-based and horizontal means of ‘driving’ society. Yet, at the same time, modern threats come not from states but from nebulous sources. Terrorists, for example, operate in networks that are flexible and agile, able to reconfigure themselves to seize new opportunities and address challenges as they arise. It follows that governments must respond with equally horizontal, cross-border and flexible means to combat threats.

Conclusions

The post-Cold War shift in the focus of security thinking away from national security and towards society’s own vulnerabilities and globalized threats is found within the UN, NATO and the EU, though these organizations do not use the term ‘societal security’ to refer to an overall strategy. Although ‘societal security’ is sometimes used in official UN, NATO and EU documents in the same way that it is used within Norwegian discourse, these organizations more often use other related and more specific concepts instead. Societal security is a complex matter. While the concepts of civil protection, civil emergency planning, homeland security, etc. are related to the concept of societal security, they are much more connected to specific scenarios or threats than is the case for societal security.
Societal security is a useful overall strategy both for the authorities and for the inhabitants within a given society. However, when it comes to the actual content of the term or how societal security is to be achieved, the concept is vague, and it does not offer specific advice or strategies. The fact that the term is not connected to any specific scenario or threat can make it difficult to grasp. On the other hand, too much focus on one type of threat will automatically reduce the attention given to other possible risks society might face. In the real world, there is a need for prioritization in relation to the amount of resources that are to be spent on crisis prevention and the risks that should be mitigated for. Societal security puts security as an overall strategy in the society, building on the notion that society should be resilient against both everyday crisis and extraordinary crisis.

The vagueness of the term ‘societal security’ and the fact that the expression is already being used with a different meaning in research connected to the Copenhagen School may make it difficult to export the Norwegian concept of societal security to the international setting. In Norwegian settings, the term samfunnssikkerhet is sometimes translated as ‘societal safety’. However, using ‘societal safety’ instead of ‘societal security’ will not solve the problem noted above, since the term ‘societal security’ is found in international research with the same meaning as the Norwegian expression.

There is little new in the notion of a new threat landscape, and the idea that globalization has had an impact on the nature of potential threats is also found within NATO, the EU and the UN. Nor is the idea of societal security the sole property of the Norwegian setting. The question, then, is whether Norway’s international partners have anything to learn from the concept of societal security, or whether the Norwegian term is so broad and vague that the benefits of its use can be questioned.