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Explaining Security Agenda Setting: Beyond the Domestic Realm

Problem

WHY DO GOVERNMENTS classify some issues as ‘security threats’ but not others? To refer to something as a matter of security implies a sense of urgency, high politics, life and death. This is a major reason why the concept is being used by decision makers as well as scholars who, as a way of assuring an issue’s importance, define it as a security problem. There are many examples of this practice, and it is no longer unusual to consider economic, ecological, political, societal as well as military issues as security problems. Issues are open to ‘securitisation’ (and ‘desecuritisation’), i.e. dramatising them as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998: 21-26; Wæver, 1995).

In a research project conducted by this author, security agenda setting is approached by using a theory of agenda setting complemented with notions of framing and securitisation.¹ This framework is applied in a case study of Sweden. However, neither this approach nor a single case study can account for all aspects of agenda setting. A puzzle that remains to be solved is the potential impact of international influence and diffusion in security agenda setting. This has been neglected in the literature on agenda setting and securitisation.

Agenda Setting and Securitisation

Combining Approaches

This project combines agenda setting and framing (specifically securitisation). Securitisation theory fails to explain why some instances of securitisation influ-

¹ The research project is conducted at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. For a more elaborated discussion, see Eriksson (2000).

ence the agenda but not others. Here agenda setting theory is helpful. On the other hand, agenda setting theory pays limited attention to the political significance of classifying issues, or of framing more generally. Thus much can be gained by combining the two perspectives.

Issues that get onto the agenda of the national government as ‘security threats’ are a useful criterion of *politically salient* securitisation. This is more specific than the vague criterion of ‘acceptance’ by ‘the audience’ suggested by the ‘Copenhagen School’ of security studies (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998: 25). Anyone may make a securitisation or desecuritisation move, but only some influence the governmental agenda.

In brief, the analytical framework applied in this project consists of six analytical concepts. First, *policy entrepreneurs*, without which no item would get onto any agenda. In addition, there are a number of processes that have to be considered: *framing*, the *problem stream*, the *policy stream*, the *political stream*, and finally ‘the coupling of streams’ through *policy windows*.

Policy entrepreneurs: the ‘security establishment’

Whenever an issue is brought into the security realm, top decision makers are almost by definition involved in the process. In addition, the security policy community can be expected to be integrated and closed rather than fragmented and open. In contrast, it could be suspected that the broadening of the security concept also broadens the range of participants, including political parties, the media, interest organisations, researchers and other nongovernmental agents. This would lead to a fragmentation of or at least to a less closely knit security establishment. Of this an indication might be the increased party struggles over foreign and security policy, witnessed not least in Sweden (Bjereld and Demker 1995; Karlsson 1995).

Traditionally, however, participation has been limited, as observed in empirical studies of Swedish security policy making in the 1970s (Hart, 1976; Sjöstedt, 1986). It is noteworthy how stable and tenacious this ‘security establishment’² has been even until the present day. The institutions of this establishment remain the same as in the 1970s—despite very significant cutbacks in the military budget, a downscaling of the military forces with more than 50 per cent, and the closing down of almost half of Sweden’s military bases. While the security agenda has been widened, and the threat of armed attacks downplayed, the security establishment remains untouched. Importantly, the institutions of the security estab-

lishment have been key agents in the widening of security that today is official policy. It appears that if any major change of official security thinking is to take place, ideas will first have to be embraced by the security establishment.

Securitisation and widening of the threat agenda

Framing is one of those heuristics people employ to make sense of the complex world they live in. Schön and Rein (1994: 29) see framing as ‘symbolic contests over the meaning of an issue domain, where meaning implies not only what is at issue, but what is to be done’. In this perspective, issues such as ‘threats’, ‘risks’ and ‘security problems’ are frames with negative connotations. This is in accordance with securitisation:

The securitization approach serves to underline the responsibility of talking security, the responsibility of actors as well as analysts who choose to frame an issue as a security issue. They cannot hide behind the claim that anything in itself constitutes a security issue. (Buzan et al, 1998: 34)

Securitisation usually implies a few specific connotations: urgency, state responsibility, and that extraordinary means such as secrecy and state violence are legitimised. A most likely effect is that securitisation helps putting an issue high on the agenda (Wæver, 1995: 75; Buzan, 1997: 14, 21). Framing seems to be particularly important if the category an issue is put into has a strong symbolic character, as in the case of securitisation (Nelson, 1984: 27; Hinnfors, 1995: 143). Therefore the practice of tacking ‘security’ to issues is very contestable, and might have more to do with electoral needs, ideological motives, and power interests than the problems themselves.

The Swedish case study demonstrates significant differences between framing issues as military or non-military threats. Every threat on the agenda is not considered to be equally important. Despite a widening of the agenda, the perceived threat of armed attacks is still considered as the most serious of all. This is also indicated by the common distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ threats.

In terms of geographical concerns, the Baltic Sea area—the major concern of this conference—is not even mentioned in Swedish security policy bills and other primary documents. At least not in terms of a region with certain characteristics,

² Some of its more significant institutions are the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Headquarter of the Armed Forces (HKV), the Defence Research Establishment (FOA), the Agency of Civil Emergency Planning (ÖCB), and the Defence College (FHS). All of these institutions are located in Stockholm

problems and opportunities. The Baltic Sea area is only indirectly touched upon, as Russia is still seen as the most significant source of potential threats (Prop. 1999/2000:30, p. 33). The perceived instability in Russia and the potential international consequences of this are the top priorities on the Swedish threat agenda. In addition, since 1999, Kosovo has a high position on the security agenda, and is thoroughly discussed in the most recent policy documents (Prop. 1999/2000:30; Prop. 1998/99:74).

Moreover, the scope of framing is not unlimited. In the Swedish case, even the broadest conception of threats is limited to a handful of specific issues. In addition to the top ranking threat of armed attacks (with both conventional and non-conventional weapons), the following issues are listed: radioactive fallout, severe disturbances on infrastructure (electricity, telecommunications, the media, water supply), flooding, mass flows of refugees, pandemics, chemical accidents, and information warfare (Prop. 1996/97:11, pp.14-15; Prop. 1995/96:12, pp. 8, 46; Prop. 1998/99:74; Ds 1999:2, p. 87).

The problem stream

Though some conditions have already become framed as problems, they do not always get the same attention from officials. The indicators used for problem recognition, by dramatic events, crises, or the personal experience of a policy maker explain this (Kingdon, 1995: 90-109; Jönsson, Kronsell & Söderholm, 1995: 15; Hermann, 1990: 12).

The traditional dominance of military threats on the Swedish security agenda is partly explained by the established and institutionalized military defence and intelligence service. It has been the primary task of these institutions to identify, monitor, and guard against military threats. This is hardly unique to Sweden, but is rather a reflection of the established world system of Westphalian states. When events or crises of a military nature are recognized there is an institutionalized mechanism for securitizing them and putting them on the agenda. There is no intelligence system or institutional voice of comparable strength for the recognition and securitisation of non-military issues. Dramatic events may provide the push for agenda setting, but if the securitisation of them is not institutionalized, their position on the agenda as *security threats* will most likely be *temporary*.

It is thus not surprising that the securitisation and agenda setting of 'new' non-military issues largely are a result of the changes within the military and intelligence system itself. To the extent that 'new' problems such as refugees, orga-

nized crime, vulnerability of information systems etc. get onto the agenda as *security threats*, it is because the security establishment itself is developing a system for monitoring these phenomena. For example, the Swedish military intelligence administration has recently arranged conferences and employed experts on nationalism, terrorism, and information technology.

The policy stream

The concept of 'policy stream' refers to the process of planning and persuasion that is conducted by politicians, specialists, analysts, researchers, staffers, planners and similar people. Ideas, proposals and problems are discussed, revised and tried out. If an idea is to be accepted, it is first necessary to 'soften up' the decision-makers, the public and the policy community itself. This is not about mobilization of numbers or showing the 'lobby muscle', but about persuasion. Ideas, issues and problems may float at some point, drop, and float again. (Kingdon, 1995: Ch. 6; Hermann, 1990: 12, 18-19). Bureaucratic theory in general and securitisation theory in particular emphasises the linkage between bureaucratic turf and agenda setting. If military invasion is no longer considered a threat to Sweden—defence politicians, officers and security analysts seek other tasks for their expertise. Therefore it is not surprising that many of them advocate a widened security concept. Simultaneously, researchers and experts on nationalism, migration, economy, organised crime, information technology etc. see an opportunity to get funding for their research projects if they frame them as being about 'security problems' (Goldmann, 1997: 12; Wæver, 1995: 48-49; Eriksson, 1999).

The political stream

It is noteworthy that while *persuasion* is the main activity in the policy stream, bargaining is the main behaviour in the political stream.³ What matters here is, for instance, creating a winning party coalition, anchoring an idea in the public opinion, being stimulated by the national mood, and judging the degree of consensus or conflict among organised political interests. Turnover provides an important push, and often seen as a major agenda setting opportunity (Kingdon, 1995: 154-159). In Sweden the impact of change of administration on the threat

³ Thus, when referring to the 'political stream', the word 'political' is used in its narrow, everyday sense. This is quite different from the much broader meaning in political science, including almost every aspect of authoritative allocation of values, as Easton put it, or the struggle over who gets what when and how, as Lasswell put it. See Kingdon (1995: 145).

agenda has been rather limited. The differences between the threat perceptions of the political parties have been downplayed by the parliamentary defence commission's effort to reach a compromise. Furthermore, it might be easier to establish a common view on what the threats are than how these threats should be counteracted. It is not surprising that the party conflicts have been much harder concerning the defence budget and the restructuring of the military defence.

The coupling of streams: policy windows

Each of the four processes discussed—framing, problems, policies and politics—may serve as an impetus as well as a constraint for agenda setting (Kingdon, 1995: 18, 197). Policy windows are usually open only for a brief time during which entrepreneurs must act if they are to set the agenda (Keeler, 1983). They have to 'strike when the iron is hot'. When all four processes serve as an impetus at one and the same time, there is a good chance that the issue reaches not only the wider governmental agenda but also the decision agenda (Kingdon, 1995: Ch. 8; Hinnefors, 1995: 44-46). Of this a good example is how the peacetime 'submarine threat' emerged on the agenda in the 1980s. The 'problem stream' was the main opener of the policy window: the dramatic intrusion and grounding of Soviet submarine U137—the 'Whiskey on the Rocks'—deep into Swedish waters in 1981. Policy entrepreneurs immediately lined up and pushed the issue onto the agenda—not only did journalists make a spectacular news story of the event, but naval officers had been warning about Soviet submarines for years, and defence politicians, and security analysts were all deeply concerned. Framing was also important, as there was some discussion about whether the submarine intrusion was actually a 'security threat' or simply a case of bad navigation on behalf of the submarine crew. Nevertheless, foreign submarines became a 'security threat' throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s. The policy stream produced a long series of reports, and promoted an improvement of surveillance and submarine hunting capability (SOU 1983:13). Some 500 incidents were reported for the 1980s only. Politically, a majority supported the securitisation of the submarine issue, at least until new studies indicated that many of the incidents—except for the U137 of course—might have been minks or fish rather than foreign submarines. In sum, all 'streams' were coupled, and the submarine issue remained high on the threat agenda for more than a decade.

There seems to be one necessary condition however: that reconceptualisation occurs within the security establishment itself. This is illustrated by the notable

difference between the unsuccessful securitisation of environmental issues and the striking success for the securitisation of information technology (IT). 'Environmental security' has been advocated for a great many years by a large group of IR scholars and also some political parties and interest organisations, especially the Green party. In contrast, only recently but very rapidly 'IT threats' and 'information warfare' have emerged as one of the greatest concerns for top ranking officers, defence politicians, security experts and researchers. Apparently, the securitisation of IT appealed much more to the security establishment than 'environmental security'. IT and information operations correspond much better than ecological problems to the traditional notion of security, requiring analogies of war and enemies with evil purposes, be they antagonistic states, terrorists or hackers. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the Internet has a military origin. But information warfare is perhaps only a new word for the intelligence gathering, espionage and subversive activities that has accompanied warfare throughout history.

International Influences

A gap between theory and reality

The approach outlined above highlights a number of important aspects for explaining agenda setting, especially the significance of the security establishment, and the impact of policy windows in which 'streams' are coupled. The Swedish case study has contributed to the corroboration and development of this approach.

However, the case study has also demonstrated a major weakness in the theories of agenda setting and securitisation: the surprising silence regarding international factors. Yet the historical record of the Swedish threat agenda reveals a pattern of change and continuity that obviously coincide with international trends. The widening of the security concept in the 1970s happened during a time of international détente, and reflected the emergence of 'economic security' thinking in the US. When the new cold war commenced in the early 1980s, the non-military issues on the Swedish threat agenda either vanished or received far less attention than before. Likewise, the Swedish reconceptualisation of security in the mid 1990s was a blueprint of the reorientation of security thinking in America and the European scene. Indeed, in 1996 the Swedish government explicitly observed that 'most countries have already redefined their view of security', implying a more comprehensive view of threats and risks (Prop. 1995/96:12, p. 31).

Nevertheless, studies of agenda setting and securitisation pay little or no attention to international factors. Notable exceptions are a few agenda setting studies which deal with foreign policy and international organizations (Durant & Diehl, 1989; Jönsson, Kronsell & Söderholm, 1995; Kronsell, 1997), and a brief discussion of securitisation in the EU (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). But security policy is almost by definition a part of international politics. The hard core of security policy has always been to maintain territorial integrity and state autonomy even in the face of external threats, particularly military threats from other states. Therefore, 'security' agenda setting is generally dependent on international events and measures taken by other states. The combined importance of domestic, international and transnational forces are increasingly being emphasized in international relations theory in general, and foreign policy theory in particular (Risse-Kappen, 1994). International actors are probably more important for agenda setting in the security realm than in others (cf. Hermann, 1990: 15-16). That security agenda setting is becoming an increasingly international or even supranational activity is most notable within the complex 'European security architecture' of NATO, EU, WEU, OSCE and their institutional offspring. It is also clear that the wider European level is much more significant for security agenda setting than the subregional level, for instance the Baltic Sea area. Security thinking within the Baltic Sea area is affected by the wider European security discourse, but is hardly making an impact on the European level. It is high time international influences, or indeed the importance of international agenda setting in its own right, are incorporated in theorising on agenda setting and securitisation.

In terms of agenda setting, the end of the Cold War provided a paradigmatic policy window that suddenly removed the threat of large scale war in Europe. This opened up for major transformations of security policy throughout the world (Risse-Kappen, 1994). Governments and security advisors went looking for new problems to put on their suddenly empty threat agendas. This opened the window for ideas already floating around in the policy community, such as 'widened security', 'common security', 'security community', and 'cooperative security'. Suddenly the government turned to advisors, specialists, analysts and researchers not only for getting advice on policy alternatives, but also for identifying new challenges and problems.

The potential significance of international influences will now be briefly illustrated by arguing that the current Swedish fear of information warfare is a case of import of ideas from North America.

Information warfare on the agenda: a case of American diffusion?

Since 1995 'information warfare', 'IT threats' and similar notions have obtained a top position on the Swedish threat agenda. There are many indications that this conception has been imported from American security discourse. First, the terminology is the same as that which has been developed overseas: 'information warfare', 'information operations', 'cyberterrorism, etc. Often key terms are not even translated to Swedish, as in the case of *Arbetsgruppen för Information Warfare*, AgIW (the Defence Ministry's working group on information warfare). The AgIW also controls a number of 'Red teams' (which is their official Swedish name) whose function is to test the vulnerability of important IT systems. Second, in defence bills and other official documents there are direct references to American influence, for instance regarding Swedish imitation of US 'cyberwarfare combat practice'. Third, in conferences, seminars and reports, Swedish security experts are voicing ideas and lessons learned from recent visits to colleagues in the US.

The Y2K (millennium computer) bug is perhaps the most obvious example of international (indeed global) securitisation of information technology. Canadian computer expert Peter de Jager omitted the first public warning of the bug already in the 1960s. It was not until the early 1990s however, specifically after a doomsday article published in *Computer World*, that the issue was securitised and got onto the agendas of states (FT 2000: 4). In Sweden the securitisation of the Y2K bug had an enormous impact. The Swedish Agency of Civil Emergency Planning coordinated a huge campaign of preparing Swedish government and society for the perceived crisis. Politicians and experts feared all possible disasters, ranging from breakdown of supply of electricity to riots and even nuclear catastrophes. Between January 1997 and December 1999, the government issued 21 major decisions regarding the Y2K bug. A temporary 'catastrophe command central' was set up. On New Years Eve 1999, Sweden was prepared almost as for war. Indeed, Sweden was one of the most well prepared countries of the world. Though the bug was real, the expected consequences were exaggerated. Only minor incidents were reported.

Finally, there is reason to make a comparative outlook. Whether Sweden is representative of an international trend, or is a deviant case, has to be settled by making comparative studies. Comparisons with other countries in the Baltic Sea area are of interest, especially in light of the efforts of creating a common security discourse in this region. It has been observed that threat images among the Baltic Sea countries are converging. The Baltic states, for instance Estonia, are no longer

holding on to their traditional military focused threat agenda, in which Russia is perceived as the one and only threat to survival. It has been suggested that this is happening either because the Baltic states are adapting to western security discourse in order to facilitate their entry into Nato and the EU (Noreen 2000), or because the Nordic states successfully have been 'tutoring' their Baltic neighbours (Archer and Jones 2000), or perhaps because of a combination of these reasons. Considering 'IT threats' and 'information warfare', however, the securitisation of these is far less common in the Baltic states than in Sweden. In general, however, threat conceptions in the Baltic Sea area seem to be converging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are good reasons to take a closer look at international influences in the study of agenda setting and securitisation. International factors however should not be treated as an additional theoretical category, but should rather be studied within the existing categories of the agenda setting approach: policy entrepreneurs, framing, the streams of problem, policy and politics, and finally the coupling of streams through policy windows. Even when studying agenda setting within a given polity, there is reason to consider influences and interactions across its boundaries.

Nevertheless, though international trends and influences have a significant impact on the threat agendas of states, these are never sufficient explanations. Without policy entrepreneurs willing and able to seize the opportunity, the issue will lose its salience and fade away from public memory. It appears that the most important policy entrepreneurs are found within the remarkably stable security establishment of the state. Despite the emergence of a widened security agenda, and downscaling of military forces, the security establishment remains the same as during the Cold War. Without the consent of the security establishment, a change of the threat agenda is very unlikely. It remains to be studied, however, whether the constitution and power of the security establishment in other states and on other decision making levels are similar or different from that of Sweden.

This leads to a new question that has yet to be pondered: are threat agendas national or international? The simple answer is that it is an analytical choice to study the agenda of a particular government or decision making level. Empirically, however, the issue is puzzling. In Europe, it remains an open question to what extent and in what form security agenda setting is a national, international or perhaps a multilevel process.

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