

Alyson J. K. Bailes

International security threats and research  
challenges

aus:

Zur Eröffnung des Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker-Zentrums  
für Naturwissenschaft und Friedensforschung.

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Alyson J. K. Bailes

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY THREATS  
AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES

Dear ladies and gentlemen!

First of all I would like to congratulate the University of Hamburg for the establishment of this new centre for Science and Peace Research. In particular, I would like to extend my best wishes to Martin Kalinowski for a fruitful build-up of this new institution.

Introduction: picturing the challenge

To describe today's global security conditions with any simple phrase or image is impossible: unless we fall straight into paradox and say that complexity or diversity is the one thing that all our problems have in common. One image that I do find quite useful for myself is a geological one. We can think of different layers or strata of security challenge forming different environments in which different parts of the world's population predom-

inantly live; but just as in a mountain or other geological structure, all these layers are simultaneously present and there are natural processes – including some quite dramatic ones like volcanic action and earthquakes – that interlink them permanently and can even physically mix them up at times.

The top layer – and I do not mean top in any moral sense, but simply the most modern or post-modern type of threat picture – would then represent the security situation that is typical for most rich developed nations today, including several hundred million Europeans. Since the end of the Cold War we no longer face the threat of complete nuclear annihilation or traditional military attack; nor do we face the 20th century type of ideological challenge – democracy and the market economy have become by far the world’s most widely adopted systems, even if they are still not really practised everywhere they are proclaimed. What we do have to worry about are the universal human dangers like epidemic disease, natural disasters and climate change; and the vulnerability of the hi-tech infrastructures on which we depend more than ever in history for our survival; and the weaknesses and contradictions that are thrown up by the very evolution of our own systems in terms of social and economic contradictions, internal law and order, political legitim-

acy, and vulnerability to transnational human movements like terrorism and illegal migration. The way I have placed these last points in the spectrum may surprise you: but I would argue that the forms taken today by the linked challenges of migration, multi-ethnic societies and the transnational variety of terrorism are among other things also a product of the combination between globalization – which allows people to move between civilizations and civilizations to interact with each other not always painlessly – and of democracy which tells us to give equal access and rights to all groups living in our societies, rather than defending ourselves with the cruder methods of discrimination, suppression and exclusion that were so popular in history before.

With all this, we know that there are not just millions but billions of people in the world who would be delighted to have the kind of problems that we have. In the strata that come at the bottom of the geological (or in this case, the economic) pile, huge numbers of people are struggling for the very basics of existential security – food, water, fuel and medicine, not to mention basic social rights like jobs and education. Others are direct or indirect victims of the internal armed conflicts that are still widespread but now largely confined to developing nations in the East and South. Universal threats like AIDS, natural

disasters, climate change and degradation of the environment strike these vulnerable societies much harder than ours in terms of total lives lost, but also of damage to the functionality of the state and the economy. Last but not least, the old-style threat of conflict between states is far from having disappeared from many regions of tension and rivalry, and still affects nations who may seem to be in a relatively high-up layer in terms of their economic and political development. Their efforts to prepare for such potential struggles throw up problems that touch us all – most obviously if they possess or seek to obtain a nuclear capability, but also through all the other kinds of damage that can be done by local arms races and the excessive militarization of state budgets and social psychologies.

This already highlights one way in which the strata or layers of my geological image interact. There are other permanent interconnections in the way that our global economy functions, notably but not only in the circulation of strategic energy supplies and of wastes; in tourism and transport; in what has become a global single market for the smuggling of everything from women to small arms to mass destruction technologies; in the spread of global information and communications systems; and in the shadowy environment where terrorists and their



supporters and suppliers operate around the globe. There are also events like the earthquakes I mentioned before, when violent processes cut across the different layers and may leave them permanently bent or broken. These may start as it were from below, when a particularly cruel conflict or a genocide or other human catastrophe cries out for international intervention; but we have also seen all too clearly in recent years how an earthquake can start from the top, as in the US-led invasions first of Afghanistan and then of Iraq which are still generating tremors powerful enough to shake us all.

For such a distinguished audience I hardly need to spell out my next point, namely the challenges of governance that all these different phenomena and interconnections pose for all actors in the global system. What rules should govern the peaceful interplay of the different actors; their cooperation against shared dangers like avian 'flu'; their response to transnational human challenges like terrorism; or the handling of cases that demand or seem to demand intervention, particularly when the state concerned is not consenting? These questions are obviously linked to the capacities, goals, priorities and procedures of international institutions: at global level like the UN and its agencies and the WTO, but also regionally where the cooperative group-

ing of states for security purposes is now a trend spreading far beyond Europe. The same questions apply to the policies of individual states, and most obviously to the most powerful players with the greatest capacity for intervention. I believe that similar questions about rules and priorities, and about building capacities for right action, should now also be extended to non-state actors because these are not only sources of problems like terrorists or smugglers or brutal insurgents: they can also help us control and solve the problems if properly empowered and guided, whether we think of the private business sector, of NGOs, civil society groupings or the responsible media. And there is yet one more dimension of complexity to add, both for research and policy-making: because as the great German genius Alfred Wegener taught us, the continents are moving all the time. The geological image I have tried to draw here is never static: every layer of security threat is growing or shrinking or mutating and the system's interconnections are naturally also in constant evolution, driven both by human choices and forces beyond human control. However good policies we may have for one security challenge at one particular time, their value will rapidly erode unless they also include a large provision for change management.

## What is peace research?

It is time to turn to the second part of my topic and talk about the task of security-related research, and more particularly peace research, in the contemporary world. I could now use up all my time just talking about definitions, because there is almost endless room for argument about what falls within the concept of 'security', whether the scope of security research corresponds exactly to that or could be different, and whether the proper scope of 'peace' research is the same as security research or wider or narrower. To save time, permit me just to offer my own not particularly well-informed answers to these questions. First of all I favor a very wide definition of security, something like the notion of 'human security' that has been so actively developed lately, but perhaps even wider than that. This is because I think it is morally better, but also less likely to lead to policy mistakes, if we try to stay aware of all the different things that are perceived and experienced as a threat to human life and welfare in all the different regions and layers of the global system; and if we acknowledge that the workings and impact of these challenges are now influenced by factors going far beyond the traditionally defined defense and security sphere, whether in the realm of the economy, social dy-

namics, science and technology development, or culture and psychology.

Secondly, I think security research should cover at least as many things as populations worry about and institutions try to find answers for, even if we have to admit that some of these are less inherently 'researchable' than others (and I will come back to that later). Thirdly, I think we do best to see peace research as being potentially as wide as security research, and then discuss whether it can leave out certain functional areas or, indeed, needs to add on others. I base this on my own belief that 'peace' is not just the absence of war, just as the meaning of 'security' is no longer limited to its Latin origin of the 'absence of care' – *sine cura*. In the world of conflict research we very rarely define the goal now as 'making peace' or 'restoring peace' because we know that a so-called peace settlement is at best only the start of a solution, and that conflicts and atrocities generally happen because there was no true peace in that environment before. The currently acceptable phrase of 'peace building', which we see in the title of a new UN Commission just starting its work now, comes closer to reality because it implies that a sustainable peace which protects not only people's lives but their rights and their quality of life is a complex, multi-functional creation includ-

ing improvements in governance, the economy, social distribution and inter-communal relations as well as the more obvious agendas of external and internal security. Building this kind of peace calls on all the different tools of security expertise but on many more as well, and it demands to be given adequate time – even if having a coherent overall design for the building is also extremely important. The corresponding challenge for research is to understand how all these different features of governance interact both in a failed and conflict-ridden society and in the peaceful society that we are aiming for – bearing in mind that the good society is not a single worldwide template but must be designed and owned by its own people – and if we want actually to promote good outcomes, we must study and advise also on how different types of international and local input can best help to achieve that goal.

We are still, however, at a very generalized level here and I would also like to raise some more specific issues about the scope, the purpose, and the current demands of peace research.

### What to study?

If we ask what exactly peace researchers are meant to study, we will see that the main centers of peace research since the mid-

20th century have all made somewhat different choices. My own institute, SIPRI, was created and tasked to do empirical research on essentially quantifiable processes of military spending, arms production and arms transfers including the development and distribution of WMD; to which in the 1990s we added systematic data collection and analysis on armed conflict processes throughout the world. We have also studied, throughout, the main institutions seeking to manage security processes and the political relationships that lie behind them. Other institutes have chosen to focus on more theoretical and philosophical questions about human tendencies to violence or reconciliation, and on the associated ethical issues; on social and cultural processes including the role of religion and gender; on functional dimensions of security such as the environment or various economic interactions; on a humanitarian agenda of human welfare or a political one of the promotion of human rights; or at the other extreme, on technical developments in weaponry and other destructive techniques – to which I am sure others could add further variations. I would find it hard to say that any of these choices is better, or more typical of or ‘central’ to peace research than others. But if we do accept them all as legitimate, we must also admit that it is hard to distinguish between peace

research and general 'security research' on the grounds of their subject-matter alone.

### What methods?

In the same way, if we look for distinguishing features in the technical methods or methodology of peace research, I would have to conclude at once that they come only at the margins. We are like any other researchers in our need to gather, analyze and process facts; in our need for inputs of many kinds from documentary to living human sources, and in the value of gaining direct field experience; in the range of ways that we have to make our findings known or to offer our advice; and in the constant need to update and adapt our working methods to today's new networking opportunities and our publishing strategies to the latest possibilities of IT. One thing we share with others working in the field of defense and security is that the data we seek are often hard to get at, deliberately hidden and falsified, distorted by subjectivity, or hard to quantify at all because of the diffuse nature of the processes involved – above all where non-state actors come into the picture. In fact one of our most interesting challenges is to find ways of broadening the scope of our collecting and quantifying methods so that – for instance –

we could assess not just traditional military expenditure but also what states are being driven to spend on homeland security or anti-terrorist measures, and how wisely they are spending it; or so that we could produce conflict statistics that capture all the deaths and damage caused indirectly by conflicts and the associated migrations; or so that we could report the deaths caused by political oppression and social violence even in the absence of a recognized 'conflict'. Peace researchers can therefore never forget that the quality and transparency of data is a value in itself, and that part of our duty as peace researchers is to share any good information we can get with the widest possible range of other legitimate users. It is no accident that both SIPRI and other peace research centers have worked hard to create large, free, publicly available databases and other information services. I believe that peace research has also been and remains particularly open to working with and learning from other disciplines such as finance and economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, gender studies, and numerous branches of the physical and earth sciences. This is, of course, one of the things that makes the boundaries of our profession so confusing and difficult to draw and it greatly aggravates our challenges of methodology: but it can also often lead to the greatest intellectual



excitements and the most promising policy solutions. Just to mention the latest interface between peace studies and the natural sciences: what could be more challenging than to consider what the impact of global warming (including the knock-on effect on disease patterns) may be on people's security and welfare in their original habitats, and on international security if the result is to make them want more of their neighbours' territory and goods? What security threats may lie in the wrongful application of the latest emerging breakthroughs in bio-science like genome mapping and genetic modification and in the field of nanotechnology, and what new concepts and partners should we look to for constructive solutions? How could science help us to resolve the very important outstanding problems and arguments about verification and analysis of nuclear activities relevant to security, or the core challenge of making civil nuclear energy production more 'resistant' to proliferation in future?

#### What for?

The single biggest and toughest question is always, however, what we are doing peace research for: for what goals, and norms, and principles? At its simplest I suppose we want more peace in that broad definition I suggested above, which can be

different from 'more security' because it is only too obvious how the search for more security for some can end by damaging the peace and welfare of others. This is one among several reasons why institutes like my own often make a principle of their impartiality or their objective, 'scientific' approach to the facts of security challenge. Not only is this the key to ensuring our access to all relevant players and sources of information, and our ability to play an active part as mediators when appropriate: but 'taking sides' between nations or institutions, between fighting factions or different companies or even between other NGOs, would risk that we become part of the problem in a way that must eventually erode both our ability to observe and our legitimacy to offer new solutions.

On the other hand, if we never 'took sides' at all, how could we defend our task as moral individuals and define our comparative advantage as professionals? We are never free from responsibility in any case, because anything we say or we publish could trigger reactions from our official or non-official customers that will change the security environment for better or worse. It is better to talk frankly of what we want to achieve and to aim for it consciously, when we select and adapt our topics of study, and all the way through to our eventual public output. At

SIPRI we 'take sides' in favor of some fairly obvious things like the lasting resolution of conflicts, and holding of military spending and armaments to a necessary minimum; we have some more political preferences like favoring non-military responses to terrorism, non-violent solutions to proliferation, and the growth of regional security cooperation; and we work for some things that many other peace researchers would not agree with such as allowing the growth of civil nuclear energy production with minimum security risk. Others might also disagree with our readiness to work with the private business sector, or our specific support for the EU's policy development processes, or our maintenance of direct dialogues with Tehran and Pyongyang. I would not expect other peace institutes to share these choices but I do hope they will respect our decisions: because the world will surely gain most from a range of peace and security research bodies offering many different degrees and kinds of active policy engagement.

What I would like to suggest here, at the end, is that peace research and security research must both position themselves in the current of time as well as observing the other three dimensions of reality: they must have, and convey to others, the sense of going somewhere. This distinguishes them from purely his-

torical researchers and this, in human terms, most often inspires their individual workers to keep going in typically difficult or even dangerous conditions for typically quite inadequate pay. Or, to return to my first geological image, it is not enough for us to stand as it were on the edge of the Grand Canyon and look down through all the different strata, layers and interconnections of today's complex and dangerous world. We also have to help people to climb up from the depths of the most basic and cruel security predicaments; we have to help find ways for the layers to coexist and interact with as few destructive earthquakes as possible; and we sometimes have to engage and help others to engage in building castles in the air.