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# Everyday Security Practices in Asia

## Editorial

Marc von Boemcken

What associations come to mind if we think about security and danger in Asia? Our first thought might go to the conflicts between India and Pakistan or on the Korean peninsula, which foreground the threats of inter-state rivalries, arms races and nuclear weapons. We might also reflect on large-scale violence within states themselves, as for instance in Afghanistan or Myanmar. Studies on issues of in/security in Asia have addressed, among other things, refugee flows, political volatility, military interventions and transnational dangers such as religious terrorism or organised crime. To be sure: all of these topics are highly relevant. They remain of utmost concern in countless recent writings in political science and its sub-disciplines of International Relations (IR) and Security Studies.

Still, this Special Issue wants to approach the subject matter of security in Asia from a different angle. It proceeds from the observation that such macroscopic perspectives only partially capture the complexity and heterogeneity of the issue at hand. Critical writings have pointed out for quite some time that the meaning of “security” is intersubjectively constructed and can, potentially, mean many different things to different people (e.g. Buzan et al. 1998). Asia is certainly no exception here. Who is to say that, for instance, nuclear weapons or terrorism are the most urgent and pressing security concerns for the continent? Whatever we consider worth securing, whatever we posit as dangerous and whatever strategies we devise for engaging and dealing with these perceived threats – all of these things vary from one person to the next, from one social group to another. As Barry Buzan once famously put it, security remains an “essentially contested concept” (1991: 6–7).

If this is the case, then we should be careful not to treat security issues in Asia (or any other place, for that matter) as a given. Rather than approach security as a self-evident condition of existence to be objectively measured and improved upon, we ought to trace the ways in which various takes on security

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emerge through certain social practices. Traditionally, of course, the term security is closely aligned to the notion of statehood. Even writings concerned with “human” as opposed to “national” security tend to regard the state and its associated organs as the principle providers of security-related services. By way of contrast, more recent contributions have emphasised the individual as an agent of security in his or her own right (e.g. Lemanski 2012, Rowley / Weldes 2012, Jarvis / Lister 2013, Crawford / Hutchinson 2016, Gough et al. 2016). We all face insecurities and dangers, some of which are quite existential. Rather than security being solely an elite practice, a concern only for civil servants, experts and professionals, everybody thus “does” security in his or her everyday life.

This Special Issue wants to further explore this important insight across different cases in Asia. It goes beyond some of the well-rehearsed narratives of the mainstream media, policy makers or, indeed, academics and sheds light on the security practices of those who do not usually stand in the centre of security-related research. In doing so, the individual contributions certainly expand and perhaps even challenge more orthodox understandings of what security is all about. This has a not only empirical but also normative value. For such a perspective may reveal non-elite practices that transport vernacular counter-discourses to state-centric securitisation strategies, militarised states of exception and emergency politics.

In terms of their methodological take on things, all the articles collected here follow an ethnographic approach. Many go to what Michel Foucault referred to as the “extremities of power” (2003: 27); that is, to those micro-spaces where power, including the power of security, manifests itself in very concrete, often routine activities. Rather than in national security doctrines or other elite discourses, it is here that meanings of security become habitually enacted and reproduced. This does not necessarily imply a clear-cut break with top-down securitisation dynamics. At the very least, a careful exploration of these extremities can reveal a more nuanced picture of how state- or corporate-sponsored security narratives actually play out in the lives and doings of people.

The article by Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Johannes Herbeck and Irene Sondang Fitritinia in this issue is a good case in point here. It ties in nicely with numerous recent studies in Critical Security Studies that emphasise a host of pre-emptive techniques and technologies geared toward constructing resilient and vigilant bodies, often by means of militarising aspects of everyday life (e.g. Amoore 2007, Adey / Anderson 2012, Amin 2013, De Goede et al. 2014). So far, such practices have been examined primarily with a view to various measures implemented in European and North American societies in the context of the so-called war on terror. Yet, as Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Her-

beck and Fitrinitia convincingly demonstrate, they equally inform the securitisation of “flood cultures” in Manila. In both cases, everyday security practice consists in requirements to submit oneself to the highly technical and usually preventative security prescriptions of experts. To cope with flooding, then, would be less a matter of dealing and living with a quite natural phenomenon; neither would it be primarily about responding with exceptional actions to a sudden and spectacular emergency situation. It lends itself, rather, to a life governed (or disciplined) by what Jef Huysmans characterised as “little security nothings” (2011) and what Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Herbeck and Fitrinitia describe as a state of “normed exception”.

Crucially, however, the notion of the everyday as a docile object of an elitist security apparatus is only part of the picture. As other publications have pointed out, vernacular practices for engaging and coming to terms with dangers may also challenge and disrupt the security measures of states (e.g. Stevens / Vaughan-Williams 2016). It is worth noting here that many of the contributions to this issue, namely the ones by Nina Bagdasarova, Hafiz Boboyorov and Aksana Ismailbekova, adopt the analytical perspective of “securityscapes”. This perspective seeks to trace the ways in which either individual or collectively shared imaginations of danger manifest themselves in various social practices. The concept thus puts the spotlight on individual agents actively navigating spaces of in/security in their daily lives (Von Boemcken et al. 2018). Of course, empirical analyses of individual securityscapes may well reveal numerous congruencies with those “national” security strategies propagated from above. Importantly, however, they may equally resist these or, indeed, suggest an altogether different kind of security practice. The suffix “scapes” is, in this sense, inspired by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996), who used it to draw attention to what he considered a growing disjuncture between the experiential life-worlds of many people and the, to his mind, weakening grip of the nation-state on social collectives.

Although Appadurai did not use the term “securityscapes” himself, the contributions collected here show that such disjunctures can also be discerned in everyday security practices. Indeed, many of them highlight ways of dealing with dangers that fail to conform to elitist and/or state-centric accounts of security. They do this by tracing the securityscapes of socially marginalised individuals and/or groups, who usually cannot claim easy access to public institutions of security provision and thus have to rely, at least to some extent, on themselves for protection.

Whatever constitutes a marginalised group or person very much differs from case to case here. Some articles concentrate on ethnic and/or religious minority groups. In the wake of rising nationalism alongside efforts of cultural homogenisation in parts of Asia, they have come under increasing pressure, occasionally even meeting with outright violence. This includes the Uzbek

people in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. In June 2010 ethnic clashes between Uzbek and Kyrgyz inhabitants claimed several hundred lives over the course of only a couple of days, most of them Uzbek. Ismailbekova's article examines the creative ways in which Uzbek businesspeople in Osh continue to make a living in a difficult situation that remains troubled by severe ethnic tensions.

Bhumitra Chakma focuses on the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Given their history of social exclusion, displacement and violent oppression by the state, feelings of vulnerability are particularly intense and widespread here, again giving rise to a specific set of practices for preserving their identity as a cultural-linguistic group and ensuring their everyday livelihood.

Besides considering fairly close-knit ethnic and cultural minority groups, the contributions to the Special Issue also take other forms of marginalisation into account. Boboyorov examines the far more diverse and varied "Rusabon" or "Russified" peoples in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, whose loose affiliation with the Russian language and culture is at odds with a post-Soviet, ethnocentric identity politics that seeks to build a "Tajik" nation. In fact, as Boboyorov shows, some bodies may be marginalised all the more severely on the grounds of not being classifiable as belonging to any ethnicity or cultural group at all, as is the case with the so-called Metis, individuals with "mixed" ethnic heritage. Bagdasarova traces the security practices of individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in Kyrgyzstan, whose sexual orientation and/or gender identification run counter to the established moral norms of society and who frequently experience homophobic attacks. Finally, Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Herbeck and Fitrinitia touch upon the issue of socio-economic marginalisation when they discuss the insecurities and coping strategies of the urban poor in the coastal areas of Jakarta, Indonesia. Arguably, Chakma's assertion that security perceptions and practices are primarily formed by the experience of marginalisation can, to varying degrees, be applied to all of the cases presented in this issue.

Still, however, the contributions show that security remains a highly heterogeneous social phenomenon. Depending on the individual or group in question and the kinds of security practices analysed, they are concerned with very different threat perceptions. Some take a very broad approach. The securityscapes of the Rusabon in Boboyorov's article range from practices to protect oneself against crime to measures for remaining healthy to attempts to muster a sense of self-certainty and feeling of belonging in the world. Other pieces opt for a comparatively narrow scope. Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Herbeck and Fitrinitia concentrate on different ways of dealing with floods. Bagdasarova is primarily concerned with security from physical assault (and, although to a lesser extent, psychological harassment). Ismailbekova, by contrast, looks at

efforts to acquire economic security in a volatile, post-conflict context. Chakma, similarly, examines livelihood opportunities, yet expands the focus by taking into account practices for securing such a thing as “cultural identity”.

As different as the cases here certainly are in terms of the particular threat discussed, their common concern with socially marginalised groups and individuals does bring at least one overarching theme to the fore. Studies on security practices, including those on everyday and/or human security, often posit the state as the principal provider of security-related services, be it with regard to protection from physical attacks or, more broadly conceived, social welfare, health and feelings of national belonging. Yet, for most, if not all, of the cases presented in this Special Issue, this holds true only to a very limited extent. Some, like the owners of the LGBT nightclub in Bishkek interviewed by Bagdasarova, may indeed call upon the police when they are faced with trouble. For others, however, public security providers appear very much as a source of insecurity. The threat may be comparatively mundane, as for example with the Uzbek businesspeople in Osh who need to deal with corruption on a regular basis (Ismailbekova). It may also be quite severe and even existential. A number of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan do not turn to the police for help out of fear of being abused or beaten by them. The indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh consider themselves endangered in their collective identity by the logic of the nation-state and the violent practices it informs (Chakma). Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Herbeck and Fitrinitia, finally, point out that the informal settlers in the coastal parts of Jakarta, Indonesia, are regularly confronted with forceful evictions at the behest of public authorities.

Given the specific predicament of marginalised groups and individuals often having to look out for and fend for themselves, studies of their everyday security practices can therefore reveal certain ways and strategies for dealing with dangers that are commonly overlooked, downplayed or neglected in more state-centric accounts. Literature in Critical Security Studies usually associates security practices with the drawing of boundaries, distinguishing between self and other, inside and outside, friend and enemy. This is as true for the doings of states as it is for non-state and even marginalised groups. Maria Stern’s (2006) study on Mayan women in Guatemala, for instance, emphasises practices of othering, of constructing a sense of self-identity against the image of a threatening outsider. Such practices can also be found in some of the accounts in this Special Issue, particularly in the case studies of the Uzbek community in Osh (Ismailbekova) and of the indigenous people in Bangladesh (Chakma). Following the violence of 2010, the city of Osh has become highly segregated along ethnic lines and Uzbeks largely stick to their own neighbourhoods, or *mahallas*. Similarly, the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in

Bangladesh see themselves as endangered in their collective sense of belonging and thus attempt to further fortify their cultural identity against those who are deemed to be other. The drawing of self-constitutive boundaries between us and them is by no means a practice exclusive to states alone.

Yet, this Special Issue also collects various ways of coming to terms with everyday insecurities that do not easily fit into this schema. In fact, in many cases security involves, quite the contrary, the active crossing of social and/or physical boundaries. It consists in practices of mimicry and adaptation, concealment and avoidance. The contributions by Bagdasarova and Boboyorov, in particular, provide ample evidence for this. What is more, Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Herbeck and Fitrinitia show that some of the coastal poor in Jakarta traditionally deal with flooding by experientially integrating it into their daily routines and habits. Floods are not so much a problem that needs to be abolished; they are a phenomenon one needs to “live with”. Such insights from ethnographic field research can, arguably, go a long way towards questioning established normative epistemologies of security. By taking creative local agency seriously, they alert us to comparatively benign security-making practices that do not rely on the violence and discipline so prevalent in the writings of political scientists on the subject. It is from this vantage point that we might want to begin considering security – not only in Asia – in a different light.

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