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Convergence and divergence in Nordic societal securities

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Introduction

This book set out to explore how different Nordic countries, namely, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, discursively and practically treat the question of societal safety and security. We explored how discourses and practices related to the security of Nordic societies transformed in both similar and different ways in the region during the post-Cold War era, from the beginning of the 1990s to the 2000s. Moreover, we departed from the crude assumption that, because of their broadly similar social welfare systems, these countries also display a common approach to domestic security. Our focus was on the publicly deployed concepts that governments adopt in the pursuit of security. And we critically assessed the origin, development, and effect of those concepts. We built our study around the notion of ‘societal security’, a concept present in all societies but at different levels of institutionalisation, as an analytical starting point. From there we found both signs of convergence and patterns of divergence, and above all a set of constantly changing and overlapping conceptual discourses with quite significant implications for how security is approached in different countries.

By way of conclusion, this chapter draws out the main findings of the book as a whole. It begins by outlining key similarities in discourses and practices, before identifying areas of clear divergence. It then reflects upon some broader themes elicited by this book, not least regarding the gradual trajectories taken by these concepts, the politics behind their emergence, and the values reflected – for better or for worse – by their adoption. We conclude by offering three paths for future research on Nordic societal security.

Convergence and divergence in Nordic societal security

The impetus behind this book came from the casual assumption, present in some security writings (Hamilton 2006; NordForsk 2013), that Nordic safety and security policies reflect broadly similar conceptional moorings: wide views of threats, society itself as a central referent object, and a holistic form of security that mirrors comprehensive social welfare systems. The Nordic

origins of ‘societal security’ seem to reflect some degree of commonality in this respect. We set out to explore these assumptions and asked whether convergence or divergence characterises Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and Danish approaches to security. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found a degree of both. A brief overview of similarities and differences serves as a brief – albeit too brief – summary of the findings in the chapters.

Lines of convergence

To be sure, all countries and issues examined in this book confirmed the tendency in the Nordic region to embrace rather commodious security concepts. Whether ‘societal’ security in Sweden and Norway, ‘comprehensive’ security in Finland, the broad use of ‘resilience’ in multiple countries, or the widened discourse of security ‘uncertainties’ in Denmark, the trend is clear. These countries all pushed for a shift in security thinking towards concepts with an ‘all-hazards’ and ‘whole-of-society’ scope. Of course, this is not limited to the Nordic region. ‘Broad’ security concepts swept the globe at the end of the Cold War (Stritzel and Vuori 2016). But the countries studied in this book tended to so with particular gusto, using them to rethink and reorganise security and defence post-Cold War and post-11 September 2001.

Indeed, this might be explained in part by another cross-Nordic similarity: namely, the shared history of comprehensive, inclusive, and pan-sectoral (‘total’) defence planning during the Cold War. Particularly in Sweden and Finland, and to a significant degree in Norway and Denmark, peacetime planning for invasion and war was the *modus operandi* for governments during the latter half of the 20th century. Hence, in the Nordic countries, where a wide spectrum of actors – from government agencies to local municipalities and businesses to individual households and citizens – were to be included in the operation of both civil and military forms of defence planning, the subsequent leap to a similarly wide and inclusive (‘societal’) approach to post-Cold War security was more straightforward than it might initially appear.

The Nordic countries’ defence heritage also involved immaterial forms of defence planning and war preparedness. As observed in some chapters in this volume, defence models necessarily had to include mechanisms for generating a ‘will’ within the population to participate in defending the country. Captured by slightly different terms – e.g. ‘psychological’ defence in Sweden, ‘spiritual’ defence in Finland – the Nordic countries developed this approach not simply as nationalistic ‘propaganda’ to mobilise volunteers, but as a way to safeguard against enemy disinformation campaigns and foreign intelligence operations while simultaneously building a widespread trust and belief in the total defence enterprise among citizens (Larsson, and Hyvönen and Juntunen, respectively, this volume). This, we may reasonably suggest, can be strongly linked to the observation that current-day Nordic societies generally tend to have a ‘great public trust in the authorities’ compared to many other countries (NordForsk 2013, 15).

The general acceptance and inclusiveness in security, moreover, makes the Nordic societies and their approach to security stand out to some extent in relation to other regions and countries. In the US, for instance, where the ‘homeland’ security paradigm has dominated ever since the start of the so-called ‘war against terrorism’ era, citizen participation in everyday policing and surveillance follows a rationale driven perhaps more by fear and less by trust, and is typically forced upon the population via various public information campaigns such as ‘if you see something, say something’ (Larsson 2017; Petersen and Tjalve 2013). As noted in this volume, Nordic approaches to counterterrorism are more generally rooted in the notion of social welfare, and the terrorist threat is perceived as not necessarily some inherently violent and uncontrollable phenomenon, but an issue that may be prevented and managed by means of socialisation, integration, and care-taking (see Jore, this volume). Indeed, the discourse of ‘homeland security’ – including the connotations and implications that come with it in a US context – did not catch on in the Nordic region, as these countries did not to the same extent or in the same organised manner as many other Western states make a ‘hard turn’ towards coercive or potentially rights-infringing security practices aimed at monitoring certain individuals and preempting would-be terrorists. Rather, as the Nordic countries moved into the 2000s, they either implicitly or explicitly centred security on *society* – its vital functions, its ‘fabric’ – and not the ‘homeland’.

Lines of divergence

However, when it came to specifying or defining the already vague notion of ‘society’ for purposes of security work – e.g. when it came to further conceptualising and operationalising the notion of societal security – the Nordic countries began to diverge significantly. Societal security ranged from being used doctrinally in official policy (Norway), to being used in practice but in combination with a range of related concepts such as ‘crisis management’ (Sweden), to being ignored in favour of the similar-sounding ‘comprehensive’ security concept which essentially captured the same issues and solutions (Finland), to being rejected but nonetheless implicitly at work when conventional security actors were forced to rethink their organisation and mission in the post-Cold War period (Denmark).

Not only was the notion of societal security received rather differently by the respective Nordic governments’ ministries and agencies, but even within the few countries where it became institutionalised, like Norway, it was still never clearly defined. Or rather, to the extent that definitions did surface in official discourse, they continuously and subtly changed over time and became reinterpreted, reformulated, reworked (see the chapter by Morsut, this volume). This illustrates how language, discourses, concepts – particularly concepts pertaining to the contested and politically sensitive area of security – are always contingent and always conditioned by the social relations and structures through which actors operate in practice. Conceptually, if not

formally, societal security may have emerged to an extent in all Nordic countries, but it did so without a common definition. Rather, it is more accurately concluded that *multiple* societal securities emerged after the Cold War and in the 2000s that all referred to slightly different things, implicated different actions in practice, and did not always engage the same actors or focus on the same threats and risks. Societal security is thus conceptually fluid, open-ended, and at times, it has arguably worked as a kind of ‘enabler’ or empty signifier which practitioners, politicians, scholars, and even private security and defence companies may fill with content in order to reach a particular goal or address a certain opportunity (Hall 1993; see also Larsson 2019).

Thus, any argument that a ‘Nordic model for societal security’ exists homogeneously at a regional level and in multiple Nordic countries, covering their entire populations and governance systems, seems at odds with the empirical findings revealed in this book project. As seen throughout the chapters, more nuance and diversity has emerged than what can be captured through the notion of a single Nordic model for societal security. In the respective analyses, covering both country cases and particular issues and processes, we saw a striking width and breadth of security discourses, practices, instruments, strategies, and actors. We saw how this heterogeneity stemmed from the Nordic countries’ related but still unique histories, their related but still diverging political trajectories in recent years, their similar but still slightly different public administration systems. We noticed how societal security became promoted in contexts like the Nordic Council as a way to reinforce a high-level, political sense of community and togetherness, despite the fact that the Nordic countries have participated and committed rather differently in military alliances like NATO and supranational institutions like the EU. Societal security is less of a coherent ‘Nordic model’, we may conclude, and more of a loose yet sometimes efficient work label, a slightly disjointed and often top-down form of security narrative, and finally, an imaginary of, or political vision for, Nordic security cooperation.

Central themes in the study of Nordic societal security

The chapters of this book illuminated the rich features of Nordic security thinking and practice. In addition to the previous section’s conclusions regarding convergences and divergences in the Nordic countries’ approach to societal security, additional key themes have also emerged that are worth lifting up for further discussion.

First, the movement of security concepts across space and time, touched upon by all the chapters, is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The notion of societal security emerged – indeed, was made possible – by the historical conceptual apparatus that preceded it and the social networks that co-evolved with it. This is clear for Sweden and Norway, which made a decisive shift towards societal security even though that concept still shares

a kinship to its predecessor: the totalising and cross-society notion of 'total defence'. These evolutionary traits appear in the Finnish case, too, although Finland's comprehensive security 'model' bears a much closer family resemblance to its wartime, militarised ancestor (similarly termed 'total defence'). Denmark has not taken on board the societal security concept *per se*, but it is clear that threat perceptions and responses have similarly widened – from known and measured threats to a wide panoply of various insecurities requiring action. Yet this took place gradually, over time, and within a historical trajectory unique to Denmark.

Second, the evolution of supposedly new security concepts, in virtually all cases examined in this book, is complex and far from linear. They take shape through processes that involve not only agents and structures, but also intention and accident. The end of the Cold War prompted a search for new security paradigms, especially those based on non-antagonistic risks, but the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US brought a new set of priorities and concepts. Centrally placed actors may promote a certain vision of security, but deeply rooted norms and institutional traditions can stymie their efforts. The evolution of societal security, especially as documented by Larsson (this volume), can be traced but only by widening the analytical lens to include the 'social' – the mix of actors, their relations, norms, epistemes, and mindsets or paradigms that co-create concepts over time. The straightforward image of a problem being neatly framed and carried into policy battles, as some research suggests, cannot be found in the rich, multitudinous factors shaping concept evolution in this book.

Third, the notion of societal security is far from objective or divorced from political processes. Indeed, as several chapters allude to in this book, societal security is itself politics: both the creation of the term, which privileges certain interests and suggests certain values worth protecting, and the use of the term, which is used to prop up certain power structures and delegitimise others. In the Finnish case, for instance, it is clear that traditional defence communities within that country wished to promote a modern version of traditional defence concepts – presumably to keep control over a politically meaningful and resource-rich issue. In the Swedish case, a small group of 'pracademics', academically trained policy advisors, crossed national and supranational borders to promote the opposite cause: the conceptualisation of security as both relating to and coming from society itself rather than territories or militaries. This would potentially wrest control over the question from traditional military authorities and redistribute resources across government. As the previous point made clear, such instrumental efforts are far from straightforward. Not only does the movement and interaction of social groups across fields (Bourdieu 1982) defy prediction, but the success of any such effort is bound to be disrupted by any number of countervailing factors. Nevertheless, as is well known in critical concept analysis (Beren-skoetter 2016), the supposed content of concepts reveals essential struggles of 'who wins and who loses' in politics.

Fourth, the studies in this book show that the study of security concepts is closely linked to conceptions of societal values. The emergence of widened meanings of security suggests a desire – implicit, and perhaps misguided – to make society itself the referent object of security. It is an embracing notion, perhaps inspired by Nordic welfare state traditions as we discuss in this book's introduction, or by an expansive notion of the social contract. Whatever the case, to cast the notion of societal security (which in several Nordic contexts goes even further to include 'safety') as such is to make a statement as to what is worth holding dear. The epilogue to this volume by Peter Burgess reflects directly on the question of values vis-à-vis security. It argues that societal security, as a concept, serves as a vanguard that draws security studies into a deeper set of puzzles. The notion of a society worth securing emphasises notions of community, for instance, and thereby leads the discussion into questions of inclusion and exclusion, and of individual perceptions of insecurity.

Indeed, the link between societal security and *insecurity* emerges in various chapters of this book. While societal security may be closely linked to values, and although one proposed value, especially one expressed by practitioners, is to ostensibly 'safeguard society', another dynamic is at play: the diffusion through society of a general sense of insecurity. This has been documented largely through political sociology approaches to security. Didier Bigo, for instance, has insisted that security functions like a 'tipping edge' in how security, mobility, freedom, and fundamental rights for *some* always entails insecurity, interception, coercion, and suspicion-making for *others* (Bigo 2013; Bigo and Tsoukala 2008). 'Security' cannot, therefore, be seen as a positive state or some ultimate end goal, but must be understood as a politics, a practice, and a process of (in)securitisation which per definition includes and values some while excluding others. Jef Huysmans goes even further to suggest that:

security is a political practice that is defined through its tensions with the democratic organisation of political life. Democracy is a political stake in security practice, not simply because of fundamental rights being violated in the name of security but because security practice inherently organises social and political relations around enemies, risks, fear, anxiety. When insecurities pervade how we relate to our neighbours, how we perceive international politics, how governments formulate politics, at stake is not our security but our democracy.

(Huysmans 2014, 4)

Liberty and rights cannot be 'balanced' against security: they are fundamentally and forever at odds with each other, according to Huysmans. Societal security, in this view, thus becomes a paradox. It becomes a practice of removing or suspending the democratic politics that make up society. Societal security, if taken to its limit, becomes an insecurity for society itself.

Fifth, and somewhat awkwardly for a book aiming to provide a current ‘state of play’, Nordic security discourses continue to evolve. The latest phase of development mentioned in several chapters is the recent, at the time of writing, shift back towards conventional threats and territorial security thinking in both academia and practice. A number of events, from the Russian invasion of the Crimea to sabre-rattling in the South China Sea, and from US assassinations of Iranian leaders to Chinese power games, portend a supposed ‘return to geopolitics’ (Mead 2014). In some respects, this shift draws the military back to the core of discussions regarding what societal security is, and what it means. It also represents a form of resistance in the dynamics underpinning conceptual politics in all Nordic countries. The extent to which traditional security thinking can fit into the current widened approaches in the Nordic region is subject to each country’s specificities. Since military actors were never fully displaced from security policies in any Nordic country, any journey back to ‘total defence’ models may be quicker than we expect. Yet that journey, we might surmise, would be longer for Sweden and Norway, for instance, who displaced military security actors, institutions, and ideas further to the periphery than in Finland, where comprehensive security represents a new form of military-style preparedness and resilience thinking. Whatever the length of the journey, the conceptual apparatus to emerge is likely to be – and empirical evidence from some of the chapters is beginning to show – some hybrid form of security that might be called ‘new total defence’ (see also Stiglund, this volume). In any case, these dynamics provide a trenchant reminder that security concepts evolve, shift direction, reorder benefactors and beneficiaries, and shape outcomes in ever-changing ways – and the Nordic region is no different.

Next steps in the study of Nordic societal securities

Despite the supposed return to geopolitical threat constructions, societal security as a concept and ostensible goal is not going away. Particularly in the area of security research and development at the EU level, the terminology of societal security is firmly rooted. It was proposed and established as one of the core ‘themes’ in the two recent EU framework programmes guiding research grants, including the European Security Research Programme (ESRP). Between 2007 and 2020, billions of euro, given to universities and research institutes as well as to private security and defence companies in transnational consortiums, were devoted to technologies for crisis management as well as surveillance, infrastructure protection, policing, counterterrorism, and border and migration control. The ‘Secure Societies’ theme thus expanded on the EU’s idea of ‘internal’ security cooperation and policies in the area of freedom, security, and justice, and, it can be added, contributed to the shift in priorities towards border security in recent years (Hayes 2009, 72; see also Jones 2017; Martin-Mazé 2020). The role that the notion of societal security continues to play within the EU policy and funding system, for

both research and practice, therefore demands further research. In particular, it is worth pursuing how the concept will impact upon, and potentially intermingle with, the upcoming European *defence* research programme and related investment funds and EU defence policies.

Second, and relatedly, what will be future of societal security from a policy perspective? What effects will societal security thinking and strategising have in a future with increased focus on geopolitics? Who will care about the safety, security, and continued functioning of societies, if the political class claims that the very existence and sovereignty of Nordic countries is under threat? Will societal security and related concepts be swept under the rug as the Nordic governments start to revisit policies for defence planning and war preparedness and again increase investments into defence materiel and armaments production? Most likely, the answer to the latter question will be 'no'. Recent geopolitical developments have led to a revival of the 'total defence' concept, and voices from across the region speak of a 'new total defence' or even a 'total defence 2.0'. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) is one such key organisation which has started to push for an increasingly synchronised and modernised regional total defence, not excluding the many valuable lessons learned in the post-Cold War security era (NORDEFECO 2015, 2016). It remains to be observed and studied, therefore, precisely which role societal security will play in a geopolitically oriented and potentially militarised future. Will it be displaced or consumed by national defence priorities? Will it be revived in the form of a new civil defence? Will the safety dimension of societal security (emergency management, non-human crises, environmental hazards, etc.) become a separate area of policy and practice? How will the hybrid threat of, say, invading armies in combination with asymmetrical attacks and cyberthreats be constructed in more detail, and how will security policy and governance solutions be defined?

Finally, in such an impending political future, what will be the theoretical implications for the analytical use of societal security? How can a continued analysis and critique of societal security be refined, opened up, multiplied? How can critical perspectives on societal security be related to, or combined with, critical perspectives on the military (Stavrianakis and Stern 2018)? As discussed by Stiglund (this volume) as well as by Larsson (2019), it may be time to start questioning the suitability of terms like societal, comprehensive, internal, or homeland securities in a world of resurging militarisation and militarism. As Stiglund proposes, the 'dual' (in)security logic that is now emerging in contemporary policy discourse – which draws simultaneously on threat and risk languages and involves both external and internal security actors – may be understood as 'socio-territorial security'. However, whatever new concept arises and is 'put to work', it is crucial that we do not permit theoretical terms to conflate, or allow diverging empirical patterns to coalesce and converge into a single, sweeping concept. For the study of

Nordic societal security to remain relevant and intellectually rigorous, it must also remain reflexive, curious, and willing and able to adjust its focus.

By showing that even one oft-used term in relation to modern security provision – societal security – is more aptly described as multiple ‘societal securities’, in different contexts across the Nordic region, we hope this book will support that point and encourage further investigation into the many shapes, changing meanings, and multiple implications of security in the world today.

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