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International Risks and the Perils of Proactive Security Policy

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The more complex social relations are, the greater is the risk that political regulation will have unintended consequences. Politics can become paradox if it produces more problems than it solves. Globalization and what is today called global security governance demand new efforts to understand this long neglected phenomenon of international relations.

After the end of the Cold War, a paradigm change has taken place in international politics. Security policy is no longer just the reactive defence of dangers, but the proactive management of risks (Daase 1992; 2002). A policy is proactive if decisions are taken in anticipation of future problems, needs and changes. A policy that follows this proviso requires shifting decision-making to earlier stages of political processes and organizationally to more specialized institutions. This increases the uncertainty under which decisions are taken and the number of behavioural contexts that are not taken into account. This in turn enhances the probability that political actions will not fulfil their objectives, will affect the contexts in a detrimental way, or will generate unwanted side-effects foiling the planned outcome – to name just a few unintended consequences.

However, this process is not deterministic. Unintended consequences of political regulation have been analyzed too little to argue that proactive security policy is doomed to failure. Theoretical analyses are just as rare as empirical studies. Yet there are some recent attempts to fill this gap. In what follows, I would like to specify the research question by conceptualizing international risks (part 1), specifying the strategies of risk policy (part 2), and by developing some ideas about causal mechanisms of unintended consequences in international security relations (part 3). The aim of this article is to demonstrate the perils of proactive security policy and to contribute to a theory of unintended consequences of global security governance.

1. International Risks

Today, risks not threats dominate international politics. The 'clear and present danger' of the Cold War has been replaced by unclear and future 'risks and challenges'. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational terrorism, organized crime, environmental degradation and many other issues are discussed in terms of uncertainty and risk. What makes them similar is their relative indeterminateness.

Politicians and political scientists have long tried to grasp these new dangers by extending the concept of security. Starting from the traditional notion of military security (e.g. Smoke 1987), the concept was broadened to include first economic (e.g. Deese/Nye 1980; Wolf 1977), then ecological (e.g. Renner, 1989; Allenby 2000), societal and cultural (Waeber 1993), and finally universal human security issues (e.g. Axworthy 1997). While the importance of non-military dangers could thus be highlighted, the conceptual extension did not contribute to theoretical clarity and new insights into the ways in which security can be provided. Some argue that the extension of security has neither been politically nor analytically progressive (Deudney 1990; Daase 1991).

At the same time, however, another concept entered into the security discourse: the concept of risk. Interestingly enough, it was NATO that stressed in 1990 that while the direct threat posed by the Warsaw Pact had diminished, "new risks and challenges of a global nature" had emerged (Communique 1990: 22). But although more and more people realized that security policy would increasingly not mean the defence of dangers but the management of risks, the concept of risk itself remained unspecified in security studies and theoretically underdeveloped for a long time. Rather, the suspicion grew, not without reason, that the use of the concept of risk was just intended to link the security debate to a popular discourse and to cheat the discipline's conceptual perplexity. But if the concept of risk is carefully defined it does have the capacity not only to contribute to a better understanding of the new security environment and to generate new research questions, but also to analyze unintended consequences of global security governance.

In every day parlance the concept of risk invokes such diverse perceptions that experts and laypersons systematically disagree over the proper assessment of risks (Slovic 1992). But even so called experts often diverge how to define and measure risks (Renn 1992). While some define risk technically as the

product of harm and probability (e.g. Morgan 1990), others insist on introducing an economic utility parameter (e.g. Crouch/Wilson 1982); and while some want to extend the notion of rational risk calculation by psychological variables (e.g. Fischhoff et al. 1981), others insist on taking social and cultural contests into account (e.g. Douglas/Wildavsky 1982). No wonder then that Niklas Luhmann could lapidary say that there is no agreed concept of risk that would come up to scientific expectations (Luhmann 1991: 14).

The task of building a concept of risk who everybody could agree to is too bold to be realistic, of course. Risk has always been a contested concept and it will be so in the future. But the aim of conceptualization – or re-conceptualization (Oppenheim 1981) – must be to clearly delineate a phenomenon and to develop conceptual tools to describe and explain it. In most definitions of risk, two elements figure prominently: the expected damage or harm on the one hand and the uncertainty of its realization on the other. The most simple and well-known definition of risk therefore is the probability of an expected loss or damage:

$$\text{Risk} = \text{probability} \times \text{damage}$$

In the sociology of risk, however, a third element is said to be crucial, namely the human ability to influence both, the magnitude of damage and the likelihood of its occurrence (Luhmann 1991: 19-40; Renn 1992). Thus, risk should be seen as *the probability of a future loss or damage that can be influenced by current action*. What is important here is the relation between the uncertainty of a possible loss and the options for action. Thus, the perception of risk always includes a weighting of possible action or inaction and the related costs and benefits. In the famous words of Frank Knight, risks are “calculated uncertainty” (Knight 1964 [1921]).

Uncertainty is an irresolvable fact of life and an essential element of politics. But it does not follow that rational policy, or political science for that matter, is impossible. Rather, Claudio Cioffi-Revilla maintains, “our choice is between a rigorous understanding of politics that includes uncertainty or no understanding at all” (Cioffi-Revilla 1998: 11). Even if uncertainty will always remain a problem of political decision making, political scientists, economists and philosophers equally insist that systematic political analyses can at least reduce some of it (Dahl 1984: 6; see also Hayek 1981: 154; Popper 1992: 154).

International politics has traditionally been regarded as a field in which uncertainty plays an especially important role. Because of the lack of a central authority which could set universal norms and enforce

agreements, international relations are characterized by such high degree of uncertainty that every state has to care for his survival individually (Waltz 1979). The resulting 'security dilemma' (Herz 1950; Jervis 1978) operates even if no true reason for fear exists, i.e. even if there is no intention by the adversary of posing an existential threat. For according to Thomas Schelling, it is the *uncertainty* of intentions that makes international politics so dangerous. "If all threats were completely certain (...) we would live in a strange world – maybe in a world more secure, with many elements based on enforceable law" (Schelling 1966: 92). The reason is that states would threaten each other with such violence that they would be compelled to subordinate themselves under a common law, a law that could "metaphorically be called the wrath of God" (Schelling 1966: 92).

In certain respects the Cold War came close to this "wrath of God". Although it was not a system of law, it was based on well-known and credible threats and thus on relative certainty. No wonder that during this time 'security' was conceptualized as the absence of or the defence against threats. If we take Arnold Wolfers's argument seriously, however, that security is nothing else than the absence of insecurity (Wolfers 1962: 148), it becomes clear that threats are just one peculiar kind of insecurity and that other ways exist to conceptualize security. Threats exist if a state perceives three things: (1) another state with contradictory interests, i.e. an *adversarial actor*, which (2) carries out or plans to carry out an attack, i.e. a *bellicose intention*, and which (3) possesses the means to inflict considerable damage, i.e. a *military capability* (Knorr 1976; Cohen 1973; Jervis 1985). During the Cold War, both sides perceived such threats with some justification (Gaddis 1997). As a consequence, security was defined in terms of threat-reduction

After the end of the Cold War, the threat-paradigm of security did not become completely obsolete. Still there are states competing for territory and resources and threatening each other. However, most dangers currently perceived lack either a clearly nameable actor, or an identifiable intention or a measurable capability to do harm. The danger is no longer direct, intended and calculable, but indirect, unintended and incalculable. In short, they are no threats, but risks. Terrorism, for example, relies on hostile intentions and on some kind of military capabilities, but it is often difficult to identify the perpetrators in advance as political actors. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, on the other hand, can be quantified and attributed to certain states, but it is often impossible to assess the intention of states to go nuclear. And finally, environmental degradation can only be vaguely ascribed to collective actors, but (usually) not to malign intentions or military capacities.

What risks then differentiates from threats is the certainty of expectations that is lost if at least one aspect of threat-perception – actor, intention, capability – becomes an unknown. The consequence is that the number of *possible* dangers increases, but the probability of their realization decreases. Conceptualized in such a way, risk can be utilized not only to describe and assess international security problems, but also to develop new strategies for security governance that are no longer directed against certain threats, but are meant to manage international risks.

2. Risk Policy

What policy options do states and international organizations have to deal with or reduce international risks? Is risk policy under the condition of complexity and uncertainty just a chimera? Indeed, risk policy has to function under severe restrictions. First, the international system is structured in such a way that cooperation in security affairs is generally difficult; second, the uncertainties regarding international dangers have increased after the end of the Cold War; and third, the issue areas of international politics (i.e. security, economy, environment etc.) are differentiated to such extent, that it becomes difficult to politically intervene. Hence, Niklas Luhmann argues that the chances for politically regulating the international economy, the environment, and international security affairs are severely restricted. The reason is that according to Luhmann the political system is just one sub-system among other sub-systems and only able to communicate with itself. Thus, the political system is not able to influence the functioning of other systems in a rational and sustainable way (Luhmann 1989). Fritz Scharpf on the other hand has criticized such pessimism. He argues that there is “no a priori theoretical reason to exclude the possibility of intended and in terms of individual objectives successful political intervention into the structures and processes of the economy and other functional processes” (Scharpf 1989: 18). In a similar vein, Michael Zürn has identified new modes of governance beyond the nation state. Although globalization reduces the ability of states to directly regulate political affairs, he argues, it also creates new opportunities to govern complex processes through international institutions (Zürn 1998: 291).

International risks are thus not only addressed by state actors. Rather, risk policy takes place at what Richard Münch called the ‘interpenetration zones’ of relatively autonomous functional systems. Similar to Luhmann, Münch regards society as composed of sub-systems, but similar to Scharpf, he allows for the governance of the system by the interaction of political, economic and social actors (1996: 180). In international relations, such interaction and the networking of different actor types into complex structures to address urgent security issues, is today called security governance (Krahmann 2005;

Bryden/Caparini 2006). However, the policies emanating from the interplay of actors rooted in different functional systems also increases the unpredictability of effects and side-effects. Thus, the possibility grows “that one measure taken to solve a problem creates a larger number of new problems” (Münch 1996: 234). Before I turn to the problem of unintended consequences, however, I would like to spell out the options of risk policy and governance in the security field.

During the Cold War, security policy was relatively simple. It had to react against a known threat and to avert it either by posing a credible counter-threat (i.e. through nuclear deterrence or conventional armament) or by cooperatively reducing the threat (i.e. through arms control and political *détente*). Security policy after the Cold War cannot remain reactive like this. It has to be proactive and reduce possible dangers anticipating future problems, developments and needs. In general, proactive security policy can be directed towards the causes or the effects of a risk, i.e. it can be preventive or precautionary. Political prevention aims at prohibiting a future loss to occur, i.e. it affects the probability-part of the risk equation. Political precaution aims at reducing the costs of a loss and at mitigating its consequences, if prevention fails, i.e. it affects the loss-part of the equation. Prevention and precaution in turn may be either practiced cooperatively or repressively, i.e. based on diplomatic means and political cooperation on the one hand or on military means and political coercion on the other. Given these options, we get a matrix of four proactive strategies to address international risks: cooperation, intervention, compensation, and preparation.

		means	
		cooperative	coercive
ends	preventive	Cooperation	Intervention
	precautionary	Compensation	Preparation

Figure 1: Approaches to Proactive Security Policy

This system of risk strategies seems to suggest quite an array of political options. However, they all have strengths and weaknesses, and peculiar propensities toward unintended consequences.

Compensation

The risk strategy of political compensation is the cooperative reduction of the magnitude of a possible future loss or damage. If risks materialize and a loss occurs, this loss can be reduced or mitigated by material compensation. But this is of course only possible, if precautionary measures have been taken in advance. The prototype of such measures is insurance. The aim of compensation is the reduction of vulnerability. The risk of oil supply disruptions can serve as an example. There is the risk of supply disruptions e.g. by boycott or by war. This risk can be reduced by building up oil reserves or by diversifying imports and encouraging domestic production. Another compensation strategy is risk-sharing through security guarantees (e.g. to the Baltic states), in order to compensate for the relatively higher risk of being threatened or attacked (e.g. by Russia). The problems of political compensation, however, lie in the calculation of its magnitude: How much reserves have to be built up to be secure of supply disruptions? How far should security guarantees go in order to satisfy client states (e.g. Taiwan)? How big a burden is acceptable, in order to get what kind of security – the classical problem of insurance. Because risks are perceived differently and compensation strategies are costly, cooperative-precautionary measures to address international risks will be controversial.

Preparation

The strategy of preparation is the repressive reduction of the magnitude of a possible future loss. If a loss or damage occurs, its consequences can be limited by responding effectively with political, military and other means. Essentially, preparation means the development and deployment of political and military tools to respond to challenges, attacks or other emergencies. The more targeted these tool or measures are, the more effective they are. In 1998 e.g. the United States created a National Infrastructure Protection Center in order to *be prepared* – in case of a massive terrorist attack or cyber-war – to keep the vital infrastructure operable. That is, even if a loss or damage should occur, the basic social and political processes should remain stable or repaired quickly. But again: it is not easy to determine the kind and magnitude of measures to address those needs. What kind of military forces e.g. is necessary for future wars? The idea of flexible forces seems to be an obvious solution, since resources spent and structures created should be multifunctional. However, the disagreement over priorities makes conflict over repressive-precautionary strategies likely.

Intervention

The policy of 'intervention' means – for the purpose of this argument – the reduction of the probability of a future loss or damage by coercive means. In this case, intervention should not be defined too narrowly, to allow political, economic as well as military measures to influence the conditions of a possible danger. More specifically, this can mean to remove of a certain political leader from power who might become dangerous in the future (e.g. Saddam Hussein), or to eliminate military or industrial facilities, that could pose a potential danger. In this respect the Israeli attack against the Iraqi Osirak-Reactor in 1981 or the economic sanctions against Former Yugoslavia in the early 1990ies were both preventive-repressive measures, insofar as they aimed at reducing the probability of a future loss. Needless to mention, that the new US National Security Strategy fits this paradigm insofar as it proposes preemptive and preventive military attacks on states which could pose a security challenge in the future. However, there might also be less confrontational measures and even positive incentives for complying with certain demands. Obviously, the dividing line between intervention and cooperation is not a strict one. The problem with preventive intervention is the calculation of short term benefits and long term costs. Because intervention, especially military intervention, can be very costly (in terms of life and material costs), states often hesitate to make an early decision to intervene. In addition, many costs are not calculated at all: E.g. what are the consequences of preventive military attacks on the enemy's determination to develop certain weapon systems? What effects do economic sanctions have on the public at large and on the government's political legitimacy? What are the consequences of interventions on international institutions and conventions, like sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention? These and similar questions are often not taken into account, if decisions over preventive-repressive strategies are made.

Cooperation

The problems with political cooperation as the forth strategy of risk policy are very similar. As a risk strategy, cooperation can be defined as the reduction of the probability of a future loss by means of political collaboration. Many security problems arise from uncertainties and the worst-case scenarios states tent to use in order to solve information gaps. In such a situation, the exchange of information and the assurance on good intentions can help to stabilize reciprocal expectations. By doing so, incalculable uncertainties can be transformed into calculable risks that allow collective risk-management through common problem definitions, the development of prognoses and common strategies. For this purpose, several international organizations have developed new tools: The OSCE has created a bureau on conflict prevention, NATO has tried to enhance its transparency through its Partnership-for-Peace program. But of course, international institutions are no guarantee for successful international risk management and conflict prevention. They suffer from the same misperceptions and bureaucratic

inertia like states. They are usually risk-averse and discourage swift and decisive action. The decision-making process – or rather non-decision-making process – that allowed the genocide in Rwanda is a chilling example.

The central problem of all risk strategies is the determination of their extension. Given the uncertainty of both, the magnitude of the expected loss and the probability of its occurrence, it is difficult to assess the necessary means to cope with them.

3. Unintended Consequences of Risk Policy

The wealth of strategies to cope with international risks should not blind us that risk policy is risky in itself. Macropolitical and micropolitical uncertainties of international risk policy lead to the application of strategies the effects of which are manifold and their consequences unpredictable. “With the growing number of unwanted effects and side-effects, political regulation can become paradox. It produces more problems than it solves” (Münch 1996: 234).

With regard to technical risks, this phenomenon has been explained by the fact that better security standards make large industrial plants more complex and therefore more unstable and less manageable in case of an accident. Catastrophes are thus the natural acquaintance of rising security standards (Perrow 1987). A similar problem is well-known in the insurance business. Car drivers with better safety equipment drive more riskily than others thus compensating for their initial security gain. In fact, they are involved in fewer but more severe accidents. Economists argue that “every attempt to produce security must lead to more insecurity” (Petin 1992: 294). But this is a fatalistic statement and not a theoretical explanation. Even Ulrich Beck remains vague by arguing about the ‘Boomerang effect’ of modernity. Today, side-effects which were latent for a long time increasingly affect and endanger the centres of their original production (Beck 1986: 49). But it does not suffice to identify unwanted side-effects and to point to the paradox effects of political regulation. The paradox outcome itself has to be explained.

One reason why unintended consequences of political regulation have not been theorized properly is the fact they are associated in the philosophical and social science tradition with positive, not with negative effects. Philosophers like Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith as well as economist like Carl Menger and Friedrich von Hayek have used what Robert Nozick termed ‘invisible hand explanations’ to account for the unintended beneficial effect of individual behaviour (Nozick 1994). According to Edna

Ullmann-Margalit, invisible hand explanations explain well-structured social patterns or institutions. They typically replace easily available and plausible explanations according to which the phenomenon to be explained is the product of purposeful planning with an alternative explanation according to which the phenomenon is emerging out of the behaviour of many individuals who mind their own business, but in the end contribute without knowing and intending to the beneficial outcome (Ullmann-Margalit 1978).

One problem of invisible hand explanations is their exclusive focus on positive paradox effects of social action. Adam Smith's idea was to demonstrate that individually egoistic behaviour could yield positive collective outcomes and that the visible hand of governments could do more harm than good. In a similar vein, von Hayek and Popper used the analysis of unintended consequences first and foremost to criticize the modern welfare state and its tendency to destroy individual initiative and the valuable social power of self-regulation. Negative unintended consequences had no place in their social theories. It is obvious, however, that market forces and unrestricted individual rationality do not only produce positive effects but more often than not suboptimal results and negative externalities. Raymond Boudon thus argues that the "unwanted effects" of social action are probably more important than the intended ones (Boudon 1979: 62). It is all the more surprising that in the Social Sciences – except for the important article by Robert Merton 1936 and the more recent ideas by Ulrich Beck – unintended consequences have attracted so little attention.

In International Relations as well, unintended consequences have not been systematically analysed. Although rational choice theory provides a method to explain suboptimal cooperation results, it focuses on the rational reconstruction of the chances for cooperation and the intended creation of social institutions (i.e. regimes and organizations). The non-intended, spontaneous evolution of international conventions has rarely been a topic, and unwanted unintended consequences of international policy even less so. But there is all reason to assume that in international relations the problem of side-effects is especially relevant. Increasingly interdependent interaction, the networking of state and non-state actors, the de-nationalization and institutionalization of many issue areas, in short: globalization requires decisions under uncertainty. The implementation of these decisions is less and less calculable and their effects are often paradox. In what follows, I discuss four examples of unintended consequences with regard to the four risk strategies previously mentioned.

Cooperation

After the attacks of 9/11, the cooperation in the fight against international terrorism received highest priority. The international community pledged to harmonize the legal basis and to develop coordinated

strategies. During this course, international organizations have been re-programmed to fight terrorism or have assumed additional tasks for that matter. Yet despite all cooperation, it is hardly to deny that the risk assessment of international terrorism diverges strongly. While for example the US regards terrorism as war, the EU still prefers to refer to terrorism as a form of crime. This is partly due to the different level of threat, the US is more in danger than Germany. But cultural patterns of risk perception also play a role. And yet, standards or risk perception prevail that are oriented at US security interests. The reason is not just that the hegemon forces its allies to accept certain standards (as in the case of the Container Security Initiative), but that cooperation on risk tends to promote risk aversion. It is well-known from the research on risk communication that actors who were not aware of a certain risk tend to believe in its danger after being exposed to continued information about it, even if the harmlessness of the risk has continuously been declared. Thus, the communication as such is raising the risk perception. In international politics, there seems to be a similar effect. The communication and cooperation about international terrorism enhances the perception of being threatened and paves the way for far-reaching anti-terrorism measures like the restriction of civil liberties, the conversion of international organizations and military strategies in the “war on terror”. It is an unintended effect of international risk policy if political cooperation artificially enhances the threat perception and leads to policies that are out of proportion to the real danger.

Preparation

Preparative risk policy aims at mitigating the consequences of a possible damage, but it can also make the damage more likely and increase the risk. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and middle range missiles has become one of the major security concerns after the end of the Cold War. While engaging in multilateral arms control on a global level, the US also pursues a counter-proliferation policy aiming at the deployment of missile-defence-systems in imperilled regions to reduce the proliferation risk. In Northeast-Asia the US is planning a regional *Theater Missile Defense* architecture that includes Taiwan, South Korea and Japan stating four objectives, (1) to protect American soldiers in the region, (2) to defend allies and friends, (3) to promote regional stability, and (4) to prevent a regional arms race. But even now, before the first TMD systems have been deployed, the contrary effect has set in. Neither China nor North Korea is willing to accept the deployment unopposed. China has increased the numbers of its missiles in the southern part of the country and has threatened to reconsider its willingness to cooperate on arms export issues. Thus, an arms race is already under way that combines offensive and defensive weapons. The resulting political tensions are likely to jeopardize both, allied and US soldiers. The preparation for future risks becomes paradox if the risk is enhanced which was the reason for risk policy in the first place.

Compensation

A similar phenomenon emerges if cooperative-precautionary measures alter the behaviour of actors to such extent that the effect of risk policy is foiled. On international financial markets currency risks are increasingly met by compensatory strategies. For this strategy to work, large sums of money are kept to bail out a country that has slipped into a financial crisis and is lacking financial solvency. However, while the bail out most often prevents a bad situation to get worse, it also influences the expectations of market participants in the long run. Subsequently the risk perception changes and venturesome investments are made with the expectation that in case of insolvency public funds are provided to regain most of the misguided investments. And yet, for financial policy makers there is no way to avoid this vicious circle; for some states are just “too big to fail” and non-intervention could cause the crisis to spread internationally. Thus, a successful short term risk policy can have counterproductive unintended consequences in the long run if precautionary measures encourage actors to behave more venturesome.

Intervention

Intervention was defined as the coercive prevention of future loss or damage. However, it is well-known that interventions can also have paradox effects by inciting conflict and reinforcing security concerns. The war in Iraq is a good example, since it was partly waged with the intention to reduce the risk of international terrorism, but had – even according to official statement – the converse effect of attracting Islamist fighters to join Al Qaeda in Iraq. Thus Iraq became a new hub for terrorist activity. But besides the nonattainment of intended goals and possible paradox effects, interventions also have a long-term impact on the normative structure of the international system. The “humanitarian” use of military force to prevent major human rights violations is a relatively new phenomenon. After the Gulf War 1991 the UN authorized a humanitarian intervention with Resolution 688 in order to provide safe havens for the Kurds in Northern Iraq. In light of this precedent, the question is not only whether this decision was justified and whether the intervention was successful, but what the effects on international norms like sovereignty and non-intervention are on which the stability of the international system is based. The practice of Western states after this decision has further compromised the sovereignty of states in the name of humanity – in Kosovo even without a UN mandate –, but not contributed to the development of new rules and norms that could guide humanitarian intervention in the future and compensate for the loss of normative coherence in international law. The not intended but wilfully accepted impairment of traditional norms of sovereignty does serve ‘solidarist’ universal humanitarian ideals on the one hand, but also facilitates traditional power politics by Western states on the other. Thus, it is difficult to decide

whether the weakening of the norm of non-intervention is a positive or negative externality of humanitarian intervention.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, there seem to be (at least) two kinds of unintended consequences of international risk policy. The first is the change of actors' perceptions, interests and strategies. Actors adapt their behaviour to new risk situations and political arrangements to reduce risks. This can limit the effectiveness of risk strategies and even lead to paradox effects. The second is the long-term transformation of fundamental institutions of the international system. Preventative and precautionary measures (especially coercive ones) have the capacity to transform norms and rules of international politics. Whether these changes are positive or negative is sometimes contested. The concept of unintended consequences should therefore be used normatively neutral to describe a larger number of involuntary results of social action.

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