Tampa analysed: the transformational effect of security upon the “normal”

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Abstract: As the Government prepares to issue a new National Security Statement, the breadth and depth of what constitutes a security issue remains topical. Similarly the tools available to national policy makers should also be considered. A number of theories consider the process of an issue becoming a security issue, and sometimes back again to a ‘normal’ state. This essay applies these theories to migration to explore how this transition is transformational and can affect the relationships between the actors involved as well as the broader socio-political environment. For the military this carries significant implications – the long-term effects of utilising the Australian Defence Force can carry unforeseen and unintended consequences.
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The period since the end of the Cold War has seen a fundamental reconsideration of what we mean by ‘security.’ The contemporary period has seen a plethora of security-related terminology – from cybersecurity, environmental security and water security to name but a few. These terms invoke images of cyber-warfare, resource wars and non-military threats that seem to demand an urgent, dramatic and exceptional response. As the current Prime Minister prepares for a new National Security Statement in 2012, the width and breadth of the national security agenda remains highly topical – what should be included and what should be left out? How do we ‘operationalise’ something as esoteric as ‘water security?’ And who will act to address these new threats?

While national security has traditionally been considered as the responsibility of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), it is becoming clear that using the military instrument in non-traditional security areas carries with it a host of limitations and consequences, some of them unintended. This paper seeks to examine some of these consequences by examining the use of the ADF in a non-traditional security issue, the case of the MV Tampa, and by applying some contemporary theories in security studies to analyse these policy consequences. These theories suggest that, in the process of making something a security issue (and sometimes back again), there is a transformational effect on what we accept as ‘normal politics.’ Even when an issue has faded from the public imagination its ongoing effects may still be felt. When the military is used in the process of changing a topic into ‘security issue’ then that development holds profound implications for the military’s role as transforming actor instead of a mute instrument of national security, challenging the trinitarian conceptualisation of the military envisaged by Clausewitz and raises questions about the responsibility for Defence in restoring ‘normalcy.’

Why make something a security issue?
So why is it that the contemporary security agenda has become so broad? What is it that has become so attractive about appearing in a National Security Statement? Firstly, the end of the Cold War provided time and space to consider non-traditional security issues that, in many respects, had always been there but had never gained sufficient prominence due to the constant distraction of pending nuclear armageddon ticking away in the background. Secondly, and possibly more pervasively, security is about power – the privileging of certain topics because of their urgency. Barry Buzan characterised security ‘as the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issues either as a special kind of politics or above politics.’ In this respect, the exceptionalism normally reserved for security (and military) issues becomes attractive – it allows urgency and resources to be mobilised to address an issue that might not otherwise be regarded as so significant. An example of this is AIDS. Many commentators recognise that AIDS become a security issue in 2000 when it was discussed at the United Nations Security Council. The issue was raised successfully, with global funding increasing more than tenfold from 2000 to approximately US$13.8 billion in 2008. Buzan and Waever contend that ‘it is important to be specific about who is more or less privileged in articulating security. To study securitisation is to study the power politics of a concept.’ Making a subject a security issue means altering the power balance that lies behind ‘normal politics,’ sometimes in an enduring manner and it is important to understand why.

Migration Securitised: the case of the MV Tampa

Tampa provides an illustration of how a subject, historically without the trappings associated with national security, can become a security issue, and the significant role of the military in making it so. On 26 August 2001, the MV Tampa, a Norwegian container ship travelling to Singapore was diverted by Australian Search and Rescue to respond to a sinking Indonesian vessel reported to be carrying 80

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asylum seekers to Australia. The Tampa would ultimately rescue 433 survivors. The next day Prime Minister John Howard announced that, in the national interest, the government would refuse the ship permission to enter Australian waters. The Tampa refused to comply and the Australian Special Air Service (SAS) boarded the vessel to prevent passengers from disembarking onto Christmas Island. Newspaper headlines included ‘New wave of 1000 illegals’ in the Australian on 27 August, and ‘Refugee Crisis’ along with a photo of SAS troops on a barge approaching the Tampa in the same paper on 30 August.

The result was a significant turnaround in the government’s electoral fortunes in the period of November 2001. A poll undertaken by the NSW Labor Council illustrated the successful acceptance of migration as a security issue by the Howard government: 58% of unionists and 67% of non-unionists believed that the government had handled the asylum seeker issue well.\(^4\) Newspoll reflected similar support, with the PM’s approval rating jumping from around 40% in the week before Tampa to 50% by 7 September, just prior to the events of 9/11. By October, and following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, John Howard’s support had risen to over 60%, assuring the Liberal-National coalition of a tight victory in the November election.\(^5\) As Ward states, the government succeeded in making the ‘asylum seekers appear a threat rather than a tragedy... defined as a crisis demanding leadership, not compassion.’\(^6\) By 27 September the government had enacted its legislative response, excising offshore islands through amendment of the *Migration Act* (Cth).\(^7\) Hutchings has argued that the combination of other incidents such as the ‘children overboard affair’ and legislative changes resulted in the objectification of asylum seekers through use of terms such as SUNC (Suspected Unlawful non-Citizen) and SIEVs (Suspected Irregular Entry Vessels).\(^8\)

**The Aftermath of Tampa**

\(^5\) *Ibid*, p. 35.
\(^6\) *Ibid*, p. 28.
\(^8\) *Ibid*, p. 395.
Some eleven years later, migration remains a deeply contentious issue within the Australian political debate. While the SAS have not been used again, maritime illegal migration has become a significant issue in Australian security. In 2006 this lead to the formation of the Border Protection Command to coordinate the military and civilian response along Australia’s maritime borders. As newspaper stories reveal, the Coalition policy of using the Navy to conduct ‘tow-backs’ means that migration remains a deeply contentious and militarised polemic today.\(^9\) According to the 2011 Lowy Institute poll, 86% of respondents agreed that unauthorised asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat pose a potential security risk to Australia.\(^10\) In another question, 64% of those asked about the importance of a number of foreign policy goals rated ‘controlling illegal immigration’ as very important.\(^11\) Regardless of the validity of the issues in debate, it is clear that migration remains a very clearly securitised issue. How this came to be, and what it means are far less clear. To help us answer these questions we might now turn to several theories of security studies.

**Security Studies – Explaining how something becomes a security issue**

Security studies provide several theories for explaining the process by which a subject become a security issue, or ‘securitised’ in the academic language. The Copenhagen School was founded during the Cold War, but has evolved to provide a framework through which to consider the ‘new’ security agenda that has emerged in the last twenty years. Essentially, the Copenhagen School argues that an issue becomes securitised by authority convincing an audience that an issue provides a threat to its existence. This in turn therefore justifies emergency action.\(^12\) The requirement for the threat to be ‘existential’ is a difficult one and it remains a challenging threshold to meet in most cases, even when applied discreetly such as to a particular sector of society. Nonetheless, despite this and other issues, the

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11 Ibid, p. 3.
Copenhagen School does provide a mechanism for understanding what happened in the Tampa case.

What then does a securitised situation look like? Huymans has argued that securitisation leads to ‘a re-ordering of social relations according to the logic of political realism and has defined it as a “technique of government which retrieves the ordering force of fear of violent death by a mythical replay of the Hobbesian state of nature.”’\textsuperscript{13} When an issue is securitised, time becomes compressed and urgency prevails. Space is condensed and boundaries are hardened. The interconnectedness coveted by liberals is subsumed by a starker cartography. Identity is similarly hardened – in Alker’s words, the process is characterised by ‘procedural exceptionalism, extreme othering, and decisionism.’\textsuperscript{14}

The refusal to let the Tampa enter Australian waters and a decision to send special forces soldiers to take control of the vessel was clearly dramatic action by the government that tried to convince the electorate of the existence of a compelling and urgent security threat. Polling and election results indicate that they achieved this emphatically. While the issue had certainly been politicised earlier, it was the act of refusing entry to Tampa and insertion of SAS troops that dramatically securitised, indeed militarised, the issue. Time, space and identity were all brought to the fore and ‘hardened,’ trends magnified by the almost simultaneous occurrence of the 9/11 attacks. The sense of urgency and crisis was palpable, facilitated by media headlines and community anxiety. This was reflected in Liberal focus groups at the time of Tampa who...

...detected an ugly sentiment amongst voters in western Sydney that “went like this: boatpeople, illegals, queue jumpers, street gangs, raping white girls.”... callers [to talkback radio] repeatedly made it clear that it was not the refugees’ countries or origin to which they objected but their religion.”\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{14} Hayward R. Alker, ‘Securitisation politics as contexted texts and talks’, \textit{Journal of International Relations and Development}, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006, pp. 70-80, pp. 74-75.

\textsuperscript{15} Ian Ward, ‘The Tampa’, p. 25.
These actions during the Tampa case turned migration into a security issue, but the consequences of this move occurred regardless of the intent of the government at the time. The choice of using the SAS may not have been specifically driven by a desire to generate fear of a security threat within the Australian community but it certainly had that effect. The consequences of using the military instrument may not always generate predictable or even desirable outcomes. The ADF may provide the most effective option for the expeditious resolution of an issue, but the long term effects, described above by Alkers, can be more complex and problematic.

**Security Studies – Explaining how something stops being a security issue**

The major element in the process suggested by the Copenhagen School is the concept of a security issues representing a movement away from ‘normal politics.’ The corollary is an ability to move back to this normalcy, but this area is somewhat neglected in the theory. Insofar as the Copenhagen School has a normative agenda it is that normal politics is preferred to the urgency and exceptionalism of security. Waever is particularly critical, regarding ‘security should be seen as a negative, as a failure to deal with issues of normal politics.’\(^{16}\) Buzan characterises it as a ‘more extreme version of politicisation’\(^{17}\) and that ‘politics should be able to unfold according to routine procedures without this extraordinary elevation of specific threats to a pre-political immediacy.’\(^{18}\) We have established that being on the security agenda is not necessarily a good thing, but how then do we move away from that state?

Being a security issue brings with it a contrast with normal politics, but as Buzan has conceded, the emergency measures critical to the concept of securitisation can be institutionalised and made routine without losing their exceptional status – he conceives of ‘normal politics as involving a reasonably high degree of

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securitisation.'\(^{19}\) Alternatively, Salter has identified a degree of desecuritisation through ‘entropy’ in which issues fade from the public imagination.\(^{20}\) However, these conceptions of securitisation don’t address the potential for securitisation as a transformational act, in which the re-ordering described by Huymans and Alkers is never truly undone by any desecuritisation. The effects of othering and exceptionalism linger, distorting any concept of normalcy. It is this transformational approach to security issues that poses the most profound implications for the military.

**Implications for Defence**

The Copenhagen School provides a means for mapping the process of making something a security issue. In order that everything does not become ‘security’, it provides steps that require, for example, a significant threat to be demonstrated. The Australian Defence Force will almost always provide the level of drama and exceptionalism, often regardless of intention. Its very presence will militarise perceptions of a situation, regardless of whether this reflects the intent to turn a subject into a security issue. Defence, as an agent, becomes a securitising actor that plays a significant role in transforming the political environment. This carries significant implications for the Clausewitzian notion of the military as an instrument of policy – in this case, its use has the potential to change the political dynamic in a fundamental manner.

This carries significant consequences for a military whose approach towards deterrence and de-escalation belies its inherent character as a catalyst for securitisation. What better dramatises a security threat than insertion of the SAS into a foreign vessel carrying people referred to as SUNCs? For Defence this means that its voiceless but critical instrumentality in securitisation is far more difficult to reflect in desecuritisation.

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\(^{20}\) Salter, ‘Securitisation and desecuritisation., p. 325.

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The transformational effect of securitisation is likely to see identities remain hardened and boundaries accentuated for a period beyond the immediate period of securitisation – the symptoms may outlast the disease, as in the case of illegal migrants. For Defence as a securitising agent, the effects of the initial event may continue to reverberate, challenging any attempt to act as a desecuritising actor. The new ‘normal’ carries with it transformed relationships, not only between actor and audience, but amongst agents and others affected by the securitisation including between Government and military. In this manner we can see fundamental tensions in the ADF’s self-conception as a ‘force for good’ that seeks to de-escalate and the effect of its very presence as a militarising force.

The policy lesson here is nuanced – beware the impetuous or reckless use of the military instrument for it remains a sharp and imprecise scalpel. At some $24 billion annually, the ADF is an expensive insurance policy and governments will be understandably interested in gaining bang for their buck. While it presents an expedient and effective option for dealing with challenges, the longer-term consequences for using the ADF may not always be apparent or desirable. For the government there is a risk that the short-term fix may transform the issue into a longer-term issue from which retreat to the safety of the status quo may be elusive. Cognisant of these limits, complementary and capable options need to be generated as an alternative to the military scalpel – the Australian Civilian Corps represents an important example.

Conclusion

As the government prepares to deliver its National Security Statement, it faces a range of challenges associated with the ‘new’ security agenda. How we address these non-traditional security issues remains an important question for our conceptualisation of Australia’s national interest. Nonetheless, security remains about power. It is the resources and urgency associated with becoming a ‘security’ issue that make it attractive. However, security, to an extent, represents a failing of normal politics to deal with issues within the realm of the national political discourse. This provokes questions about the role of the military in non-traditional security
challenges. The result, as demonstrated by the Tampa case, can have long-lasting and unexpected consequences. A number of security studies theories explore the manner in which an issue becomes ‘securitised’ and back again. It is clear that this process is more than a threshold, but is a transformational operation. When we consider the military as an instrument to be used in this process, then this perspective offers an understanding that its actions as an agent might lead it to do more than act as an instrument of the Government. Instead the military fulfils a role in which it changes the very political environment in which the original decision took place. The military will often provide an attractive option for the resolution of non-traditional issues. However, it is clear from the case study and theory that the consequences for its use may not always be desirable.
Bibliography


