By Rachel Miller-Sprafke

The modern security environment presents an unprecedented challenge. Throughout history security requirements and the defence policies initiated therein have been subject to change, yet never before have the concepts themselves been so completely revolutionized. An unprecedented level of risk has compelled people of every stratum in society, from members of the public to those responsible for their defence, to do the impossible: to prepare for threats that have not yet materialized.

Previous changes in security and defence have not been conceptual, but practical. Technological developments and budget increases altered the potential of defensive policies. Political, economic, and social changes affected state relations, and therefore who and what was to be perceived as a security threat. What society faces now, however, is a complete revolution in the concept of security. It is an expansion necessitated by the increasing number of potential risks, which are no longer limited to traditional military notions of security. Threats are emerging from fields that were never previously included in the remit of defence, covering a spectrum from energy shortages to economic recession to climate change to global disease pandemic. The security sector is growing to include these new types of risks, but its expansion does not stop at these borders. Beyond these risks that are quantifiable lies the vast realm of the unknown. Here belong the dangers that have no name, where threats that do not yet exist lie in wait. The definition of security is evolving to include protection from the unpredictable, and thus defence policy must now do the seemingly impossible: to account for dangers that do not exist, to think the unthinkable.

Security and defence are dynamic concepts, engaged in a symbiotic relationship that consistently evolves in reaction to changes in the environment. New risks create new security concerns, which in turn require new defence policies. Additionally, the development of new technologies makes possible new defensive means, creating the potential for previously implausible securitization measures. Yet throughout history, the concepts of defence and security have largely been confined to a military perspective, and thus such changes have been limited to the realm of warfare. Military inventions such as the bow and arrow and the machine gun revolutionized contemporary methods of fighting. Innovations in other industries, such as the steam engine or the discovery of penicillin, also affected what was or was not possible on the battlefield. The recent introduction of unmanned aerial vehicles and so-called 'smart weapons' has almost made it possible to remove the human from the theatre of war. Similarly, political developments have caused changes in threat perception, requiring the revision of existing policy. Such progress, in both international relations and technology, have created paradigm shifts within the fields of security and defence, yet they had not actually changed the meaning of the words themselves.

In the past, security requirements were chiefly limited to a military point of view, meaning

perceived threats were largely territorial, and defence policies have reflected this. This is not to say that other types of risks did not previously exist, or that individuals did not fear them. The difference is in expectations. State security responsibilities are now broader than ever, an expansion resulting from an increase in the types of risks recognized. While there is nothing new about global pandemics, societies now expect state protection from disease. This can be attributed to two factors. First, science has made extraordinary progress in the fields of prevention and treatment. Scientists know more now about the causes than ever before, and past successes make almost anything seem possible in the way of disease prevention. Second, such information is now widely accessible. Not only do those in the field know more, the average person has a greater understanding of the health risks they face. In the fourteenth century, people turned to god for protection from the black death. At the onset of the swine flu pandemic in 2009, people turned to their governments. The United States Department of Homeland Security produced federal guidelines for a response, and the United Kingdom's National Health Service stockpiled £500 million worth of the anti-virul drug Tamiflu.

Yet both countries used the recommendations of the World Health Organization to formulate their policy. This highlights the second way in which security and defence are being revolutionized, that is, by the multitude of actors now involved. There are an increasing variety of types of defence provider, from individuals to private companies to international organizations. Even the state, traditionally seen as responsible for the security of its population, is now forced to take a role in the protection of the rest of the world as well. Yet the types of actors perceived as threats to security are increasing as well. As threats cannot be confined within state borders, it is no longer enough for states to securitize their own territory and defend their boundaries. Security must be viewed through a holistic lens, and may require far-reaching measures. The dangers of climate change may be most successfully mitigated through cooperation at the international level. Combating terrorism may require small-scale, but highly focused actions in foreign countries. Preventing spill-over from civil wars and forced migration may take the form of intervention on humanitarian grounds. In short, the new areas being securitized require both greater coordination amongst actors and a re-configuration of where defence policy is to be applied.

The concept of security has now been transposed to non-military areas, thereby creating new threats that require defence. These dangers must be considered during the formulation of policy: contingency plans must be made relating to environmental, economic, and societal threats. Yet the nature of these new risks requires a different treatment from the traditional military issues. Recession cannot be prevented through force. Coercion cannot prevent a volcanic eruption in Iceland. Even some more traditional military aspects of security now require alternative approaches, as the fight against international terrorism and prevention of nuclear proliferation has demonstrated. Wars currently being fought in Afghanistan and Iraq have required a revision of defence approaches and new counter-insurgency techniques. The security risks of the modern age thus do not only cover a broader spectrum, they also require completely new responses, and are in many ways more difficult to mitigate and predict.

Yet beyond this expanding spectrum of new and recognizable threats, there is the additional danger of those that remain unknown. Not only are more risks being recognized, risks are now being 'de-bound', no longer easily territorially or temporally defined. As the source of such risks

cannot be pinpointed, their causes cannot be targeted. Responsibility is not born by an easily identifiable individual or group, making pre-emptive defence little more than a byword. September 11, 2001 was arguably the turning point for this new conceptualization of security. Previously unimaginable, the events of that day forced the world to recognize that military might was no longer the only or best path to security. One of the strongest military machines in history proved incapable of defending its own citizens, on its own soil, from foreign attack. This realization brought to light a new kind of reality, one in which society was perpetually at risk from dangers that were impossible to identify, either because they were new and never previously experienced, or because they did not yet exist.

From threats such as these, prevention is not merely difficult but impossible. As in the past, defence has evolved to meet many of the new threats emerging within the context of globalization. Yet there is no way to feasibly prepare for threats that are not yet real, and may in fact never become so. Although scorned by the media, Donald Rumsfeld's famous speech warning of the 'unknown unknowns' in Iraq had, in reality, hit the nail on the head. In a world in which it is possible to imagine a seemingly endless list of destruction scenarios, it is difficult to grasp the reality that beyond these unknowns is a realm of genuinely endless un-imaginables. In such a security environment, it is normal to perceive oneself as in a state of perpetual risk, the mind frequently given to the imagining of new dangers. Indeed, society's only possible course of action is to think the unthinkable. Obviously this is paradoxically impossible; once something has been 'thought' it is no longer 'unthinkable'. The idea, however, is that thinking of 'un-thinkables' brings them from that outside netherworld of unknowns, into the realm of the possible. Once possible, any threat becomes capable of, and indeed worthy of, a developed response. By thinking the unthinkable, threats that generate a relevant level of concern may be treated as security risks, and thus potentially mitigated through defensive policies.

The fields of security and defence have undoubtedly been subject to myriad adaptations and fluctuations throughout history. Such transformations have affected who and what is perceived as a security risk, and how such risks should be treated defensively. Security and defence have remained military concepts, chiefly concerned with the role of the state in protecting its own population. Yet in recent years the concepts have undergone an expansion, one that includes a wide range of non-military actors and areas. Increasing recognition of new types of threats within the field of security is coupled with the expectation that such threats must be defended against. However, non-traditional risks cannot be dealt with in traditional ways, requiring new ways of thinking about defence and security. In addition, because risks now come from such a wide array of sources, they can no longer be easily defined, and their sources are difficult to pinpoint, creating an entire new level of unquantifiable risks. However, by seeking to imagine what such inconceivable risks might be, it is possible to bring these unknowns into the realm of common security, and potentially to garner enough interest to develop an appropriate defence mechanism. The expansion of security and defence may initially give us more to fear, but by forcing the practice of thinking the unthinkable, it can serve the valuable purpose of preparing us for any eventuality.

About the author:

Rachel Miller-Sprafke graduated from the London School of Economics with a BSc in

International Relations in 2009, at which point she crossed the road to pursue an MA in International Peace & Security at King's College London. She is currently writing her dissertation on the achievements of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; other areas of chief academic interest include peace-building and human rights.