



THE RELEVANCY OF WALTER LIPPMANN FOR ARNOLD WOLFERS' UNDERSTANDING OF SECURITY

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Currently, the definition of security that was put forward in 1952 by Arnold Wolfers in his article “National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol” is widely cited within the field of security studies while the definition of this concept that have been advanced by Walter Lippmann in his book from 1943, “US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic” is largely absent, a situation which hinders the turning into a research topic of the connections between these definitions. However, there are authors who cite both the definition of security advanced by Wolfers and the definition of it put forward by Lippmann, but they either do not mention the existence of connections between these definitions or take notice of them but do not investigate them, with the consequence that a thoughtful consideration of this problem is lacking. In order to fill this gap in the study of the early stages of the development of security studies, this article provides an in-depth investigation of the links between the two definitions of security which reveals that Wolfers’ reflection on security was meant to explain implicit aspects of Lippmann’s definition of this concept but that eventually and somehow unintentional Wolfers advanced a different perspective on security.

Keywords: *Walter Lippmann; Arnold Wolfers; definition of security; security studies; realism; foreign policy.*

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Introduction

The relevancy that Walter Lippmann's definition of security from his 1943 book *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic* has to the well-known definition of security put forward by Arnold Wolfers in his 1952 article *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* is the topic of this article and the reason for choosing it is represented by the fact that the links between these definitions are generally neglected and, when noticed, they are not explained or subjected to thoughtful consideration, with the effect that the connections between these definitions are yet to be studied in detail. This assessment is grounded on a literature review that covers the period from 1983 until today and which, alongside the formulation and the justification of the importance of both the research topic and the research question of the paper and the description of the research methods applied herein, make up the first section of this paper which is concerned with its methodological aspects. Its second section consists in analysing and interpreting Lippmann's view on the meaning of security as it appears in his mentioned book, while the last section of the paper deals with placing Lippmann's understanding of security in the context of Wolfers' article, with presenting Wolfers' reading of it, and with comparing the views of the two authors on the definition of security both from Wolfers' viewpoint and from an objective point of view.

1. Methodological Considerations

Scholars considering the meaning of the concept of security have cited the contribution to its definition made by Water Lippmann and/or Arnold Wolfers but either did not refer to the relevancy of Lippmann's understanding of security for Wolfers' account of it or acknowledged that but did not consider it. Thus, back in the 1980s, in the first edition of his book *People, States, and Fear*, Barry Buzan cited one after another the definition of security that Lippmann put forward in *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*, and the definition of it provided by Wolfers in his famous article *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*¹. The excerpt from Lippmann reads that "a nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values, if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by such victory in such a war", while the excerpt from Wolfers is the following one: "security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values

¹ Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, p. 216, Brighton, Wheatsheaf Books, 1983. The citation from Wolfers is taken from his collection of essays entitled *Discord and Collaboration* which includes that article (Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Cooperation. Essays on International Politics*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins Press, 1962).



will be attacked”. Despite the fact that Buzan mentioned that the citation from Lippmann was taken from Wolfers’ book², he established no connection between these definitions. Buzan took the same approach in the second edition of this book that was published after the end of the Cold War and where both citations appeared, with the difference that they did not figure side by side but were separated by other definitions of security³.

Also in the 1980s, Mohammed Ayoob indicated that Lippmann’s definition of security cited by Buzan had been considered by Wolfers in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* and that Wolfers understood it as referring to the ability of a state to deter or defend an attack directed against it⁴. However, Ayoob did not further explore the implications of Lippmann’s definition on Wolfers’ perspective on security as developed by the latter in that article. It is to be remarked that Ayoob chose to take that citation not from Wolfers’ article, as Buzan did, but from Lippmann’s book *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*, an option which obscured an aspect that could point towards a closer connection between the two authors.

The existence of a connection between the definition of security provided by Wolfers in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* and Lippmann’s view on security was signalled out latter by Graham M. Smith who, in an article from 2005, indicated that, in formulating the above-mentioned definition, Wolfers “draws on the thought of Walter Lippmann”⁵. Despite noticing the connection between their views, Smith did not explore it so that he opened up a research direction but did not pursue it, its readers being left uncertain about the exact meaning of his words. Moreover, Smith did not indicate that Wolfers cited Lippmann in his paper and equally did not mention the work of the latter that was used by Wolfers. However, given that *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic* is Lippmann’s book referred to by Wolfers in that article, it is obvious that Smith identified a link between these two works.

Smith’s suggestion is absent from a 2021 book on critical security studies by Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams where both Lippmann’s and Wolfers’ contributions to the definition of the concept of security made by them in the works

² *Ibidem*, p. 216.

³ Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, p. 36, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2009.

⁴ Mohammed Ayoob, “Security in the Third World: the worm about to turn?”, in *International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 1, 1984, pp. 41-51. Similar to Buzan, Ayoob used Wolfers’ collection of essays *Discord and Collaboration* when he made reference to his article *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*.

⁵ Graham M. Smith, “Into Cerberus’ Lair: Bringing the Idea of Security to Light”, in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 485-507.



previously indicated are mentioned⁶. People and Vaughan-Williams do not refer to a connection between their perspectives on security and do not even indicate that Wolfers included Lippmann's ideas into his 1952 article with the overall effect that one is provided with no grounds for considering that their views on this issue could be related.

In many recent works designed to provide guidance through the field of security studies, the contribution of Lippmann to the definition of security, unlike that of Wolfers, is no more acknowledged so that it became virtually impossible to even take into consideration the fact that Wolfers could have been influenced by Lippmann in formulating his definition of security that is to be found in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*. Thus, one could mention the 2010 handbook edited by Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Victor Mauer⁷, the reader edited in 2011 by Christopher W. Hughes and Lai Yew Meng⁸, the handbook from 2017 whose editors are Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq⁹, the introduction to the field of security studies edited in 2018 by Paul D. Williams and Matt McDonald¹⁰, and the 2021 book on theoretical and practical aspects of international security studies authored by Peter Hough, Andrew Moran, Bruce Pilbeam and Wendy Stokes¹¹, with all of them mentioning the contribution that Wolfers made in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* to the definition of the concept of security. Lippmann is equally not mentioned in the influential article from 1997 that David Baldwin elaborated on the concept of security, albeit he indicates therein that Wolfers, in the mentioned article, conceived security as “the absence of threats to acquired values” and attributed to it both an objective and a subjective meaning¹². Lippmann is also absent from a 2009 book by Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen which retraces the evolution of international security studies, a book where figures instead the distinction made by Wolfers in that article between the objective and the subjective

⁶ Columba Peoples, Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies. An Introduction*, pp. 2, 5, London, Routledge, 2021, 3rd edition.

⁷ Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Victor Mauer, “Introduction”, in Myriam Dunn Cavelty; Victor Mauer (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 2.

⁸ Christopher W., Hughes, Lai Yew Meng (eds.), *Security Studies. A Reader*, London, Routledge, 2011 p. 1.

⁹ Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Thierry Balzacq, “Introduction”, in Myriam Dunn Cavelty Thierry Balzacq (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, London, Routledge, 2017, 2nd edition, p. 1.

¹⁰ Matt McDonald, “Constructivism”, in Paul D. Williams, Matt McDonald (eds.), *Security Studies. An Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2018, 3rd edition, p. 50.

¹¹ Edward Smith, “The Traditional Routes to Security. Realism and Liberalism”, in Peter Hough, Andrew Moran, Bruce Pilbeam, Wendy Stokes (eds.), *International Security Studies. Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition, London, Routledge, 2021, p. 15.

¹² David Baldwin, “The Concept of Security”, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5-26.



meaning of security¹³; given that this book traces back the origins of international security studies to the 1940s and that Lippmann's book *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic* appeared in 1943, one could reasonably conclude that, for its authors, Lippmann, unlike Wolfers, had no relevant contribution to the development of the concept of security and, implicitly, that he did not exert an important influence on Wolfers' account of security.

Even if, presently, the significance of Lippmann's view on security for Wolfers' account of it is not a research topic, the fact that Lippmann's definition of security was cited by Wolfers in his much-celebrated article *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*, together with the fact that Wolfers commented on it herein and it is considered by Smith to have been influenced by the way Lippmann conceived security, justify the conduct of a research on this issue. Further grounds for assuming such a research topic result from closer examination of Wolfers' article, given that it indicates the citation from Lippmann is included in the paragraph which precedes the paragraph where the distinction between the objective and the subjective meaning of security is made. The viability of this topic is equally supported by the fact that in *The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference*, an article by Wolfers which appeared one year before the publication of *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*, he argued that a prudent foreign policy requires statesmen to pursue only goals that are within the reach of actual or potential national power and indicated that this idea represented the central thesis of Lippmann's book *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*¹⁴. One could also justify the research on this topic by pointing out that both Lippmann and Wolfers belong to the realist approach in international relations¹⁵ and that, two years after the publication of *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*, they have worked together for exploring the possibility of developing a theory of international relations¹⁶.

This research topic could be considered as highly relevant for the field of security studies for the following reasons: Wolfers' definition of security is a prominent one, the clues that could direct research on this topic are virtually missing today, there is yet no thoughtful investigation of this topic, and, finally, it provides

¹³ Barry Buzan, Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 32, 33.

¹⁴ Arnold Wolfers, "The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference", in *World Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1951, pp. 39-63. This article is included alongside *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* in the collection of essays *Discord and Cooperation* by Wolfers.

¹⁵ Robert E. Williams Jr., "The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory, Edited by Nicolas Guilhot", in *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 284-286.

¹⁶ Nicolas Guilhot (ed.), *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 239.



a better understanding of the early stages of the development of security studies in view of filling a gap in the study of this field.

Taking into consideration all these aspects, the research question guiding this article could be formulated as follows: How much Wolfers' definition of security provided in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* was influenced by the definition of this concept advanced by Lippmann in *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*? To answer this question, a qualitative research will be conducted by subjecting relevant sections from the two works to both content analysis and comparative analysis. Thus, in the case of Lippmann's book, the paragraph where the definition of security is formulated is subjected to content analysis with its meaning being discussed in connection with the central ideas of the chapter it belongs to. As for Wolfers' article, the content analysis is applied to the three paragraphs where the definition of security is provided and illustrated, the way he refers therein to Lippmann's definition of security being of peculiar analytical concern. By means of comparative analysis, the definition of security included in the specific paragraphs from Wolfers' article is considered from the point of view of its similarities and dissimilarities with the definition of it put forward by Lippmann.

2. Walter Lippmann on the Meaning of Security

Lippmann advanced the definition of security reproduced above in a chapter from *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic* where he criticized the US foreign policy for pursuing peace at the expense of national security, an error that he characterized as turning an illusion into a paramount aim¹⁷. He strongly argued that national security should be such an aim and he linked national security with the vital interests of a nation, a type of interests that he equally designated as legitimate ones¹⁸. According to that definition, security means for a state that it is able to advance its vital interests even in case of war¹⁹, an idea which, on grounds of Lippmann treating war as being the most adverse circumstance that a state could face in pursuing its vital interests, could be restated as follows: a state disposes of security if it is able to advance its vital interests in any circumstances, irrespective how dangerous. It is then possible to maintain that, by establishing the highest threshold for security, Lippmann advances what could be called a maximalist account of security.

Because Lippmann speaks about security not only during war but also in peacetime²⁰, it follows that he considers the risk of war as the highest danger in

¹⁷ Walter Lippmann, *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1943, p. 50.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 51.



times of peace for the vital interests of a state, and that he treats the defeat in war as the greatest danger for those interests when a state is at war. It is to be remarked that Lippmann emphasized that the assessment of the capacity of a state to advance its vital interests in both contexts must result from an extremely accurate analysis or, in other words, that it must reflect the best available knowledge; the words used by Lippmann are very explicit in that sense: “as far as human foresight and prudence can make it so”²¹. It is obvious that Lippmann excludes the possibility of this assessment being just an impression, a mere opinion, maintaining instead that it must be as little subjective as possible or, put is differently, as objective as a human assessment could be. Thus, Lippmann puts forward a maximalist understanding of the objective nature of the assessment implied in the definition of security so that one could observe that this definition is maximalist with respect to both the degree of security and the assessment of the capacity to cope with threats to vital interests or, in other words, it implies what one could designate as both an ontological maximalism and a cognitive maximalism.

This analysis reveals that neither Buzan, nor Ayoob provide an exact quotation from Lippmann given that he maintained that “a nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war”²², while the quotation reproduced by the two authors is, as previously indicated, the following one: “a nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values, if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by such victory in such a war”. If in the case of Buzan the differences could be explained as resulting from the fact that he took the quotation from Wolfers’ article and not directly from Lippmann’s book, no viable explanation for them could be provided in case of Ayoob who clearly indicated that he retrieved the quotation from its original source, namely *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*. It is then possible to maintain that Ayoob equally took the citation from Wolfers and, consequently, that he wrongly indicated Lippmann’s book as its source.

Because Lippmann takes prudence in the field of foreign policy to mean a perfect match established by statemen between the pursued goals and the power, expressed in military terms, that a state disposes of, and having in view the fact that, according to him, national security must be the paramount goal of every state, it could be concluded that, for Lippmann, a state has security only if it disposes, according to an evaluation by statemen that is as objective as humanly possible, of the needed power to accept the risk of waging a war for advancing its vital interests, or to win a war fought for this purpose and, equally, that assuming security as a foreign policy objective when the state lacks the required power to assume the risk

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 51.



of such a war or to win a war aiming at that represents a political imprudence. In other words, it has to be considered that, in Lippmann's view, security cannot be prudently turned into a foreign policy goal by any state, but only by those states disposing of the appropriate power, with this evaluation being made by statemen from a point of view that is as objective as it could be. Moreover, Lippmann considers prudence as the capacity enabling statemen to make the most possible objective assessments with respect to the ability of a state to advance its vital interest in face of the most dangerous threats to them, namely as the capacity in virtue of which statemen evaluate whether or not a state has security.

It is to be observed that what became known as Lippmann's definition of security was not remarked in reviews of his book, such as those by Leland M. Goodrich²³, James C. Malin²⁴, and Mary Sumner Benson²⁵ that appeared at the time of its publication.

3. The Characteristics Attributed to Security by Arnold Wolfers as Seen through the Lens of Lippmann's Understanding of Security

In his article *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol*, Wolfers starts his reflection on security from Lippmann's account of it that is to be found in *US foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*. However, Wolfers did not cite Lippmann, as Buzan and Ayooob indicate, but has interpreted his definition of security, equating vital/legitimate interests of a state with its core values, maintaining that this definition implicitly refers to a degree of protection of these values that could range from virtually no protection, and thus from virtually no security, to almost total protection and thus to almost total security, and considering that, in peacetime, security represents a state's ability to deter a war against it²⁶. Except for the existence of degrees of security, Wolfers' reading corresponds to Lippmann's understanding of security. The incompatibility of security being a matter of degree with Lippmann's ideas on security results from him having a maximalist understanding of security which presupposes that a state has security only when it disposes of the needed power to protect its vital interests by means of taking the risk of war or of winning

²³ Leland M. Goodrich, "U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic by Walter Lippmann" in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 37, no. 5, 1943, pp. 935-938.

²⁴ James C. Malin, "U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic by Walter Lippmann; America's Foreign Policies, Past and Present by Thomas A. Bailey" in *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1943, pp. 417-418.

²⁵ Mary Sumner Benson, "U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic by Walter Lippmann; Collective Security: The Why and How. by Joseph H. Ball" in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1944, pp. 263-265.

²⁶ Arnold Wolfers, "National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol", in *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1952, pp. 481-502.



the war. Consequently, one could argue that Lippmann considers that if there is insufficient power to do these things, a state does not dispose of less security but has no security at all. In other words, it could be said that in Lippmann's view there is only total security, anything below it being simply insecurity.

Wolfers continued his analysis of Lippmann's implicit understanding of security by maintaining that, according to it, security is in itself a value which, given that there are degrees of security, a state could have more or less of it and which a nation could aim at having more or less of it²⁷; the fact that Wolfers attributes these ideas to Lippmann results from Wolfers' using the word *then* to introduce them²⁸. Deepening this analysis, Wolfers argues that security is for Lippmann just one among other values that inform the foreign policy of any state, namely power and wealth. It is, however, to be observed that, for Lippmann, power is a mean for achieving security so that power and security are not put on the same level and therefore they could not be both considered as foreign policy values, that is as its final goals.

In order to differentiate security from power and wealth, Wolfers indicates in a much-quoted paragraph that "security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked"²⁹. It could be argued that this characterization of security is meant to explain the definition of security advanced by Lippmann, more exactly some implicit features of it, so that it is possible to say that Wolfers does not necessarily consider it as his own contribution to that definition. Assuming such a reading of Wolfers' article, one could remark that, from the point of view of Lippmann's perspective on security, this quotation means that, in an objective sense, security refers to the fact that a state has the needed power to risk a war for protecting its vital interests and to win a war it is engaged in for this purpose, while in a subjective sense, security designates the fact that nationals do not experience fear that their state lacks the power enabling it to risk a war for protecting these interests and to prevail in a war fought for this aim. Thus, in line with Lippmann thinking on security that the mentioned quotation is supposed to be designed to explain, the threat Wolfers refers to is not the risk of war or the war itself, but the lack of sufficient power enabling a state to prudently assume the risk of war and to win a war in which it takes part. However, one could remark that Wolfers' explanation could be read as turning the war and the risk of war into threats to security.

Equally in line with Lippmann's perspective on security, which necessary connects security with the least humanly possible subjective assessment by statemen of the capacity of a state to assume the risk of war and to win it once it begins,

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 484.

²⁸ "Security is a value, *then* [emphasis added], of which a nation can have more or less and which it can aspire to have it in greater or lesser measure" (*Ibidem*, p. 484).

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 485.



the subjective meaning of security has to be understood as the feeling aroused by such an assessment, while the objective meaning of it should be understood as the least subjective assessment of the national power that humans could do. Therefore, the distinction between the objective and the subjective meaning of security that Wolfers refers to should not be read as a distinction between an assessment that is well founded (the objective meaning), and an assessment that is not well founded (the subjective meaning), but as a distinction between an assessment that is well founded and its psychological effects on those making the assessment. However, Wolfers does not have this reading of the objective and subjective terms, considering instead that the subjective assessment is opposed to the objective one, the former distorting the reality, while the latter accurately capturing it; he illustrates this difference by mentioning that, in the aftermath of World War I, France operated with a subjective meaning of security because it exaggerated the risk of a new war with Germany, while other great powers from the League of Nations operated with an objective meaning of security because they correctly appreciated that such a risk was reduced³⁰. Wolfers admits that a purely objective assessment of the risk of war is impossible so that such an assessment could be objective only in a relative sense, an idea which corresponds to Lippmann's idea that in the field of foreign policy one could speak only of a humanly attainable objectivity.

Results and Conclusions

The paper provided arguments in support of the idea that Wolfers' much celebrated distinction between the objective and the subjective meaning of security, as well as the description of security it belongs to, was originally designed to explain implicit aspects of Lippmann's definition of security, but that it ended up as a new perspective on security. This outcome resulted from Wolfers providing an inaccurate account of Lippmann's views on security by mentioning that the latter conceives security as a matter of degree, treats security and power as similar values within the field of foreign policy, and, most importantly, accepts the possibility for security to exist when grounded on erroneous assessment and for it to be equated with the absence, be it real or apparent, of threats to vital national interests. The first misreading of Lippmann leads to what he considers as insecurity to be turned by Wolfers into less security, an interpretation which results from security being understood as a value, and, consequently, as something that one could have more or less; the ontological maximalist account of security is thus replaced with a far less demanding view on it which encompasses even a minimalist account of this concept with the result that security becomes affordable, ceasing to be a great

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 485.



performance. The second misreading of Lippmann further explains the introduction of degrees of security, given that the value of security is understood similar to that of power whose possession by states in various degrees is accepted as a common fact. This misreading equally turns power from a mean desired in view of acquiring security into something desired for itself with the effect that security is no more the unchallenged single most important aim of a nation. As for the last misreading of Lippmann's perspective on security, on one hand it focuses security on external aspects, namely on threats coming from the international realm, instead on the internal ones, that is on the capacity of a state to successfully cope with these threats, and, on the other hand, it allows for the lack of prudence to be compatible with security thus making possible for a cognitive non-maximalist account of security to be put forward.

It is then possible to provide two answers to the research question of this paper, the first being that, taking into account Wolfers' intention, Lippmann's definition of security exercised an overwhelming influence on his own account of it, while the second answer is that, considering how Wolfers actually read Lippmann's definition, the view of the latter on this issue did not significantly influence the former understanding of it. Put it differently, Wolfers was, subjectively speaking, highly influenced by Lippmann but, objectively speaking, he was little influenced by him. In final analysis, both answers to the research question contribute to a better understanding of how security is conceived by Wolfers and Lippmann, of the interplay between their views on this issue, and of what is peculiar to each of them, with the overall effect that a more accurate account of the early stages in the development of security studies is made possible.

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