

Conceptual Ambiguity in International Security

Examining international order, security sector assistance, and terrorism

Pearl Matibe

Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University

pmatibe@gmu.edu

Working Paper presented at the

2025 American Political Science Association (APSA)

Virtual Research Meeting

April 10-11, 2025

Panel Session: International Order and Organizations in Security, Corruption, and Beyond

Abstract

International security relies on key concepts that, while central to scholarship and policy, remain deeply contested. This paper examines three foundational concepts—international order, security sector assistance (SSA), and terrorism—through a comparative analysis of definitions and an empirical examination of usage patterns. Despite their prominence, these concepts lack universally accepted definitions, leading to inconsistencies in both academic discourse and practical application.

The first section explores international order, assessing competing views on whether the post-Cold War era remains U.S.-led, is transitioning toward multi-polarity, or represents an indeterminate configuration. The second section interrogates SSA, often conflated with security cooperation, and evaluates whether a clear definitional boundary exists. The third section revisits terrorism, a term mired in definitional disputes, and synthesizes key debates that hinder knowledge-building and empirical application.

By examining the ambiguity in these contested domains, this paper contributes to the broader study of concept analysis in political science. It evaluates how definitional uncertainty shapes scholarly discourse and influences real-world policymaking. This research fosters dialogue and collaborative efforts to refine contested concepts, with implications for both academic inquiry and security policymaking.

Keywords: Political Philosophy and Theory, International Politics, International Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International security relies on key concepts that, while central to both scholarship and policy, remain deeply contested. Over the past several decades—particularly since the end of World War II and the Cold War—scholars and policymakers have extensively debated the meaning and application of such concepts. This paper examines three foundational terms—international order, security sector assistance (SSA), and terrorism—through a comparative analysis of their definitions and an empirical review of their usage.

Main Argument

Despite their prominence, these concepts lack universally accepted definitions, leading to ambiguity in academic discourse and practical application. The ambiguity in these contested domains affects both knowledge-building in political science and the formulation of effective security policies.

Policy Implications

- If policymakers recognize the shifting nature of international order, then they can develop more adaptable strategic frameworks rather than relying on outdated assumptions of unipolarity or multi-polarity.
- If SSA is clearly distinguished from broader security cooperation, then policymakers can better evaluate its effectiveness in strengthening partner countries' security institutions.
- If a widely accepted definition of terrorism is established, then counterterrorism efforts can become more consistent and strategically aligned.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

International security relies on key concepts that, while central to scholarship and policy, remain deeply contested. Scholars and policymakers have extensively debated these concepts since the end of World War II and especially after the end of the Cold War. This paper examines three foundational concepts—international order, security sector assistance (SSA), and terrorism—through a comparative analysis of their definitions and an empirical examination of their usage. Despite their prominence, these concepts lack universally accepted definitions, leading to inconsistencies in both academic discourse and practical application. This definitional ambiguity

affects knowledge-building in political science and influences security policymaking at national and international levels.

This paper investigates the following research questions: (1) How do scholars and policymakers define international order, SSA, and Terrorism? (2) What are the consequences of definitional ambiguity for academic scholarship and security policy? (3) Can conceptual clarity be achieved to enhance coherence in security discourse and policymaking? Addressing these questions is essential for refining theoretical debates in international security and improving policy decisions that rely on contested concepts.

The policy significance of this research lies in its potential to clarify how the definitional challenges surrounding these concepts impact real-world security strategies. If international order remains an unsettled notion, policymakers may struggle to craft strategic frameworks that accurately reflect the evolving global balance of power. Similarly, the conflation of SSA with broader security cooperation efforts can lead to ineffective assistance programs, while the lack of a universally accepted definition of terrorism complicates international counterterrorism efforts and strategic alignment.

Roadmap

This paper is structured as follows: The next section provides a review of the literature, highlighting existing scholarly debates on international order, SSA, and terrorism. The methods section outlines the comparative analytical approach used to examine these contested concepts. The findings section presents empirical evidence on the definitional inconsistencies across academic and policy domains. The discussion section evaluates the implications of definitional ambiguity for security scholarship and policymaking. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing key findings and suggesting avenues for future research to enhance conceptual clarity in international security studies.

INTELLECTUAL TERRAIN

Key Debates and Perspectives

International security remains a contested domain, shaped by diverse theoretical perspectives and policy applications. Scholars have debated the meanings and implications of international order, security sector assistance (SSA), and terrorism, highlighting their evolving nature and their impact on global governance and security policies. This literature review synthesizes key contributions to these debates, drawing on multiple perspectives to illustrate both areas of convergence and contention.

International Order

Competing Visions and Theoretical Foundations

Authors G. John Ikenberry and Michael Barnett argue that international order is not a fixed structure but rather a dynamic system shaped by hegemonic leadership, institutional frameworks, and shifting power relations.¹ Ikenberry extends this argument by explaining that liberal

¹ Michael Barnett, "The End of a Liberal International Order That Never Existed," *The Global* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>;

G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001);

G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and International Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006);

international order, far from being static, has historically been adjusted to accommodate rising powers and changing security dynamics. Barnett, however, challenges this view, arguing that the so-called "liberal international order" never truly existed in a pure form, as it has always been shaped by competing geopolitical interests.

Unlike Ikenberry, who suggests that international order is best maintained through institutions and strategic restraint, Fukuyama and Deudney, Ikenberry, and Postel-Vinay believe that global order is defined as much by ideological conflicts as by institutional frameworks.² They emphasize that international stability depends not only on power dynamics but also on the legitimacy of global governance structures. McKenzie, Dell, and Ewing provide historical context, explaining that past international orders have been contested and redefined through diplomatic negotiations, war, and economic restructuring.³ Their work provides evidence for Ikenberry's broader claim that international orders are subject to constant negotiation and transformation.

Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order and Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order offer empirical assessments of international order, illustrating how institutional resilience and geopolitical shifts affect global stability.⁴ These reports extend the arguments presented by Ikenberry and McKenzie et al. by demonstrating that states' commitment to multilateralism fluctuates in response to security threats, economic conditions, and domestic political changes.

Security Sector Assistance

Distinguishing Between SSA and Security Cooperation

Security sector assistance (SSA)⁵ is frequently conflated with broader security cooperation, leading to conceptual ambiguities in both academic and policy discussions. To understand SSA, it is vital to know the difference between security cooperation (SC) and security assistance (SA—the two elements that make up the concept under study, security sector assistance. security sector assistance

G. John Ikenberry, "The Logic of Order: Westphalia, Liberalism, and the Evolution of the International Order in the Modern Era," in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 83–105;

G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23;

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, eds., *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/journal/debating-worlds-contested-narratives-of-global-modernity-and-world-order#:~:text=Debates%20on%20what%20form%20international>.

Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, eds., *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/journal/debating-worlds-contested-narratives-of-global-modernity-and-world-order#:~:text=Debates%20on%20what%20form%20international>.

³ Francine McKenzie, Justin Dell, and Cindy Ewing, "Discussing the History of International Orders: A Workshop Report," *Wilson Center*, September 15, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/discussing-history-international-orders-workshop-report>.

⁴ Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1994.html.

Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2226.html.

⁵ White House. 2013. "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Sector Assistance Policy." Accessed February 5, 2025. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/05/fact-sheet-us-security-sector-assistance-policy>.

(SSA) is a term for U.S. initiatives that help strengthen other countries' security. This is done by improving their forces' skills, military exercises, and giving them defense equipment. As mentioned, SSA includes SA and SC. SA provides military equipment, training, and financial aid to countries under U.S. defense programs. It's regulated by the Department of State, aiming to strengthen military abilities while supporting good governance. While SC is about building strong military partnerships through joint operations, training, and cooperation. This part is managed by the Department of Defense. It helps countries work better together, fight terrorism, and support U.S. defense goals. SC and SA aspects of SSA are integral to the United States' efforts in supporting its partner countries. Both components entail giving essential resources such as military training, equipment, and various services. However, what distinguishes one from the other is the government agencies, which manage them. SC is primarily managed by the United States Department of Defense (DoD), whereas SA is supervised of the U.S. Department of State, and can still involve DoD. Despite their differences in management and specific rules under which they are administered, both SC and SA are features of SSA—concepts and sub-concepts that align with the overall strategic interests of the United States.

The U.S. Department of State and the 2023 Security Cooperation Conference Report offer helpful definitions of SSA, distinguishing it from military aid and traditional defense partnerships.⁶ Unlike SSA, which focuses on long-term institutional development, security cooperation encompasses a broader range of activities, including joint training and military-to-military engagements.⁷

The U.S. Code Title 22, 2010 and the 2022 Security Cooperation Conference Report illustrate how the SSA concept can sometimes be operationalized without clear distinctions in application, leading to inconsistencies in SSA effectiveness.⁸ Ikenberry and Mo extend this discussion by arguing that SSA must be viewed within the broader context of international order, as it serves as a tool for reinforcing alliances and shaping regional security structures.⁹

Francis Fukuyama and RAND challenge what is presented by the U.S. government reports by suggesting that SSA often serves as a mechanism for advancing hegemonic interests rather than fostering genuine security sector reform.¹⁰ They argue that SSA programs, while ostensibly focused

⁶ Defense Security Cooperation University, *2023 Security Cooperation Conference Report* (April 2024), <https://www.dscu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/sc-conference-report-2023.pdf>.

U.S. Department of State. "Security Sector Assistance: A Tool for Strengthening Governance and Rule of Law." *Policy Brief* 2, no. 5 (2024): 1-4.

⁷ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Chapter C1 - Security Cooperation Overview and Relationships, n.d., <https://www.dscamail>.

2022 Security Cooperation Conference Report, accessed March 24, 2025.

⁸ *United States Code*, Title 22—Foreign Relations and Intercourse, Chapter 39—Arms Export Control. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2023. <https://www.gpo.gov>; Defense Security Cooperation University, *2023 Security Cooperation Conference Report* (April 2024), <https://www.dscu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/sc-conference-report-2023.pdf>

⁹ G. John Ikenberry and Mo Jongryn, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Watts, Stephen, Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Sean Mann, Michael J. McNerney, and Andrew Brooks. *Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2447.html.

on capacity-building, frequently reinforce power imbalances and create dependencies that undermine local agency. In contrast, McKenzie, Dell, and Ewing provide evidence for the arguments presented by Ikenberry and Mo, demonstrating that the concept of SSA, when effectively operationalized, can illustrate elements of the notion of contributing to regional stability by professionalizing security forces and reducing reliance on foreign military intervention.¹¹

Counter to these perspectives, SSA programs can contribute to regional stability by enhancing the capabilities of partner nations' security forces. This, in turn, helps reduce reliance on foreign military intervention and fosters self-reliance.¹²

In international discourse, countries have developed diverse conceptualizations of security assistance and security cooperation, reflecting their strategic interests and regional dynamics. This segment of the literature review explores perspectives from the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, the Russian Federation, China, and several African countries.

The EU's approach to security assistance is characterized by capacity-building initiatives aimed at fostering stability in partner countries. The EU Global Strategy highlights the importance of combining diplomacy, development, and defense to enhance security.¹³ Security cooperation within the EU context involves collaboration with organizations like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and partner countries to address common security challenges.¹⁴

The UK's understanding of security assistance focuses on providing military equipment, training, and advisory support to strengthen partner countries' security capabilities.¹⁵ Its approach to security cooperation emphasizes multilateral collaboration, including joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and participation in organizations such as NATO and the UN.¹⁶

Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order. RAND Corporation.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2226.html.

¹¹ Francine McKenzie, Justin Dell, and Cindy Ewing, "Discussing the History of International Orders: A Workshop Report," *Wilson Center*, September 15, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/discussing-history-international-orders-workshop-report>.

¹² *Ibid.*

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), "Official Website," accessed February 14, 2025, <https://www.africom.mil/>.

¹³ European Union. "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe." EU Global Strategy. Brussels: European Union, 2016.

¹⁴ European Union. "Cooperation in Security and Defence." EU-NATO Relations Factsheet. Brussels: European Union, 2021.

¹⁵ HM Government. "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy." London: HM Government, 2021.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

French security assistance emphasizes military capacity-building and reinforcing the rule of law in partner countries.¹⁷ Security cooperation in France entails joint military operations, defense industry partnerships, and engagement in multilateral initiatives¹⁸.

Germany's view of security assistance involves providing defense equipment, training, and advisory support to enhance partner countries' defense capabilities.¹⁹ German security cooperation focuses on multilateral collaboration, particularly within the EU and NATO, to address shared security challenges.²⁰

The Russian Federation's approach to security assistance includes military and technical cooperation with partner countries, encompassing defense equipment, training, and expertise.²¹ Security cooperation in the Russian context involves joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and participation in regional security organizations Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).²²

China's security assistance comprises military aid, technical cooperation, and capacity-building initiatives in partner countries.²³ Security cooperation in China includes joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and multilateral engagement in organizations such as SCO, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁴

African countries, such as South Africa, Botswana, and Malawi, emphasize regional cooperation in their security assistance and cooperation policies. These countries focus on capacity-building initiatives, sharing expertise, and participating in regional security organizations like the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions.²⁵

In conclusion, non-U.S. perspectives on security assistance and security cooperation demonstrate the nuanced approaches countries adopt to address their unique security challenges and foster regional stability. These varying approaches contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of security sector assistance and its global implications.

¹⁷ Ministère des Armées. "Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale 2017." Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Federal Ministry of Defence. "White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr." Berlin: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ President of Russia. "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation." Moscow: President of Russia, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ State Council Information Office. "China's National Defense in the New Era." Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2019.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Department of Defence. "South African National Security Strategy." Pretoria: Department of Defence, 2014;

Republic of Botswana. "Botswana National Security Strategy." Gaborone: Republic of Botswana, 2009;

Government of Malawi. "National Security Policy." Lilongwe: Government of Malawi, 2014.

Terrorism

Conceptual Ambiguities and Legal Implications

The concept of terrorism is one of the most contested in international security discourse, with scholars and policymakers struggling to establish a universally accepted definition. Terrorism is defined in different ways across legal frameworks, but key elements remain consistent: the use of violence to intimidate, coerce, or achieve political, religious, or ideological goals. The United States has a specific and structured definition under Title 22, Section 2656f of the U.S. Code, which states that terrorism involves the illegal employment of violent means or coercive force by entities such as terrorist organizations, subnational groups, or secretive operatives against non-combatants or their assets is done with the intent to provoke a state of anxiety and fear, and subsequently exert influence or manipulate the views of the targeted population.²⁶ For an act to be considered terrorism under U.S. law, it has to meet three important conditions. First, the act must have a bigger purpose, like trying to change politics, religion, the economy, or society. Second, it must be meant to scare (“coerce”, pressure (“intimidate”), or send a strong message to people beyond just those directly harmed. Third, it has to target civilians or other non-combatants, breaking the rules of International Humanitarian Law.²⁷ This argument is evident as referenced by Pearl Matibe in *Modern Diplomacy* and *Homeland Security Today*.²⁸ Similarly, the UK Counter-Terrorism Act of 2000 defines terrorism as the use or threat of serious violence to influence the government or intimidate the public for ideological, political, or religious reasons.²⁹ The European Union follows a comparable approach, emphasizing intent to destabilize or destroy political, economic, or social structures.³⁰ The Australian Government’s 2024 definition highlights acts designed to advance a cause through serious harm, intimidation, or disruption.³¹ Meanwhile, African Union frameworks address terrorism as acts committed to undermine sovereignty, destabilize governments, and harm civilians. While these definitions align in their recognition of terrorism as politically or ideologically motivated violence, the U.S. criteria are particularly strict, requiring intent, goal-driven actions, and violations of humanitarian law, making its classification process more rigid and systematic.

From this, we see that the Australian Government, the UK Counter-Terrorism Act, and EU legal frameworks offer official definitions of terrorism, emphasizing its political motivations, use of

²⁶ U.S. Code 22 § 2656f (2023), *Annual Country Reports on Terrorism*, <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title22-section2656f>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Pearl Matibe, "Nigeria: Understanding the Surge of Terrorism and Its Impact on Civilians, 2018-2022," *Modern Diplomacy*, May 30, 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/05/30/nigeria-understanding-the-surge-of-terrorism-and-its-impact-on-civilians-2018-2022/>.

Pearl Matibe, "ISIS-DRC's Deadly Ascent: Emerging and Expanding Threat in Africa," *Homeland Security Today*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/isis-drcs-deadly-ascent-emerging-and-expanding-threat-in-africa/>.

²⁹ Terrorism Act 2000, Section 1, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/1>.

³⁰ EUR-Lex: Legal Content on Counter-Terrorism, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum%3A4322328>.

³¹ Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Laws, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.ag.gov.au/national-security/australias-counter-terrorism-laws>.

violence, and impact on civilian populations.³² These sources provide helpful explanations of the legal parameters that shape counterterrorism policies at the national and international levels.³³

Unlike these official definitions, which suggest that terrorism can be clearly delineated from other forms of political violence, scholars such as Ikenberry and Barnett believe that terrorism is a fluid concept that evolves alongside broader geopolitical shifts.³⁴ They argue that states often manipulate counterterrorism narratives to justify military interventions and restrict civil liberties. This perspective is supported by RAND, which provides evidence for Barnett's claims by demonstrating that counterterrorism measures frequently reflect national security priorities rather than consistent legal principles.³⁵

Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order by authors Deudney et al., exemplifies the issue presented by scholars such as Fukuyama and Barnett, arguing that what is labeled as "terrorism" often depends on the strategic interests of dominant global powers.³⁶ Unlike Fukuyama, who suggests that the post-Cold War era has seen a decline in ideological conflicts, Deudney et al. believe that terrorism and counterterrorism narratives continue to be shaped by ideological battles over global governance and political legitimacy.

³² Australia's Counter-Terrorism Laws, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.ag.gov.au/national-security/australias-counter-terrorism-laws>.

Terrorism Act 2000, Section 1, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/1>.

³³ Council of the European Union: Fight Against Terrorism, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/>.

EUR-Lex: Legal Content on Counter-Terrorism, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum%3A4322328>.

Crown Prosecution Service: Terrorism, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/terrorism>.

³⁴ G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23.

Barnett, Michael. "The End of a Liberal International Order That Never Existed." *The Global* (blog), April 16, 2019. <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>.

³⁵ Watts, Stephen, Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Sean Mann, Michael J. McNerney, and Andrew Brooks. *Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2447.html.

³⁶ Deudney, Daniel, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, eds. *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Michael Barnett, "The End of a Liberal International Order That Never Existed," *The Global* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>.

Conclusion

The Debates

This literature review demonstrates that the concepts of international order, SSA, and terrorism remain deeply contested in both academic and policy discourse. Scholars such as Ikenberry, Barnett, and Fukuyama provide competing interpretations of international order, highlighting its institutional foundations, ideological dimensions, and geopolitical fluidity. SSA, while often presented as a technical security policy, is shown to be embedded in broader debates about hegemony, regional stability, and dependency. Finally, terrorism remains one of the most politically charged terms in international security, with definitions and counterterrorism measures frequently reflecting strategic interests rather than universal legal principles.

By integrating these perspectives, this review underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity and empirical rigor in the study of international security. Future research should focus on developing more precise definitions of these concepts, assessing their practical implications through case studies, and exploring their evolving nature in response to contemporary security challenges.

HOW THIS STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

This study employs a qualitative research approach focusing on works that directly define or debate the concepts of international order, security sector assistance (SSA), and terrorism, including empirical and theoretical analyses that explore their contested nature. Unlike purely quantitative studies that rely on statistical modeling, this research emphasizes interpretative and comparative analysis. It examines reports and legal texts that reflect state or institutional perspectives, offering insight into how these terms are applied in policy and practice. By integrating scholarly debates with real-world implementation, this research aims to bridge conceptual discussions with practical security challenges.

This paper adopts a comparative conceptual analysis framework, examining how different scholars, policymakers, and institutions define and apply these key international security concepts. Primary sources included official government documents on legal frameworks such as U.S. Code Title 22 and counterterrorism laws from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU). The paper also relied on secondary sources including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports from institutions like RAND. Building on the work of Ikenberry and Barnett, this study identifies patterns of contestation and convergence, highlighting how interpretations evolve over time.³⁷ In addition to theoretical debates, the research investigates how two of these concepts—SSA and terrorism—are applied in practice. Specifically, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) serves as a case study for SSA, providing insight into how security cooperation—a key component of SSA—is operationalized. Meanwhile, the Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) Record of Incidents Database (GRID) is examined to assess how terrorism is categorized and recorded, offering a data-driven perspective on definitional challenges. Through this approach, the study not only

³⁷ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and International Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Michael Barnett, "The End of a Liberal International Order That Never Existed," *The Global* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>

traces conceptual disagreements but also evaluates their real-world policy implications, particularly in shaping international security strategies.

FINDINGS

International Order

Concept	Sub-dimension	Key Elements	Relevant Literature
Core Structure		Hierarchical framework with one central concept branching into five main dimensions and 17 sub dimensions.	
Historical Foundations	1. Concert of Europe & 19th-Century Order 2. Post-WWII Liberal Order 3. Cold War & Containment 4. End of History Debate	- Early diplomatic balance of power (Concert of Europe) - Institutionalism post-WWII - Containment strategies during the Cold War - Liberalism vs. Realism in the post-Cold War world	Lascurettes (Concert of Europe), RAND Reports, Ikenberry, Acheson (Present at Creation), Fukuyama (End of History), Dueck (Reluctant Crusaders) Anthony Lake, Reagan's Westminster Address
Theoretical Perspectives	1. Liberalism & International Institutions 2. Realism & Power Politics 3. Grand Strategy & Security	- Liberalism: Institutions maintain order - Realism: Power struggle defines order - Grand Strategy: States must plan for long-term stability	- Liberalism: Ikenberry (<i>After Victory, Liberal Leviathan</i>) - Realism: <i>Federalist No. 8</i> , Kagan (<i>Dangerous Nation</i>), Dueck (<i>Reluctant Crusaders</i>) - Grand Strategy: Hal Brands (<i>What Good is Grand Strategy?</i>)
Major Thinkers & Contributions		Contributions of scholars on order and institutions - G. John Ikenberry: Liberal Order, Institutionalism, Strategic Restraint - Francis Fukuyama: End of History Hypothesis - Walter Russell Mead: American Foreign Policy Traditions - Robert Kagan: U.S. Global Role (<i>Dangerous Nation</i>)	Ikenberry Fukuyama Mead Kagan Dueck
Modern Challenges	1. Crisis of Liberal Order 2. Rise of Multipolarity & Great-Power Competition 3. Decline of U.S. Hegemony	- Debate over whether the liberal order ever truly existed - Increasing power shifts among China, Russia, and the West - U.S. struggles to maintain influence	Barnett ("The End of a Liberal Order That Never Existed"), RAND Reports (Health of the Liberal Order, Russian Views on Order) Barnett (<i>The End of a Liberal Order That Never Existed</i>), RAND Reports, <i>Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order</i>
Policy Implications	U.S. Strategic Adjustments, Emerging Powers, Regional Orders 1. Testing the Value of the Postwar Order 2. U.S. Grand Strategy Adjustments 3. Emerging Powers & Regional Orders	- Is the current global system still relevant? - How should the U.S. shift its global role? - How will new powers shape future international relations?	RAND Report (<i>Testing the Value of Postwar Order</i>), Hal Brands, Colin Dueck, Anthony Lake, Ikenberry & Mo Jongryn (Korean Leadership)
Interconnected References		- RAND Reports appear across historical foundations, challenges, and policy implications - Ikenberry and Dueck contribute across multiple theories and policy discussions	RAND Reports Ikenberry Dueck

Table 1: Key Themes and Literature on International Order

Security Sector Assistance

Table 2 below captures how SSA, SC, and SA are defined and operationalized across some regions and organizations while distinguishing between their different scopes and strategic objectives.

Country/Body	Security Sector Assistance (SSA)	Security Cooperation (SC)	Security Assistance (SA)
African Countries (e.g., Botswana, Malawi, South Africa)	Prioritizes regional security capacity-building and institutional development.	Cooperates with AU, SADC, and UN peacekeeping missions for collective security efforts.	Involves knowledge-sharing, military training, and logistical support for defense strengthening.
China	Provides military aid, technical cooperation, and security training to partner nations.	Conducts joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and promotes security through the Belt and Road Initiative and SCO.	Supplies military hardware, training, and infrastructure support.
European Union (EU)	Emphasizes stability through capacity-building and a mix of diplomacy, development, and defense strategies.	Cooperation with NATO and partner nations to address collective security challenges.	Involves financial and technical aid to partner nations for security development.
France	Strengthens partner countries' security forces through military capacity-building and rule of law initiatives.	Engages in joint military operations, industrial defense partnerships, and multilateral security initiatives.	Provides defense equipment, training, and operational support.
Germany	Supports partner nations' defense institutions through advisory programs and equipment supply.	Works within NATO and the EU to address collective security threats.	Provides training, military aid, and defense assistance to partner states.
Russia	Offers military and technical cooperation, including training and expertise, to allied nations.	Engages in joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and regional security alliances (CSTO, SCO).	Supplies defense equipment, training, and operational support to aligned countries.
United Kingdom (UK)	Provides military training, advisory support, and equipment to allies for security enhancement.	Focuses on multilateral defense partnerships, joint military training, and intelligence sharing within NATO and the UN.	Supports partner nations with training, financial aid, and military assistance.
United States	SSA encompasses both SC and SA, aiming to strengthen partner nations' security forces through training, equipment, and institutional support. Managed by both the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of State.	SC focuses on military partnerships, including joint exercises, military-to-military engagements, and cooperation, primarily managed by the DoD.	SA involves providing military equipment, financial aid, and training to allies, managed by the Department of State but may involve DoD.

Table 2: Security sector assistance (SSA) and security cooperation (SC) by country and organization

Security Cooperation as a Key Component of Sector Assistance

Between 2012 and 2024, various U.S. Navy and U.S. Military Sealift Command ships have participated in the ongoing maritime security efforts in the Gulf of Guinea through their involvement in Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS. This exercise, designed to improve regional maritime cooperation, safety, and security, has seen the participation of several vessels, each contributing to building stronger security partnerships in West and Central Africa.

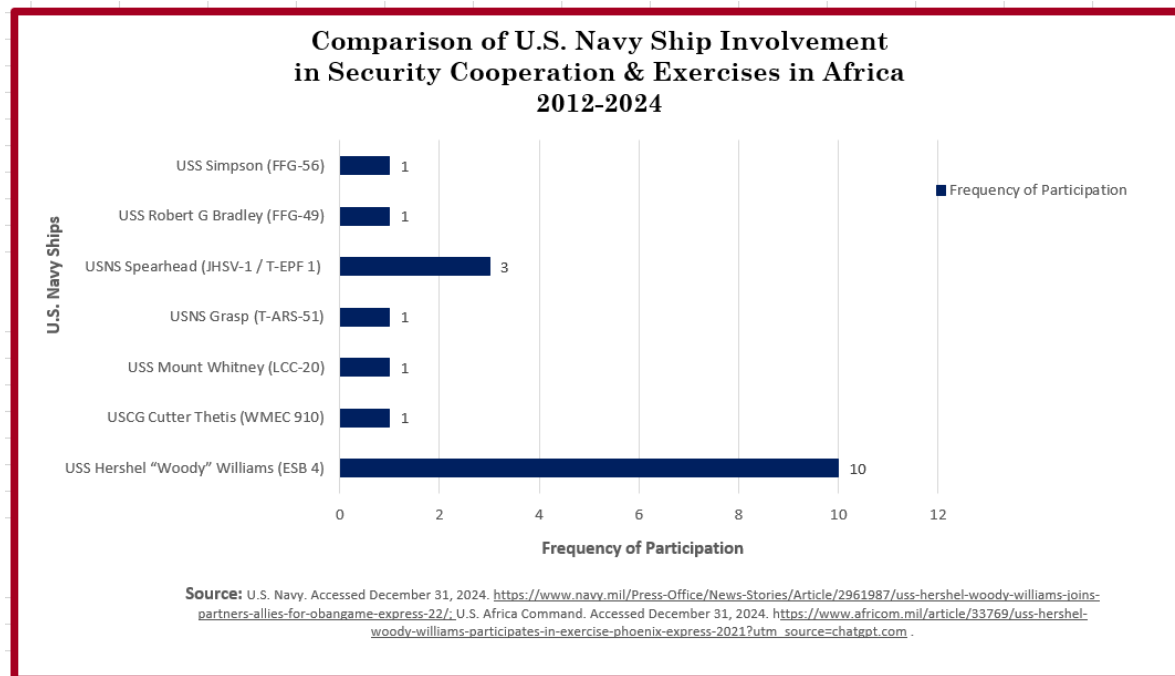


Figure 1: Comparison of U.S. Navy Ship Involvement in Security Cooperation & Exercises in Africa, 2012-2024

2012: USS Simpson (FFG-56)

In February 2012, the USS Simpson, a guided-missile frigate, participated in OBANGAME EXPRESS as a key player in fostering cooperation between naval forces from several African nations, including Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Spain. The USS Simpson's involvement included being a boarding vessel, helping train teams from these countries in boarding and tactical procedures. It also contributed to maritime security by conducting training sessions and coordinating ship formations and maneuvers. As part of its operations, the USS Simpson made port visits to Lagos, Nigeria, and Tema, Ghana, supporting the Africa Partnership Station (APS) initiative, aimed at enhancing maritime security and safety in Africa.³⁸

2013: USS Robert G. Bradley (FFG-49)

In 2013, the USS Robert G. Bradley, a guided-missile frigate, also participated in OBANGAME EXPRESS, contributing to the exercise's focus on enhancing regional maritime cooperation and providing training for local navies in the Gulf of Guinea.³⁹

³⁸ Naval History and Heritage Command, "Simpson (FFG-56) II (1985–)," *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/simpson--ffg-56--ii-1985-.html>;

United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), "USS Simpson Participates in Obangame Express 2012," *AFRICOM*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.africom.mil/article/8843/uss-simpson-participates-in-obangame-express-2012>.

³⁹ Naval History and Heritage Command, "Robert G. Bradley (FFG-49)," *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/r/robert-g-bradley.html>;

United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), "Robert G. Bradley Completes APS Exercise Obangame Express," *AFRICOM*, March 7, 2012, <https://www.africom.mil/article/8169/robert-g-bradley-completes-aps-exercise-obangame-e>.

2014-2016: USNS Spearhead (JHSV-1 / T-EPF 1)

From 2014 to 2016, the USNS Spearhead, a joint high-speed vessel (JHSV), participated in multiple maritime exercises, including Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS and Exercise SAHARAN EXPRESS. The USNS Spearhead's involvement highlighted the growing importance of fast and versatile vessels in conducting security operations and partnerships. The ship's capabilities were used to provide logistical support, training, and operational cooperation with African navies, helping to address issues like piracy, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing.⁴⁰

2017: USNS Grasp (T-ARS-51)

In 2017, the USNS Grasp, a towing and salvage vessel, participated in maritime exercises that focused on enhancing African countries' ability to conduct maritime security operations. The Grasp's involvement emphasized the importance of specialized vessels for operations such as salvage, towing, and recovery, which are critical for the safety and security of maritime trade routes.⁴¹

2018: USS Mount Whitney (LCC-20)

The USS Mount Whitney, the flagship of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, joined Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS in 2018. The ship's participation in the exercise underscored its role in command, control, and coordination of multinational maritime operations. The Mount Whitney's capabilities allowed for improved communication and maneuvering coordination among the participating countries, contributing to more effective maritime security strategies in the region.⁴²

2019: USCG Cutter Thetis (WMEC 910)

In 2019, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Thetis, a medium endurance cutter, took part in Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS, focusing on law enforcement and operational tactics against illicit maritime activities, such as illegal fishing, piracy, and trafficking. Its involvement further showcased the integration of U.S. Coast Guard capabilities in strengthening security efforts in the Gulf of Guinea.⁴³

⁴⁰ United States Navy, "USNS Carson City Conducts Maritime Security Operations with Gulf of Guinea Nations," *Navy.mil*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=685&Article=2263362>;

United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), "Exercise Obangame/Saharan Express 2016 Commences," *AFRICOM*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.africom.mil/article/28060/exercise-obangame-saharan-express-2016-commences>;

U.S. Embassy in Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe, "Remarks at USNS Spearhead Reception," *U.S. Embassy in Angola*, March 17, 2016, <https://ao.usembassy.gov/remarks-usns-spearhead-reception/>.

⁴¹ U.S. Navy, "U.S. Navy Sailors perform daily maintenance on an F/A-18F Super Hornet assigned to Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 23," photograph, Military Sealift Command, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.msc.usff.navy.mil/Press-Room/Photo-Gallery/igphoto/2002480995/>.

⁴² U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, "USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20)," U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/About-Us/Our-Task-Forces/CTF-63/USS-Mount-Whitney-LCC-20/>.

U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, "USS Mount Whitney Departs Senegal," U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, July 5, 2019, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/1901375/uss-mount-whitney-departs-senegal/>;

DoD News, "Exercise Obangame Express 2018 Starts," U.S. Department of Defense, March 23, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1480881/exercise-obangame-express-2018-starts/>.

⁴³ U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, "USCGC Thetis Participates in Exercise Obangame Express," U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, April 5, 2019, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/News-Display/Article/1795344/uscg-thetis-participates-in-exercise-obangame-express/>;

U.S. Coast Guard, "USCGC THETIS (WMEC-910)," U.S. Coast Guard Atlantic Area, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.atlanticaea.uscg.mil/Area-Cutters/CGCTHETIS/>

2022-2024: USS Hershel “Woody” Williams (ESB 4)

From 2022 through 2024, the USS Hershel “Woody” Williams, an expeditionary sea base ship (ESB), has played a pivotal role in maritime security exercises in West and Central Africa. It conducted multiple port visits, including to Cape Town, South Africa, Pointe-Noire in the Republic of the Congo, Walvis Bay in Namibia, and other African locations. The USS Hershel “Woody” Williams’ operations in the region focused on enhancing partnerships through training, humanitarian support, and contributing to maritime security, especially in the Gulf of Guinea and the broader U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility. This ship’s versatility and capabilities have allowed for continuous engagement and capacity-building in the region, further supporting initiatives like the Africa Partnership Station.⁴⁴

Across these years, the ships’ involvement in Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS has been integral in fostering a greater sense of collaboration and operational effectiveness among African and U.S. naval forces. These efforts are central to improving the security environment in the Gulf of Guinea, a region plagued by piracy, illegal fishing, and other maritime threats. By offering both training and operational support, these U.S. vessels have helped bolster the maritime security capabilities of African nations, ensuring greater stability and safety on the continent's vital maritime routes.

The USS Hershel “Woody” Williams (ESB 4) participated in multiple port visits and maritime security operations from 2022 to 2024. Specifically, the ship made several stops in various African countries, contributing to U.S. Navy's presence and engagement in the region. Here are the key locations it visited:

No.	Security Cooperation, Month, & Year	Military Activity
1	Cape Town, South Africa (February 2021)	Marking the second U.S. Navy ship to stop in Cape Town in the last 12 months.
2	Exercise PHOENIX EXPRESS (May 2021)	In May 2021, the ship participated in Exercise Phoenix Express 2021 in the Mediterranean Sea, aimed at enhancing maritime safety and security among participating countries. ⁴⁵
3	Pointe-Noire, Republic of the Congo (September 2022)	Marking the first U.S. ship to visit the Republic of the Congo in more than a decade.
4	Walvis Bay, Namibia (September 2021)	Aimed at fostering relationships with the Namibian Navy.
5	Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS (March 2022)	The USS Hershel “Woody” Williams joined U.S. partner countries and allies for Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS 2022 off the coast of Senegal, focusing on improving regional cooperation and maritime domain awareness in the Gulf of Guinea.
6	Tema, Ghana (October 2023)	For a routine port visit, part of its deployment in the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility.
7	Lomé, Togo (September 2023)	Conducted a port visit as part of its deployment in the Gulf of Guinea and Western Africa.
8	Dakar, Senegal (June 2021)	Moored for a four-day visit.
9	Agadir, Morocco (June 2021)	Supported a multinational training exercise, AFRICAN LION 2021.
10	Exercise SEA LION 2024 (March 2024)	The ship collaborated with the Ghana Navy in the Gulf of Guinea for Exercise SEA LION 2024, which included personnel exchanges and cultural ceremonies to strengthen bilateral maritime relations.

Table 3: USS Hershel “Woody” Williams (ESB 4) – African Maritime Security Engagements

In total, the USS Hershel “Woody” Williams conducted seven major port visits in various African locations from 2021 to 2023. These visits were part of its role in supporting maritime security operations and fostering partnerships in the region, part of U.S. security sector assistance (SSA).

⁴⁴ U.S. 2nd Fleet, “USS Hershel ‘Woody’ Williams (ESB 4),” U.S. 2nd Fleet, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.c2f.usff.navy.mil/esb4/>.

⁴⁵ U.S. Africa Command, “USS Hershel ‘Woody’ Williams Participates in Exercise Phoenix Express 2021.” Accessed March 24, 2025. <https://www.africom.mil/article/33769/uss-hershel-woody-williams-participates-in-exercise-phoenix-express-2021>.

Terrorism

Source	Definition of Terrorism	Key Elements	Ambiguities/Controversies
African Union (AU)	Terrorism undermines sovereignty, destabilizes governments, and harms civilians.	1. Undermining sovereignty 2. Destabilizing governments 3. Harm to civilians	Focuses more on sovereignty and government instability, rather than specific targets or motivations of the violence.
Australian Government (2024)	Acts designed to advance a cause through serious harm, intimidation, or disruption.	1. Use of violence or threat 2. Intimidation or disruption 3. Serious harm to advance a cause	Lacks clear guidance on how "serious harm" is measured, and whether it must specifically target civilians or non-combatants.
Barnett (2019)	Terrorism is defined by the narratives of dominant global powers, manipulated to justify actions like military interventions and civil liberty restrictions.	1. Shaped by dominant global powers 2. Used to justify military actions or restrict liberties	Critiques the use of terrorism as a political tool; questions whether the term is being manipulated based on power dynamics.
Deudney, Ikenberry, and Postel-Vinay (2023)	Terrorism and counterterrorism narratives are shaped by ideological battles over global governance and political legitimacy.	1. Shaped by ideological battles 2. Terrorism and counterterrorism linked to global governance and legitimacy battles	Argues terrorism definitions shift based on strategic global interests and legitimacy concerns, complicating universal classification.
European Union (EU)	Terrorism is an act designed to destabilize or destroy political, economic, or social structures.	1. Use of violence or threat 2. Intent to destabilize political, economic, or social structures 3. Political, ideological, or religious motivations	Vague about the level of harm required for an act to destabilize; also does not clarify if acts must target civilians specifically.
Fukuyama (1992)	Terrorism, in the post-Cold War era, has seen a decline in ideological conflicts.	1. Decline of ideological conflicts post-Cold War 2. Focus on terrorism as a byproduct of political instability	Suggests that terrorism is no longer driven by ideological conflict but could be a response to governance issues.
Ikenberry (2018)	Terrorism is a fluid concept that evolves with geopolitical shifts.	1. Evolving concept 2. Dependent on geopolitical context	Argues that terrorism definitions often depend on strategic interests rather than fixed principles.
Matibe (2024)	Terrorism is the use of violence to intimidate, coerce, or achieve political, religious, or ideological goals, often targeting civilians and breaking International Humanitarian Law.	1. Use of violence to achieve political, religious, or ideological goals 2. Targeting non-combatants 3. Violating humanitarian law	Emphasizes the strict criteria of U.S. law in defining terrorism, noting challenges in universally applying such standards globally.
RAND (2018)	Counterterrorism measures reflect national security priorities rather than consistent legal principles.	1. Counterterrorism shaped by national interests 2. Measures often not based on fixed legal principles	Highlights inconsistency in counterterrorism definitions and the political manipulation of the term "terrorism."
UK Counter-Terrorism Act (2000)	Use or threat of serious violence to influence government or intimidate the public for ideological, political, or religious reasons.	1. Serious violence or threat 2. Political, ideological, or religious motivations 3. Intention to influence government or intimidate public	Ambiguity regarding the scope of "serious violence" and the specific role of public intimidation vs. government influence.
U.S. Government (Title 22, Section 2656f)	Terrorism involves the unlawful use of force or violence by designated terrorist groups, subnational entities, or clandestine agents against civilians or property.	1. Violence for political, religious, or ideological goals 2. Intent to instill fear and influence a broader audience 3. Targeting civilians or non-combatants	Strict criteria: must target civilians, have a larger political purpose, and violate International Humanitarian Law. May exclude acts against military targets or with less intent to instill fear.

Table 4: Comparative Definitions of Terrorism: A Cross-Section of Legal, Scholarly, and Policy Perspectives

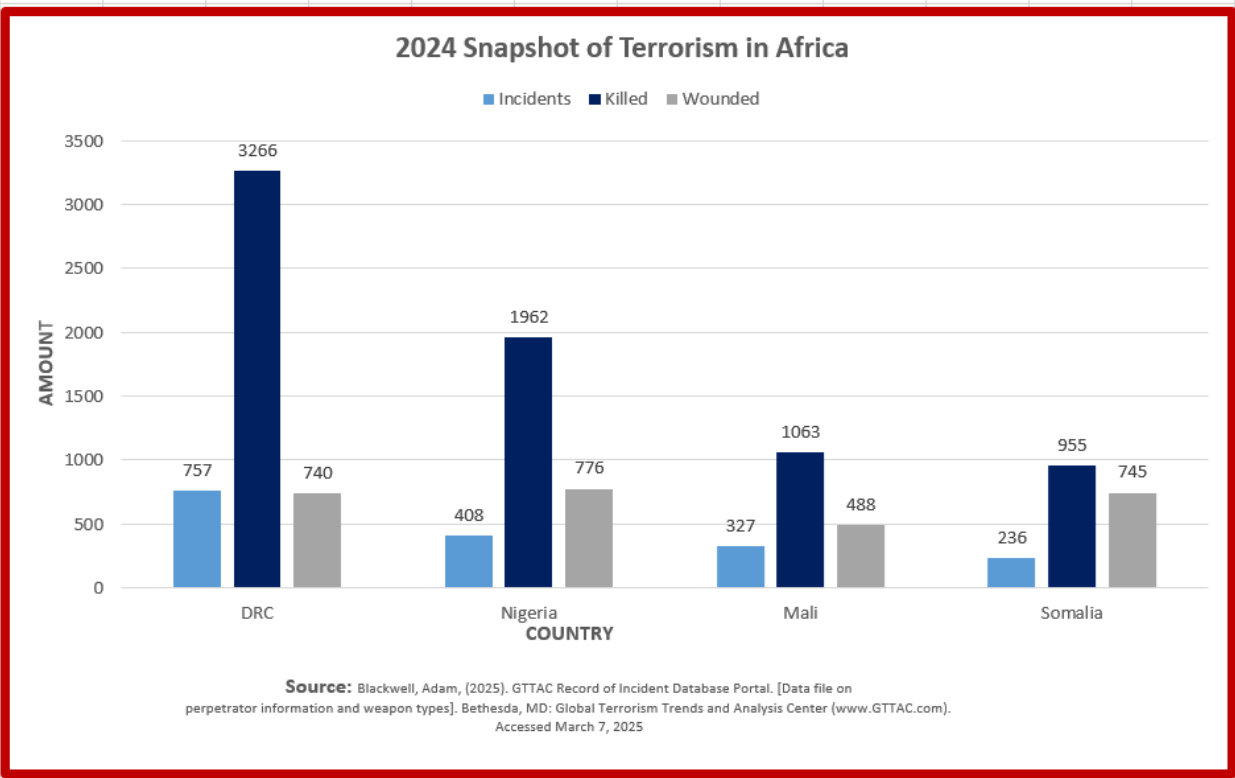


Figure 1: 2024 Snapshot of Terrorism in Africa

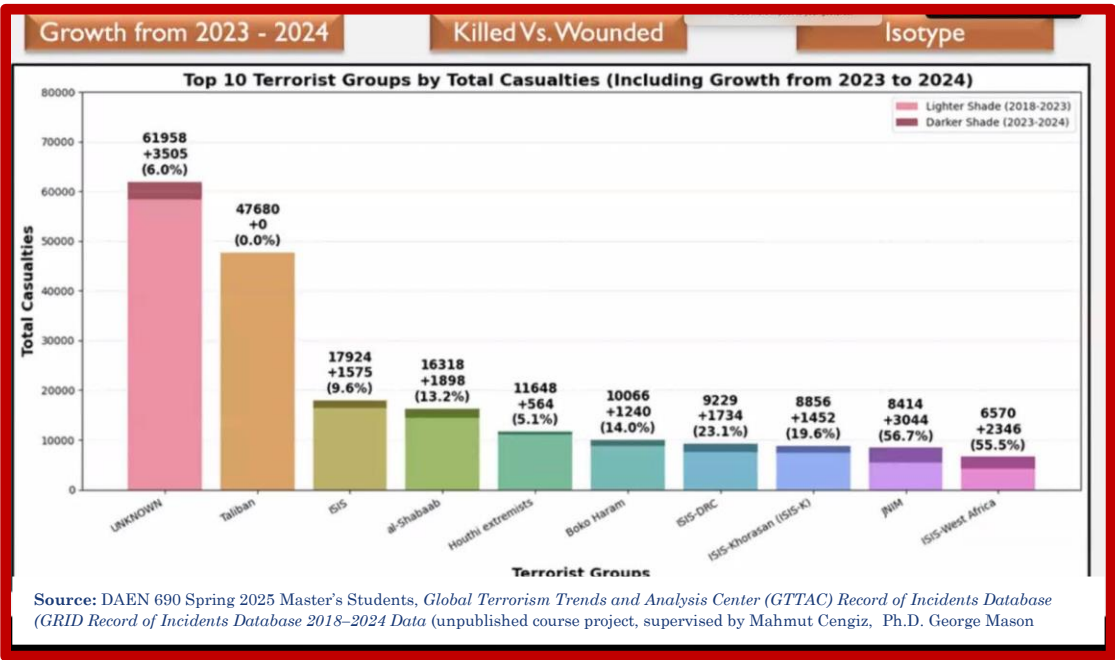


Figure 3: Global Terrorism Growth of Killed and Wounded Casualties (2023-2024)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ DAEN 690 Spring 2025 Students. Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) Record of Incidents Database (GRID Record of Incidents Database 2018–2024 Data). Unpublished course project, supervised by Mahmut Cengiz, George Mason University. Accessed April 1, 2025.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The operationalization of a concept—as this paper uncovered in the results of the SC and terrorism—provides a consistent and accurate representation of the concept, which in turn leads us to what we expect to find aligning with the expectations of the concept. In the case of the findings in this paper, they are valid measures of the definitions of international order, SSA, and terrorism. Since this operationalization of these three concepts is reinforcing the concept, it suggests that the definition of international order, security sector assistance, and terrorism in this paper, are a valid and reliable method of observing the concepts under examination.

International Order

1. Conceptual Framework

The concept of international order is a foundational principle in international relations, shaping global governance, security, and diplomacy. This discussion employs a multi-dimensional framework to analyze international order by integrating historical, theoretical, and contemporary perspectives. The framework is structured around five primary dimensions: historical foundations, theoretical perspectives, major thinkers and contributions, modern challenges, and policy implications. These dimensions provide a structured means to assess how international order has evolved, its guiding principles, and the ongoing debates surrounding its stability and transformation.

1.1 Historical Foundations

A historical lens provides context for understanding the development and transformations of international order. Key historical moments, such as the Concert of Europe, the post-World War II liberal order, the Cold War containment strategy, and the "End of History" debate, highlight the various attempts to construct and maintain global stability.

- a) The Concert of Europe and 19th-Century Order, which emerged after the Napoleonic Wars, was an early model of international governance. It was also a precursor to modern international governance structures. It was followed by the post-World War II liberal order, which created institutions like the UN, the Bretton Woods system, and NATO. These institutions supported cooperation, democracy, and economic interdependence.
- b) During the Cold War and containment era, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union became the center of a bipolar order, defined by ideological confrontation. This changed with Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" debate, which proposed that liberal democracy was the final form of government. This reflected optimism about the persistence of a liberal international order.

1.2 Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of international order is shaped by various perspectives, each providing insights into the complexities of global relations. They are predominantly categorized into liberalism, realism, and strategic grand strategy perspectives.

Liberalism advocates the importance of international institutions and cooperation in sustaining global stability. Scholars like G. John Ikenberry support a rules-based international order, emphasizing the role of multilateral cooperation in fostering peace. In contrast, realism underscores the persistence of state competition and the role of military power in shaping international order, as

seen in the works of Federalist No. 8, Robert Kagan, and Colin Dueck.⁴⁷ Another perspective, grand strategy, examines how countries develop long-term security plans, as discussed by Hal Brands.⁴⁸

Several intellectuals have influenced our understanding of international order. Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis argues for the supremacy of liberal democracy, while Walter Russell Mead identifies distinct traditions in U.S. foreign policy.⁴⁹ Robert Kagan emphasizes America's historical role in shaping global order, highlighting the importance of leadership in international relations.⁵⁰ And as we now know, G. John Ikenberry: Advocates for a liberal, rules-based international order rooted in institutions.⁵¹

1.3 Major Thinkers

Several key intellectuals and policymakers have influenced the conceptualization of international order. Despite the contributions of these thinkers, the international order faces numerous challenges in the contemporary era. Michael Barnett questions the existence of a genuinely liberal international order and if one ever existed, sparking debates about the effectiveness of current institutions.⁵² Additionally, the rise of multi-polarity and great-power competition, as evidenced by the growing influence of China, Russia, and regional powers, challenge U.S. hegemony and reshape the global landscape.⁵³

1.4 Policy Implications & Future Directions

Understanding international order is crucial for formulating foreign policy strategies. As policymakers navigate the evolving international order, they must consider several crucial aspects of the concept. These include reevaluating the effectiveness of postwar institutions, adjusting U.S. grand strategies such as containment and engagement, and understanding the role of emerging powers and regional blocs in shaping new forms of order.⁵⁴ Considering emerging powers and

⁴⁷ Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, pp. 71–129; Publius, *Federalist Paper No. 8*;

Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, pp. 44–81; Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence*, pp. 132–174.

⁴⁸ Hal Brands, What Good is Grand Strategy, pp. 17–59; Dean Acheson, Present at Creation, pp. 249–354.

⁴⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992);

Walter Russell Mead. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁵⁰ Robert Kagan. *Dangerous Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

⁵¹ G. John Ikenberry, "The Logic of Order: Westphalia, Liberalism, and the Evolution of the International Order in the Modern Era," in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 83–105.

⁵² Michael Barnett, "The End of a Liberal International Order That Never Existed," *The Global* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>.

⁵³ Russian Views of the International Order Andrew Radin, Clint Reach Published May 18, 2017 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html;

Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1994.html.

⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Westminster Address";

Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement,"

Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, pp. 44–81; Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence*, pp. 132–174;

regional orders will be key, including the role of rising powers like China, India, and regional blocs. By addressing these challenges, policymakers can work towards fostering a stable and secure global environment.⁵⁵

By integrating historical, theoretical, and policy dimensions, this conceptual framework provides a structured approach to analyzing international order. While traditional liberal institutions remain influential, challenges from rising multi-polarity, geopolitical competition, and ideological fragmentation indicate that the nature of international order is in flux. Future research should focus on evaluating how states navigate this transformation and whether emerging governance structures can maintain stability in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Security Sector Assistance

Security Cooperation

If the concept of SSA operationalized cements, then the definition of the concept may be potentially inaccurate. This means that the way the concept is defined highlights certain aspects while potentially not taking into account other aspects. The definition of the SSA concept should be observable empirically; transferring the concrete concept into observable indicators.

U.S. Navy deployments are a tangible and operationalized expression of security cooperation, a key component of security sector assistance (SSA), within U.S. strategy in Africa. These deployments demonstrate SSA in action, serving as direct mechanisms for building partner capacity, enhancing maritime domain awareness, supporting interoperability, and reinforcing regional security frameworks. By examining U.S. naval presence—both in port visits and at-sea operations—it becomes evident that the definition and perception of SSA are shaped by how security cooperation is implemented on the ground. Notably, discourse on SSA often blurs the distinction between security assistance (which primarily involves arms transfers, training, and funding) and security cooperation (which entails sustained military-to-military engagements and joint operations).

Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS exemplifies how security cooperation operationalizes SSA goals. This multinational exercise, led by the U.S. through AFRICOM and the U.S. Navy, is designed to improve maritime security capabilities in the Gulf of Guinea. The engagement of U.S. naval assets, such as the USS Hershel “Woody” Williams and USS Mount Whitney, underscores how SSA functions through long-term strategic engagement rather than one-time military aid. By strengthening the maritime law enforcement capabilities of African partners, these exercises enhance regional security while also serving U.S. strategic interests.

However, the use of U.S. naval forces under the SSA umbrella raises conceptual ambiguities. While commonly categorized under “security cooperation,” such operations sometimes overlap with “security assistance” in public and political discourse. The distinction is critical: whereas security cooperation entails sustained engagement through training and joint operations, security assistance often refers to more transactional support, such as arms transfers and advisory roles. The lack of terminological precision in policy discussions can lead to misinterpretations of SSA’s scope, influencing both domestic and international perceptions of U.S. military engagements in Africa.

Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy*, pp. 17-59; Dean Acheson, *Present at Creation*, pp. 249-354;

⁵⁵ G. John Ikenberry and Mo Jongryn, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Through naval-led SSA initiatives, the U.S. does not merely provide aid but actively integrates regional forces into a global security framework, illustrating the interconnected nature of SSA, security cooperation, and international order. As such, OBANGAME EXPRESS and similar exercises not only build maritime capacity but also highlight the ongoing conceptual and practical ambiguities within SSA discourse.

Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS is a prominent maritime security operation that not only focuses on the immediate security concerns of Sub-Saharan Africa but also plays a significant role in the broader framework of international security. This multinational exercise involves the collaboration of African nations, the United States, and European partners, providing a unique platform for cooperative defense strategies in an increasingly interconnected world. In a region like the Gulf of Guinea, which is critical for global trade and maritime activities, piracy, illegal fishing, and drug trafficking have profound implications not only for the countries within Sub-Saharan Africa but also for global maritime security. By fostering security cooperation among nations, OBANGAME EXPRESS strengthens regional maritime law enforcement capabilities and helps mitigate threats that transcend national borders. This is a perfect example of how regional security efforts are interwoven with global security concerns—demonstrating the interconnectedness of modern security challenges and the necessity of multilateral responses.

Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS is a clear example of how security cooperation plays a vital role in addressing regional security challenges, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea and broader West African maritime areas. When examined within the broader framework of Sub-Saharan Africa security, OBANGAME EXPRESS highlights several key points about the importance of security cooperation as a component of regional stability, security, and development. There is much to glean from OBANGAME EXPRESS and security cooperation.

1. Fostering Multilateral Partnerships

- OBANGAME EXPRESS emphasizes the critical role of multinational cooperation in enhancing security within Sub-Saharan Africa. By involving countries from across the Gulf of Guinea (like Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, and others), as well as global partners (such as the U.S., Spain, and more), the exercise demonstrates a collaborative approach to countering maritime threats. This mirrors the sub-concept of security cooperation, which promotes joint operational training, sharing of intelligence, and coordinated tactical efforts among multiple actors.
- The involvement of various countries reflects a shared commitment to improving maritime safety in a region prone to piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking, and other illicit activities that destabilize the region.

2. Enhancing Maritime Security Capacity

- OBANGAME EXPRESS allows the U.S. Navy and its international partners to train and exchange expertise with regional navies, thus enhancing their maritime security capabilities. For example, the USS Simpson's participation in 2012 was a direct attempt to improve boarding procedures and tactical communication drills for African navies, which are critical in responding to piracy and smuggling in the Gulf of Guinea.
- By fostering security cooperation, OBANGAME EXPRESS allows Sub-Saharan Africa countries to develop and strengthen self-defense capabilities, crisis response strategies, and interoperability with partners like the U.S. and Spain. This is crucial for ensuring regional stability.

3. Capacity Building

- The training and technical assistance provided by participating countries, like USNS Spearhead's role in 2014-2016, serve as opportunities for capacity building within Sub-Saharan Africa countries. These exercises offer hands-on experience and technical exchanges that are often unavailable through other channels. U.S. personnel not only train military teams but also help improve operational procedures (e.g., detect-to-engage procedures), which ultimately help to strengthen local forces and improve their ability to manage maritime threats on their own.
- Security cooperation, in this case, isn't just about immediate tactical support; it's about building lasting institutional capacity in the region.

4. Promoting Regional Stability and Security

- Exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS serves as a platform for promoting regional security by engaging SSA countries in addressing common threats that cross national borders. As seen in 2012 with the USS Simpson and the cooperation with Cameroonian teams, such exercises help to improve the coordination and communication between different countries and their military forces, fostering a collective security environment. This is essential in regions where security challenges transcend national boundaries (e.g., piracy in the Gulf of Guinea affecting multiple states).
- By creating a unified response framework, OBANGAME EXPRESS aligns with broader Sub-Saharan Africa security objectives, such as improving regional governance, countering terrorism, and ensuring maritime law enforcement.

5. Strategic Engagement and Long-term Partnerships

- The involvement of the U.S. military, and other NATO and European nations, in these exercises reflects a long-term commitment to Sub-Saharan Africa's stability. Exercises like OBANGAME EXPRESS not only provide immediate security solutions but also foster long-term partnerships. The involvement of the USS Hershel "Woody" Williams and its frequent port visits across various African nations demonstrates that military presence and cooperation are not short-term solutions but long-term investments in peacekeeping and regional security architecture.
- The repeated engagement of U.S. ships like USS Simpson and USS Mount Whitney in the region suggests a deepening, strategic military cooperation designed to increase regional cohesion in the face of evolving threats like piracy, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing.

6. Interdisciplinary Engagement beyond the Military

- Security cooperation through exercises like OBANGAME EXPRESS is not limited to military cooperation alone. While naval forces are primarily involved, civilian cooperation is often an integral part of these exercises. Port visits, training sessions, and engagements that focus on areas such as intelligence sharing, anti-piracy operations, and humanitarian assistance help to build broader networks for regional security. These engagements also serve to promote diplomatic and cultural ties between Sub-Saharan Africa countries and international partners.
- For example, the USS Simpson's port visits to Nigeria and Ghana were part of the Africa Partnership Station, which aims to strengthen global maritime partnerships in broader, non-military ways that align with U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa objectives for security and economic development.

7. SSA's Role in Global Security

- Through these multilateral exercises, SSA plays an increasingly active role in global maritime security efforts, reinforcing its importance as a global partner in maintaining peace and stability in international waters. Exercises like OBANGAME EXPRESS ensure that Sub-Saharan Africa countries are not just recipients of aid but are contributors to global security networks, signaling a shift towards self-reliance in addressing regional security challenges.
- Security cooperation frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in maritime security, help integrate these countries into broader international security structures. By doing so, SSA becomes part of the larger global defense architecture, contributing to collective security strategies that are crucial in combating transnational threats.

Through its focus on maritime security cooperation, OBANGAME EXPRESS illustrates how regional security efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa are an integral part of the broader international security landscape. By involving a mix of African countries and international partners like the United States, Spain, and others, the exercise serves as an avenue for capacity building, fostering multilateral security partnerships, and improving interoperability among military forces. This collaboration not only addresses local maritime security issues such as piracy and illegal fishing but also enhances the ability of participating nations to respond to global threats like terrorism and transnational organized crime.

The importance of these exercises in terms of international security cannot be overstated. OBANGAME EXPRESS is a manifestation of how cooperative security efforts at the regional level directly contribute to the stability of the global maritime system. As threats such as piracy and terrorism are not confined to one country's borders, exercises like this help bridge the gap between local efforts and broader global security objectives. They demonstrate that international security today requires collective efforts, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility, making security cooperation an essential pillar of global peacekeeping and conflict prevention strategies.

By enhancing regional capabilities and fostering international cooperation, OBANGAME EXPRESS not only strengthens security in the Gulf of Guinea but also reinforces the broader international commitment to peace, stability, and law enforcement on the world's seas. It exemplifies how effective regional cooperation can create a ripple effect on the global stage, ultimately contributing to a more secure and interconnected world. Overall, OBANGAME EXPRESS provides a robust example of security cooperation in practice, underscoring its importance as a sub-concept of SSA.

Terrorism

A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis

Defining Terrorism

Terrorism is a contested concept, often defined within legal, policy, and academic frameworks. The Terrorism Act 2000 (UK) and Council of the European Union's counter-terrorism policies define terrorism as the use or threat of serious violence to intimidate a population or influence a government for political, ideological, or religious objectives. Meanwhile, the Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) categorizes terrorist incidents based on their intentionality, political motivation, and civilian targeting.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC). "Record of Incidents Database (GRID)." Accessed February 18, 2025. <https://gttac.com/>

This study operationalizes terrorism using three key indicators derived from the dataset:

1. **Frequency of incidents** – Measures the intensity of terrorist activity.
2. **Fatalities per incident** – Indicates the lethality and effectiveness of terrorist strategies.
3. **Number of wounded per incident** – Reflects the broader impact on civilian populations.

Using these parameters, the dataset provides a structured way to empirically analyze terrorism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Mali, and Somalia—countries with persistent insurgencies and extremist activity.

This analysis demonstrates how terrorism is operationalized as an empirical phenomenon, revealing distinct regional trends:

1. **Frequency vs. Lethality:**

- The DRC has the highest number of incidents (757), but a moderate lethality rate (4.3 deaths per incident), suggesting that armed groups engage in sustained, frequent attacks. This aligns with Verweijen and Wakenge's research on armed group proliferation, where numerous local militias rather than transnational terrorist networks drive violence.⁵⁷ And the lethality of the perpetrator aligns with Matibe's argument.⁵⁸
- Nigeria shows a higher lethality rate (4.8 deaths per incident), reflecting Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)'s strategic focus on mass killings. This pattern is consistent with Matibe, which highlights Boko Haram's increasing reliance on suicide bombings and large-scale assaults on villages and security installations.⁵⁹

2. **Casualty Rate as an Indicator of Civilian Impact:**

- Somalia has the highest casualty rate (7.2 victims per incident), demonstrating the devastating impact of al-Shabaab's asymmetric warfare tactics, including car bombings and mass shootings. This aligns with Australia's Counter-Terrorism Laws and the Crown Prosecution Service reports, which emphasize that counterterrorism efforts must address both direct violence and the broader psychological and societal destabilization caused by terrorist organizations.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Verweijen, Judith, and Claude Iguma Wakenge. 2015. "Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo." Rift Valley Institute. Accessed February 5, 2025. <http://riftvalley.net/publication/understanding-armed-group-proliferation-eastern-congo>.

⁵⁸ Pearl Matibe, "ISIS-DRC's Deadly Ascent: Emerging and Expanding Threat in Africa," Homeland Security Today, February 13, 2025, <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/isis-drcs-deadly-ascent-emerging-and-expanding-threat-in-africa/>.

⁵⁹ Pearl Matibe, "Nigeria: Understanding the Surge of Terrorism and Its Impact on Civilians, 2018-2022," Modern Diplomacy, May 30, 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/05/30/nigeria-understanding-the-surge-of-terrorism-and-its-impact-on-civilians-2018-2022/>;

⁶⁰ Australia's Counter-Terrorism Laws, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.ag.gov.au/national-security/australias-counter-terrorism-laws>;

Laws to Combat Terrorism in Australia, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/laws-to-combat-terrorism>;

- Mali's relatively lower lethality and casualty rates (3.2 and 4.8, respectively) suggest that terrorist activity is concentrated in military confrontations rather than indiscriminate attacks against civilians. This corresponds with Tobias Feakin's assessment of jihadist expansion in the Sahel, where Salafi-Jihadist groups like Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) target security forces to undermine state authority rather than seeking maximum civilian casualties.⁶¹

Operationalizing Terrorism through Regional Dynamics

Terrorism is not a monolithic phenomenon; rather, it is shaped by political, economic, and security conditions. The GTTAC dataset illustrates three major operational models of terrorism:

1. Irregular Warfare-Linked Terrorism (DRC & Mali):

- In these cases, terrorism blends with local insurgencies, where armed groups like the ISIS-DRC in the DRC and JNIM in Mali use terrorist tactics to sustain long-term conflicts.
- Here, terrorism operates as a tool within broader civil conflicts, as described by Verweijen and Wakenge, who note that localized armed groups engage in strategic violence to control resources and territory.⁶²

2. Transnational Jihadist Terrorism (Nigeria & Somalia):

- Boko Haram, ISWAP (Nigeria), and al-Shabaab (Somalia) fit a more classic definition of terrorism, using spectacular attacks to project power, gain recruits, and challenge state authority.
- The casualty rates in Somalia (7.2 victims per attack) and Nigeria (6.7 victims per attack) suggest a pattern of high-profile terrorist violence, reflecting the global jihadist playbook discussed by Sabrina Joy Smith.⁶³

3. Hybrid Terrorism-Organized Crime Nexus (DRC & Nigeria):

- In parts of the DRC and northern Nigeria, terrorist groups engage in illicit economies, blurring the lines between terrorism and organized crime. This hybrid model is evident in GTTAC reports on global terrorism trends, which stress that funding sources, recruitment strategies, and operational methods often overlap between terrorist networks and armed criminal groups.

Crown Prosecution Service: Terrorism, accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/terrorism>.

⁶¹ Tobias Feakin, "New Frontiers of Islamist Extremism in Africa," *The Strategist* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute), September 23, 2014, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-frontiers-of-islamist-extremism-in-africa/>.

⁶² Verweijen, Judith, and Claude Iguma Wakenge. 2015. "Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo." Rift Valley Institute. Accessed February 5, 2025. <http://riftvalley.net/publication/understanding-armed-group-proliferation-eastern-congo>.

⁶³ Sabrina Joy Smith, "Africa: A Key Battleground in Global Islamist Jihad," *The Strategist* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute), September 27, 2013, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/africa-a-key-battleground-in-global-islamist-jihad/>.

The GTTAC data visualization by George Mason University master's student shows the growth of terrorism worldwide.⁶⁴ The total casualties attributed to various terrorist organizations, with "UNKNOWN" perpetrators causing the highest number at 61,958 casualties (showing a 6.0% increase from 2023-2024), followed by the Taliban at 47,680 (with 0.0% growth), and ISIS at 17,924 (with a 9.6% increase).⁶⁵ Other significant groups include al-Shabaab (16,318 casualties, 13.2% increase), Houthi extremists, Boko Haram, ISIS-DRC, ISIS-Khorasan, NIM, and ISIS-West Africa. The last two groups show particularly high percentage increases of 56.7% and 55.5% respectively, suggesting rapidly escalating violence from these organizations. The chart illustrates how terrorism is operationalized through quantifiable metrics of harm (total casualties), while also demonstrating the global reach of terrorist activity with groups operating across different regions. The high number of "unknown" perpetrators highlights challenges in attribution and the diffuse nature of modern terrorism.

Policy Implications and Conceptual Insights

- How we define and measure terrorism shapes policy responses. The European Union's counterterrorism strategy focuses on intelligence-sharing and financial tracking, which may be effective against transnational jihadist networks (Nigeria, Somalia) but less so against irregular warfare-linked terrorism (DRC, Mali).
- Operationalizing terrorism requires context-specific approaches. The Australian Counter-Terrorism Laws emphasize proactive counter-radicalization measures, but such strategies may be less effective in weak states like Mali and the DRC, where state capacity is limited.
- Terrorism is both an act of violence and a strategic communication tool. High casualty rates in Somalia and Nigeria reflect terrorist groups' intent to instill fear and control narratives, as noted in RAND's studies on postwar orders.

This analysis demonstrates how terrorism is operationalized as a measurable phenomenon through incident frequency, lethality, and casualty rates. The dataset reveals distinct regional manifestations of terrorism, reinforcing the idea that terrorism is not a singular concept but rather a set of diverse strategies employed by non-state actors to achieve ideological, political, and military objectives.

By linking empirical data to theoretical frameworks, this study provides a nuanced understanding of terrorism beyond simplistic definitions, illustrating how it functions as both a tactic and an evolving phenomenon within contemporary global security dynamics.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications

This study's analysis of contested concepts in international security yields several significant implications for both academic scholarship and policy practice.

⁶⁴ DAEN 690 Spring 2025 Students. *Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) Record of Incidents Database (GRID Record of Incidents Database 2018–2024 Data)*. Unpublished course project, supervised by Mahmut Cengiz, George Mason University. Accessed April 1, 2025.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

First, the persistent ambiguity surrounding international order, security sector assistance, and Terrorism fundamentally shapes how these concepts are deployed in scholarly discourse and policymaking. This ambiguity is not merely a semantic challenge but reflects deeper theoretical divisions and competing worldviews about international systems, security interventions, and armed violence. The lack of definitional clarity therefore represents a substantive obstacle to knowledge-building rather than simply a technical problem of terminology.

Second, the findings suggest that conceptual contestation often reflects power dynamics in international relations. Definitions of international order that emphasize U.S. leadership or liberal principles, conceptions of SSA that align with specific strategic interests, and characterizations of terrorism that exclude state actors all reveal how dominant actors shape conceptual boundaries. Scholarly objectivity and policy neutrality is essential.

Third, the analysis reveals that practitioners often operationalize these concepts pragmatically, sometimes diverging significantly from scholarly definitions. This theory-practice gap suggests that academic refinements of these concepts may have limited influence on real-world applications unless they engage directly with policy imperatives and operational constraints.

Recommendations

Based on these implications, several recommendations emerge for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners engaging with these contested concepts:

1. **Develop Typological Approaches:** Rather than pursuing singular definitions, scholars should develop typologies that explicitly acknowledge conceptual variants and their underlying assumptions. For international order, this means distinguishing between descriptive and normative conceptions; for SSA, between capacity-building and influence-oriented approaches; and for Terrorism, between actor-based and behavior-based definitions.
2. **Increase Definitional Transparency:** Researchers should explicitly state their definitional choices and theoretical assumptions when employing these concepts, allowing for more meaningful comparison across studies and reducing unacknowledged conceptual slippage. This transparency should extend to methodological decisions about how concepts are operationalized.
3. **Foster Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue:** Creating structured opportunities for scholars from different disciplines and theoretical traditions to engage directly with definitional disagreements could help identify areas of potential convergence and clarify the sources of persistent disagreement.
4. **Bridge Theory-Practice Divides:** Establishing collaborative forums where academics and practitioners jointly refine working definitions could enhance the practical relevance of scholarly concepts while bringing analytical rigor to policy applications. These forums should acknowledge different stakeholder needs while preventing conceptual fragmentation.
5. **Contextualize Concepts Historically and Culturally:** Future research should more explicitly situate these concepts within their historical and cultural contexts, acknowledging how Western-centric perspectives have shaped dominant definitions and exploring alternative conceptualizations from diverse global perspectives.
6. **Develop Common Analytical Frameworks:** While universal definitions may remain elusive, developing shared analytical frameworks that accommodate different conceptual approaches would facilitate more productive scholarly exchange and cumulative knowledge-building in these contested domains.

Implementing these recommendations would not resolve all definitional disputes, which often reflect genuine theoretical disagreements and competing normative visions. However, they would foster more productive engagement with conceptual contestation, transforming it from an obstacle to knowledge-building into a catalyst for deeper theoretical reflection and more nuanced policy approaches.

LIMITATIONS

This study's examination of contested concepts in international security faces several inherent limitations that must be acknowledged.

First, the scope of analysis necessarily constrains comprehensive coverage of all relevant literature. While the research synthesizes key contributions to debates surrounding international order, security sector assistance, and terrorism, it cannot exhaustively capture every scholarly perspective or policy document. The rapidly evolving nature of these concepts means that new definitions and frameworks continue to emerge even as this analysis was conducted.

Second, the comparative approach employed in this study may impact conceptualizations. The paper does have an emphasis on post-Cold War frameworks for international order, for instance, which may underrepresent historical perspectives or non-Western conceptualizations that could offer alternative insights. Alternative perspectives could yield different interpretations.

Third, the study relies on available datasets and reports on terrorism and security incidents, which may suffer from underreporting, bias, or inconsistencies. This is particularly relevant in Sub-Saharan Africa, where weak state institutions, restricted press freedom, and remote conflict zones limit reliable data collection.

Fourth, while this research identifies conceptual ambiguities, it cannot fully resolve the inherent tensions between competing definitions.

Finally, the research primarily engages with English-language scholarship and Western policy frameworks. This limitation risks reinforcing existing power asymmetries in knowledge production and potentially overlooks valuable perspectives from other linguistic and cultural traditions, may be deeply influenced by socio-political contexts. Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution to understanding how definitional uncertainties shape both scholarly discourse and security policymaking, offering a foundation for future research that might address these constraints through expanded methodological approaches and more diverse conceptual frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined three foundational concepts in international security—international order, security sector assistance, and terrorism—revealing the profound implications of their contested nature for both scholarly understanding and policy implementation. Through comparative analysis of competing definitions and empirical examination of usage patterns, this research has demonstrated how conceptual ambiguity shapes discourse and practice in security studies.

The analysis of international order revealed competing frameworks that variously emphasize U.S. hegemony, liberal institutionalism, or multipolar power distribution. Far from mere semantic differences, these competing conceptions reflect fundamental disagreements about the structure and trajectory of global politics. Similarly, the investigation of security sector assistance highlighted the blurred boundaries between SSA and broader security cooperation, complicating efforts to evaluate program effectiveness and strategic alignment. The examination of terrorism further illustrated how definitional disputes—particularly regarding state actors, political motivation, and civilian targeting—have hampered cumulative knowledge-building and consistent policy application.

These findings underscore a broader truth about international security: conceptual clarity is not merely an academic concern but a prerequisite for effective policymaking and strategic planning. When fundamental concepts remain contested, both scholarly discourse and practical applications suffer from inconsistency, talking past one another, and imprecise measurement. The conceptual frameworks developed in this paper offer pathways toward greater clarity without imposing artificial consensus where genuine theoretical disagreements exist.

Moving forward, both scholars and practitioners would benefit from greater transparency about definitional choices, increased dialogue across disciplinary and theory-practice divides, and the development of typological approaches that acknowledge conceptual variants. While universal definitions may remain elusive, more structured engagement with conceptual contestation can transform such ambiguity from an obstacle to opportunity—fostering deeper theoretical reflection and more nuanced policy approaches.

This research contributes to the broader study of concept analysis in political science by demonstrating how definitional uncertainty shapes both scholarly discourse and real-world security governance. By systematically examining these three contested concepts, the paper not only clarifies their current usage but also establishes a foundation for more productive dialogue across theoretical traditions and between academic and policy communities. In a security environment characterized by complexity and rapid change, such conceptual clarity becomes not just intellectually valuable but strategically essential.