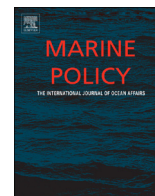Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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What is maritime security?

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A B S T R A C T

Maritime security is one of the latest buzzwords of international relations. Major actors have started to include maritime security in their mandate or reframed their work in such terms. Maritime security is a term that draws attention to new challenges and rallies support for tackling these. Yet, no international consensus over the definition of maritime security has emerged. Buzzwords allow for the international coordination of actions, in the absence of consensus. These, however, also face the constant risk that disagreements and political conflict are camouflaged. Since there are little prospects of defining maritime security once and for all, frameworks by which one can identify commonalities and disagreements are needed. This article proposes three of such frameworks. Maritime security can first be understood in a matrix of its relation to other concepts, such as marine safety, seapower, blue economy and resilience. Second, the securitization framework allows to study how maritime threats are made and which divergent political claims these entail in order to uncover political interests and divergent ideologies. Third, security practice theory enables the study of what actors actually do when they claim to enhance maritime security. Together these frameworks allow for the mapping of maritime security.

1. Introduction: Maritime security—In search for a meaning?

Maritime Security is one of the latest buzzwords of international relations. Major actors in maritime policy, ocean governance and international security have in the past decade started to include maritime security in their mandate or reframed their work in such terms. In 2014 the United Kingdom, the European Union as well as the African Union (AU) have launched ambitious maritime security strategies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) included maritime security as one of its objectives in its 2011 Alliance Maritime Strategy. The U.S. pioneered this development when launching a national Maritime Security Policy in 2004. Also, the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) of the International Maritime Organization included maritime security in their list of tasks. As reflected in the U.S. policy, the concept of 'maritime security' gained initial salience after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the associated fears over the spread of maritime terrorism. If maritime terrorism has largely remained a virtual threat [28], the breakthrough for maritime security came with the rise of piracy off the coast of Somalia between 2008 and 2011. The dangers of piracy for international trade brought the maritime dimension of security to the global consciousness and lifted it high on policy agendas. Moreover, the inter-state tensions in regions, such as the Arctic, the South China Sea, or the East China Sea and the

significant investments in blue water navies of emerging powers, such as India and China, have increased attention for the oceans as a security space [7,20,26,35,40].

Maritime Security, like other international buzzwords, is a term that draws attention to new challenges and rallies support for tackling these. Discussions of maritime security frequently do so by pointing to 'threats' that prevail in the maritime domain [22,23,33,43,44]. They refer to threats such as maritime inter-state disputes, maritime terrorism, piracy, trafficking of narcotics, people and illicit goods, arms proliferation, illegal fishing, environmental crimes, or maritime accidents and disasters. The argument is then that maritime security should be defined as the absence of these threats. This 'laundry list' approach to defining maritime security has rightfully been criticized as insufficient since it does neither prioritize issues, nor provides clues of how these issues are inter-linked, nor outlines of how these threats can be addressed. It moreover creates enduring puzzles over which threats should be included. Are climate change and disasters at sea maritime security issues? Should inter-state disputes be treated in terms of national security rather than maritime security? Others advocate for an understanding of maritime security as "good" or "stable order at sea" [39,44,23]. In contrast to the 'negative' definition of maritime security as absence of a range of threats, this understanding provides a 'positive' conceptualization that projects a certain ideal-typical end state that has to be reached. In this approach there is however hardly any discussion of what "good" or "stable" order is supposed to mean, or whose order it is intended to be. Instead the

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discussion turns immediately to questions of how law enforcement at sea can be improved. A related discussion aims at defining maritime security in positive terms by linking it to 'economic' or 'blue growth'. In this economic attempt to define maritime security, similar questions arise: whose economy is it concerned about, and who will be the primary beneficiaries of such growth? Discussions of responses to maritime security outline a rather broad and incongruent mix of diverse policy proposals which tend to include calls for more coordination, information sharing, regulation, law enforcement and capacity building. Again it remains open what and who should be coordinated or regulated and who should build what kind of capacity. In short, and as several observers have alluded to: no international consensus over the definition of maritime security has emerged [22,23].

Is this lack of consensus problematic? Understanding maritime security as a buzzword provides answers. As Cornwall [15] suggests, buzzwords "gain their purchase and power through their vague and euphemistic qualities, their capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, and their normative resonance." These are exactly the qualities that maritime security brings. Buzzwords are what Gallie [17] has called "essentially contested concepts". Such concepts represent a general agreement in the abstract, but they generate endless (and irresolvable) disagreements about what they might mean in practice. In Löwy's [24]) understanding these concepts have a beneficial function since they allow actors to coordinate their action and proceed in joint activities while simultaneously disagreeing over local meanings. In policy formulation buzzwords allow for "a measure of ambiguity to secure the endorsement of diverse potential actors and audiences" ([15]: 474). They provide "concepts that can float free of concrete referents, to be filled with meaning by their users. In the struggles for interpretive power that characterize the negotiation of the language of policy, buzzwords shelter multiple agendas, providing room for manoeuvre and space for contestation" ([15]: 474). Buzzwords, however, also contain the risk, to mask political interests, and underlying ideologies and leave much of what is actually done in their name unquestioned ([15]: 472).

Core contemporary international political terms, such as peace-building or human security (e.g. [9,18]), have such qualities. Grasping maritime security as a buzzword, allows us to understand the salience as well as disagreements around the concept. Buzzwords, as the literature shows, enable the international coordination of actions, under the absence of consensus (e.g. [9,11]). Buzzwords, however, also face the constant risk that disagreements and political conflict are camouflaged. Such disagreements might break up in crisis situations and lead to stalemates and in-action when it is most needed. They might moreover lead to contradicting activities and weak coordination, when actors think they are talking about the same things, when de facto they are not. If maritime security is a buzzword, then there are little prospects to form an international consensus on the concept. To phrase it more directly, the intellectual quest of identifying the definition that is logically superior by rationalist criteria and everyone will hence have to agree on is a rather unproductive exercise. Divergent political interests and normative understandings will always lead to different understandings of the concept.

Yet, how can we than cope with this situation? To find an answer, we need to identify frameworks by which one can grasp the commonalities and disagreements that the concept of maritime security entails. The objective of this article is to propose three of such frameworks. These can be developed from recent security studies. Security studies has been struggling with similar questions for decades (e.g. [8,37]). The lessons from these discussions suggest meaningful ways of how to push the intellectual and policy debate on maritime security forward. The frameworks that are particularly useful are (1) 'semiotics' which intends to map different meanings by exploring the relations between maritime security and other concepts, (2) the 'securitization' framework which provides the

means to understand how different threats are included in maritime security, and (3) security practice theory which aims at understanding what actions are undertaken in the name of maritime security.

The reminder of this article is structured as follows. The next section draws on the core insights from semiotics that concepts gain their meaning in relation to other concepts. Maritime security can hence be understood in the way it organizes older established and more recent concepts. These include the concept of marine safety, seapower, blue economy and resilience. Studying these relations lead to the outline of a maritime security matrix that can be used to map divergent understandings of maritime security and explore how different actors situate threats. Section 3 introduces the securitization framework. The core tenet of this approach is to study how threats are made and what divergent political claims they entail. This is an approach especially useful to uncover political interests and divergent ideologies. The fourth section discusses the framework of security practice theory. Here the question is focused on what actors actually do when they claim to enhance maritime security. The fifth section concludes in arguing for studies that draw on these framework. Such studies have significant value and facilitate international coordination by mapping different understandings of maritime security and bringing political conflicts to the fore.

2. Conceptual relations: A maritime security matrix

In semiotic thinking the meaning of a term can be grasped by exploring the relations of the term to others. Concepts acquire their meaning relationally, through their similarities and differences from other words. The term 'fish', for instance, achieves sense though its contrast with 'meat' or 'seafood', its association with 'gills' or 'fins' and its relation to 'water'. Maritime security can be analyzed in similar ways by recognizing the relations to other terms. Maritime security organizes a web of relations, replaces or subsumes older, established concepts, as well as relates to more recently developed ones. At least four of these require consideration: seapower, marine safety, blue economy, and human resilience. Each of these concepts points us to the different dimensions of maritime security. The concepts of seapower and marine safety are century old understandings of danger at sea, the latter two have arisen at roughly the same time as maritime security.

A discourse on security at sea preceding the current debate on 'maritime security' is that of naval warfare, the importance of maritime power projection, and the concept of seapower. Firmly based in a traditionalist understanding of national security as the protection of the survival of states, the concept of 'seapower' aims at laying out the role of naval forces and at elaborating strategies for their use [39]. In peacetime the role of warships is mainly seen in protecting the core sea lines of communication in order to facilitate trade and economic prosperity by means of deterrence as well as surveillance and interdiction [36]. The concept of seapower is related to maritime security in several ways. It first concerns the fact that naval forces are one of the major actors in maritime security. Moreover, discussions of seapower address in how far state forces should act outside their territorial waters, engage in other regions than their own and have a presence in international waters.

The concept of 'marine safety' addresses the safety of ships and maritime installations with the primary purpose of protecting maritime professionals and the marine environment. Marine safety in the first place implies the regulation of the construction of vessels and maritime installations, the regular control of their safety procedures as well as the education of maritime professionals in complying with regulations. Marine safety is closely linked to the work of the International Maritime Organization and