

## Regionalisms and the ‘exceptionality’ of security regions

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**Abstract:** Work on regions and regionalisms highlights the complex processes through which regions emerge or disappear, or are remade often with unpredictable outcomes. This well-established knowledge of regions is however not fully appreciated by proponents of Regional Security Complex Theory, who are pre-occupied with security as a central element in region-formation. In security context the intersection between regions and security is expressed through a pluralistic security community in which the security of the regional group is a focal point for member states and their activities. In this paper I draw on insights from research on regionalism and from the emergence of southern Africa as a region to suggest that there is no need to treat regional security complexes as ‘special regions’ of some sort as Regional Security Complex Theory suggests. Security should be understood as an integral part rather than an exceptional feature of region-formation processes. I further suggest that analyses of regional security complexes are still trapped in the concept of bounded territoriality.

*Keywords:* Regional Security Complex Theory, southern Africa, regionalism

### Introduction

The possibilities for classifying regions and their outcomes multiply endlessly when regions are placed in spatio-temporal contexts. This is so because regions are complex and also manifest in the multitude of mental regions that are profoundly shaped by various interests (Agnew 2013; Paasi 2013). Such interests are often at variance with realities on the ground where regions gain much of their material and symbolic meanings (Ramutsindela 2013). From the vantage point of International Relations (IR), a region – as a geographical grouping of countries – is seen as an integral part of the evolution of security among states. Buzan and Wæver (2003) distinguish

three stages in the modern history of regional security. These are the periods in which colonial states were protected as regions of empire (1500–1945); the ignition of regional security dynamics and influence under conditions of decolonisation and the Cold War (1945–1989); and the freedom of regions to develop their security structure in a post-1990 unipolar world.

The link between region and security in IR theory is expressed through a pluralistic security community that aims to promote peaceful co-existence among states (Fawn 2009). It is for this reason that the success or failure of regionalism – in the domain of security – is measured in terms of how a regional group provides security to its member states. The Regional

Security Complex Theory (RSCT) refines the notion of a pluralistic community by emphasizing security complexes, i.e. a cluster of interdependent states whose existence is determined by security considerations. These complexes amount to 'regions as seen through the lens of security' (Busan & Wæver 2003: 43). I argue that this refinement of the pluralistic security community and RSCT's notion of region are insufficient when placed within a broader literature on regions and regionalism. Using the example of the southern African region, I suggest that the role that security plays in the formation of regions is indistinguishable from other forms of regionalisms. Rather than producing 'unique regions', security should be understood as a component of complex region-producing processes.

### Exceptional regionalism and bounded territoriality

*"Contrary to approaches that construct boundaries and distinguish 'regions' from each other, it is challenging to make sense of regional identity discourses in the globalizing world and to analyse how narratives of identities are constructed as part of the making of regions, how they become part of a sociocultural practice/discourse and are used to maintain divisions and exclusions." (Paasi 2003: 481)*

The quotation above suggests that it is unhelpful to distinguish regions from each other because they are dynamic products of wide-ranging processes and practices. Despite this caution the tendency to categorise regions as unique is still

with us mainly because of disciplinary foci and emphases that in turn influence the theorization of regions (Murphy & O'Loughlin 2009). For example, from the IR/Political Science perspectives a region is understood as a supra-state entity whose material foundation is the state. My concern here is with how the RSCT accentuates security as a key element of regionalism and how this leads to a supposedly unique configuration of a regional space. The RSCT starts from the premise that regionness and security are co-constitutive, i.e. security practices act a tools for region-making (see Ciută 2008). The central idea in RSCT is that 'since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes' (Buzan & Wæver 2003: 4).

In brief, a region in RSCT is made up of state-to-state relations and is understood as a product of physical adjacency and patterns of security discourses, practices, and interactions generated by fears, threats and friendship. That region is also characterized by intense security interdependence among actors inside the complex, and have a substantial degree of autonomy from patterns set by the global powers. Thus, Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) are substructures of the international system. The borders of RSCs are determined by an insulator state facing in the direction of two or more regions. Buzan & Wæver (2003: 41) claim that 'the concept of insulator is specific to RSCT and defines a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back'.

It could be argued that the conception of security complexes as product of physical adjacency relies on the view of regions as territorially bounded. It ignores the development of other security-inspired regions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that have little to do with neighbourliness – in locational terms – but everything to do with ideology and the protection of the interests of Western nations. The conception of RSCs as inward-looking regions is also challenged by the realignment of states to form regions across other regions as evident in the coming together of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) to form an entirely new region. Furthermore, the role played by security in regionalism is inseparable from other factors such as economics.

### **Southern Africa: becoming a region**

The weight of security in regionalism is not static but can change over time due to local and international political and economic dynamics that impact on priorities for a region. A case in point is the southern African region that was initially shaped by two main forces, namely, struggles against colonial states by the black majority and the defense of white polities by the white minority. These forces abated in the early 1990s with the attainment of liberation and the end of civil wars in the region. Whereas security issues in the region were pronounced in the 1980s, regionalism in southern Africa in the post-1990s was fueled by strong economic currents. Below I

briefly discuss the development of southern Africa as a region in order to substantiate my points.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) are correct in their view that southern Africa became a RSC during the Cold War. Nevertheless, the intense security interdependence and the role of external forces in the development of the region require nuanced explanation. White-ruled states of Angola, Mozambique, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, and South West Africa (now Namibia) became concerned with their security at the onset of decolonization in the 1960s. Farley (2008) is of the view that, unlike in other parts of Africa, colonists in southern Africa had their lives, emotions and aspirations firmly bound up in the colonies from which it was impossible to detach both psychologically and financially. This attachment – often expressed through owning vast tracts of land – together with the ‘black peril’ led to state-to-state relations that were underpinned by security and racism. The relations and interactions among white-ruled colonial states were bolstered by external powers such as Portugal that were determined to keep the future of southern Africa under white rule and control. Thus, whiteness became the foundation on which the identities of the colonial state in the region and external powers found a common ground against equally determined black liberation movements that also shared the common colonial experiences. In these circumstances, issues of security were indistinguishable from those of identity.

It is worth noting that the meaning of southern Africa as a region has never

been static. For instance it meant different things at different times for the South African security and military strategists. Their pre-1960 view of the region as a backyard for exploitable resources changed to that of a *cordon sanitaire* – in which neighbouring countries were seen as a political and military buffer against the 'black peril' – at the onset of decolonization in the 1960s (Daniel 2009). Following the independence of Zambia in 1964, the Zambezi represented the ultimate white frontier. This construction of the Zambezi as a regional border meant that Zambia formed the zone of friction not so much because of its location but because it was the operational bases for most liberation movements. In contrast to the view held by RSCIT theorists, Zambia was not an insular state at the edge of the region but was instead a key factor and actor in the development of the region. By the mid-1970s, South Africa's national security interest had fused into that of the fight against communism and was conceived in the broad East-West ideological conflict in which South Africa positioned itself as part of the Free World (South Africa 1973). It is argued here that the communist threat shaped the map of the region by providing the platform on which local actors formed alliances with clear spatial patterns. It also allowed external actors to define the region in terms of the extent and implications of the 'communist threat'. More importantly, the framing of the communist threat helped define the specific countries to be engaged with; those countries in turn constituted the geography of the region.

External actors such as the US defined the region in terms of National Security

Study Memorandum 39 (NSSM39). The NSSM 39 that was submitted to the National Security Council by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on 10 April 1969. It sought to establish an intergovernmental group that would guide US foreign policy in the region. It also defined countries that, in the US's view, constitute southern Africa. For example, (NSSM39) described the northern border of the region as 'south of the Congo [River] and Tanzania' and defined southern Africa as 'the black states of Zambia, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana. The white minority areas of South Africa, South West Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Mozambique and Angola' (El-Khawas & Cohen 1976: 81).

Though the interactions among white-ruled states and their physical adjacency set the stage for the evolution of the region, the actual borders of the region were delineated by complex processes and actions involving state and non-state actors. These include the actions and strategies of the liberation movements, the interplay between local actors and superpowers, the reinterpretation of security threats, and domestic conditions, especially in South Africa. African liberation movements, while focusing on their specific countries, operated beyond their borders as a show of solidarity. They established military bases outside their countries in order to counter networked white power and defense strategies. For example, Zimbabwean liberation forces were based in Zambia and Mozambique and operated in Angola and within camps in Botswana. The CIA estimated that there were about 15 nationalist movements operating in Zambia in the early 1960s (DeRoche 2009).

The point here is that, like the white minority governments they engaged, liberation movements had a regionalist outlook and defined the contours of the region by assembling a group of countries which not only became the frontline states but also acted as the core of the present-day SADC. Onslow (2009: 18) correctly observed that, ‘by the 1970s the map of Africa should be conceived as a web of connections between regional liberation movements and state power centres – rather than in the traditional or conventional cartographical terms of the artificially boundaries of the colonially constructed states’.

## Conclusion

Read from the perspective of RSCT, the southern African region was defined by fear, threats and solidarity that brought together local and international forces. Issues of security add an important layer into our understanding of regionalism that could be lost when regional security complexes are treated as a special category of regions that has nothing to do with general understandings of regions. Seeing regions through the lens of security should not blind us from understanding a multitude of interests that are pursued under the guise of security. The ‘exceptionality’ of regions espoused in RSCT can be ascribed to lack of attention by IR theorists to broader processes of regionalism. It could be argued that security issues have not been central to discussions and debates on regionalisms hence IR theorists have capitalized on

security as a unique object of inquiry into regionalism. The discussion presented in this paper confirms Paasi’s (2009: 146) view that an interdisciplinary conception of regions would be enriched by ‘thinking critically the complexity of regions, regional identities, their roles in regional promotion, politics of identity and difference.’ As we noted above, identity politics was critical to the emergence of southern Africa as a region. That politics elides RSCT as a result of the pre-occupation with security issues.

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