

DEMOCRATIC SECURITY: A CONCEPT FOR THE SWEDISH TOTAL DEFENSE APPROACH

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Original scientific paper

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Abstract: Democracy and the rule of law are classified as “national interests” and “critical assets” in Sweden’s National Security Strategy and Military Strategic Doctrine. These assets are targets of a range of challenges and attacks. For instance, foreign powers seek to create confusion and polarization through disinformation and influence operations. Domestic violent extremist groups promote conspiracy narratives in order to divide society and create mistrust of authorities. Meanwhile, social phenomena such as serious organized crime and honor-based violence undermine and counteract the basic principles and functions of both democracy and the rule of law and, additionally, are actively exploited by malicious actors. Importantly, these challenges frequently overlap and interact. This paper gives an overview of Democratic Security, a model created in order to answer to two primary questions: what does it mean to posit democracy and the rule of law as critical assets? And, how does one operationalize the defense of values and principles? It is an approach to understanding threats and challenges democracy and the rule of law, within which these principles and processes are seen not only as core critical

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assets but also as normative for effective and democratically sustainable counter-measures. This enables analysis of both vulnerabilities and threats that is highly granular.

Keywords: Democracy, security, Democratic Security, hybrid threats, interface zone, extremism, influence operations

Introduction

“Democratic security” is used here to describe “an approach to understanding threats and challenges to the principles of democracy and the rule of law, in which these principles and processes are seen not only as critical assets, but also as fundamental to appropriate protective measures” (Strindberg & Svensson, 2022). This approach, briefly outlined in what follows, was originally developed as part of an effort to think constructively – perhaps even creatively – about what it means to claim that democracy is a critical asset; to “visualize” democracy and the space in which it is challenged in order to aid practical efforts to defend and secure the democratic process.

Democratic security sits quite comfortably within the Swedish total defense approach, within which civil defense – alongside psychological and military defense – is understood as a key element of the total defensive capability of the nation. As the foundation on which civil defense stands, a robust and well-functioning civil society is seen as an important factor in preventing war and maintaining peace (Försvarsberedningen, 2019). A well-functioning civil society makes it more difficult for an antagonist to foment or exploit distrust and discontent in society and thus contributes to the overall national security arrangement. Accordingly, in Sweden, the democratic rights and freedoms of the population and the ability of the authorities to safeguard their security and well-being are in themselves classified as national interests; the very essence of what is to be defended in case of attack (Regeringskansliet, 2017).

The challenge

Civil society and its structures and processes “are central to democracy” (Regeringskansliet, 2009) but they are also being used and undermined by a range of antagonists. These include, for example, foreign powers seeking to create social confusion through electoral influence or the dissemination of fake news in order to gain strategic advantages. They include domestic violent extremist groups and movements using hate speech and conspiracy narratives to divide society or create mistrust for authorities. Such actors turn the strengths of democracy and the rule of law – the openness, liberties, predictability, rules-based processes – into vulnerabilities. Threats and challenges may also come from problematic social phenomena, rather than specific actors. Corruption, serious organized crime and honor-based violence tear at the fabric of society by undermining basic principles and functions of democratic society (Strindberg, 2021). Such phenomena can create insecurity and lead to or deepen polarization, which in turn can feed violent extremism and provide easy targets for disinformation and influence campaigns by foreign powers. They are not ‘classic’ security threats, but nonetheless potent challenges to social solidarity and trust in government, and therefore by extension challenges to national security.

Each of these threats and challenges comes from very real actors and phenomena both within and beyond the country's borders. They are important in their own right but often flow into each other both conceptually and practically. As a result, the boundaries between threats can be difficult to draw and the connections are often hidden or unclear. This is a challenge for researchers and practitioners alike: an undefined or unclear understanding of a threat may result in countermeasures being seen as either redundant or overzealous, thus exacerbating rather than addressing the challenge (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018; ODNI, 2017; Asmussen, Hansen & Meiser, 2015).

In a very real sense, the democratic security approach is both normative as well as derivative of traditional security concerns and priorities. In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz described how a state's resilience is based on a combination of available resources and "willpower." Willpower, he argued, is difficult to assess because it "can only be estimated in relation to the strength of motives" (Clausewitz, 1991). In an open democratic society, this "strength of motives" is intimately tied to a common view of the common good; a shared self-image and worldview. In order to want to build, maintain and defend the common good we must value it.

Indeed, strategists, political scientists and philosophers of various schools have understood since antiquity that a sustainable social project both builds on and strengthens a shared self-image and worldview: a common understanding of who we are, what binds us together, how we solve common problems - and of the common good as valuable enough to defend. As Olof Petersson points out, "the self-defense of democracy can only be truly effective when it is democratic, i.e. when the defence of democracy has a strong popular foundation" (MSB, 2014). This has direct implications for security policy.

Given this, we decided to ask the question: what does it mean to claim values, principles, and processes as critical assets? And the follow-up to that: How does one operationalize the defense of values, principles and processes? Clearly something very different is involved in securing and defending the principles and processes of democracy compared to physical objects, be they national borders, critical infrastructure or actual individuals.

Democratic security

How does one determine what is central to a functioning democracy? Such questions have been the subject of debate and discussion since antiquity and have no simple or self-evident answers. However, the present focus is not to discuss the nature of democracy but, rather, to think about operationalizing the notion of democracy as a critical asset. Sidestepping this

important philosophical conversation, a suitable starting point for the present purpose is Robert A. Dahl's classic exposition of the basic criteria of democracy (Dahl, 2020). A functioning and sustainable democracy, he argued, must contain five key functional components:

- 1. Effective participation:** that all members should have an equal and effective opportunity to represent their views to other members
- 2. Equal voting rights:** that all members should have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and that all votes are of equal value
- 3. Informed understanding:** that all members must have an equal and effective opportunity to understand the implications of, and alternatives to, different proposals
- 4. Power over the decision-making process:** members collectively have the final right to decide whether or not a matter should be brought up for decision.
- 5. Participation of all adults:** that all or most permanently resident adults have full access to the above four criteria.

Dahl argued that these are interconnected to the point that they constitute a system; each component is necessary for political equality and “in so far as any of these criteria is restricted, the members [of society] are not political equals” (Dahl, 2020). Dahl was aware, of course, that this is an ideal picture; that there are no historical examples of a perfectly functioning democracy. He argued, however, that by the same token, these components as a system “provide a standard by which to measure performance among real associations that claim to be democratic. They can serve as a guide for creating and reshaping concrete arrangements, constitutions, practices and political institutions. For all democracy seekers, they can also generate relevant questions and help in the search for answers” (Dahl, 2020).

To Dahl's five functional components are added two value components:

6. Social solidarity: the population's mutual trust in, and loyalty towards each other, and a sense that they belong together as a polity.

7. Trust in government and the rule of law: the population's belief that the processes and structures of government are fair, reliable and better than non-democratic alternatives.

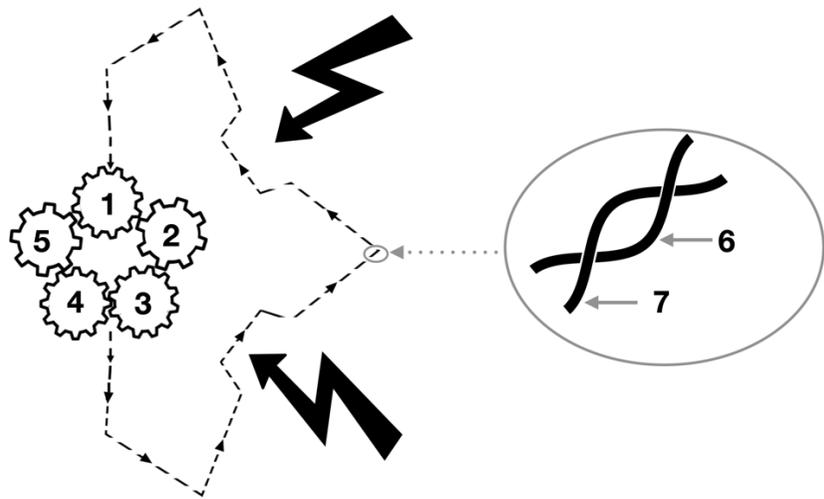


Figure 1. The basic functional components of democracy presuppose, generate and are protected by its closely intertwined value components. Together they constitute the core critical asset that is democracy. Illustration adapted from Strindberg & Svensson (2022), based on Dahl (2020) and MSB (2014).

These latter two are closely intertwined and both are essential for democracy to be seen as important and to function in a sustainable manner. Petersson argues that “a functioning government requires a civic spirit of social solidarity” (MSB, 2014). Indeed, these two value components are a prerequisite for the five functional components. At the same time, social solidarity can also be understood as a consequence of a functioning democratic order; it is both input and output in the machinery of democracy. This feedback loop, or self-reinforcing

effect means that social solidarity and trust can be seen both as the inner principle of the democratic process and its outer defense against threats and challenges.

What, then, is the point of this visualization? Within the democratic security model, the seven components of the critical asset are understood as essential and inseparable. That is, the critical asset consists of a system; when one component is damaged, the entire critical asset is at risk. Relevant threats and challenges to democracy, from this perspective, are those that target, damage, or threaten to damage one or several of the components of the critical asset. At the same time, activities that do not threaten any of these components are not to be understood and addressed as a threats to the critical asset; that is, as a threat to democracy. Moreover, to the extent that the state and society's own countermeasures damage or threaten to damage any of these components, they too are to be considered threats to democracy.

The fact that this is an idealized model provides a benchmark and is helpful in terms of metrics for both threats and countermeasures. We can ask, in the face of attack but also when we contemplate protective measures – “is this measure, operation, or posture bringing us closer or further away from the democratic ideal?” Does it strengthen or harm the system? Moreover, we can ask “what specifically is being threatened?” Which component? This allows us to move away from overuse and therefore devaluation of the term “threat to democracy.” More importantly, perhaps, it allows us to address the allocation of responsibility and resources to deal with the threat. Faced with a range of different challenges from a range of different actors and phenomena, there is a practical need to be specific about what is harmed, what are the consequences, and know more about appropriate defensive measures and consequence management.

The interface zone

What is the environment in which the critical asset and its components must be protected and safeguarded? A simple

answer is “civil society.” Democracy is affirmed or rejected, challenged and defended, where individuals and groups meet, interact, organize, influence and are influenced. But civil society is not one-dimensional, nor is it isolated. It includes cognitive and social processes, digital and physical relationships, private lives and public relations, local and global influences. Threats and challenges to democracy can come from actors and phenomena both within and beyond any specific national borders.

Political movements may engage in activities on the Internet that have consequences in a completely different part of the world. States may engage in disinformation and propaganda that is consumed and expressed in ways that harm an adversary on the other side of the globe. Confusion, discord, discontent and fear can be manipulated by both local and distant actors. National borders and boundaries, both physical and digital, are being crossed at a seemingly ever-increasing rate. Transnational phenomena such as pandemics, famine and war have resulted in significant population movements. Increased interaction and exchange of information between cultures and ways of thinking has led to both new alliances and new tensions. The environment in which any given democratic system exists and is challenged can best be described as unbounded.

One way to illustrate this complex environment is to set out from Ahmet Davatoğlu’s idea of the great power interface in the border zones. In a critical analysis of the strategic paradigms that emerged after the end of the Cold War, Davatoğlu (1994) noted that most military and political crises after the end of the Cold War took place in border zones that lay between areas controlled by the great powers; in areas that were fully controlled by none but of strategic importance to all. This was a return to the geopolitical logic of the early twentieth century, when disputed border areas were recurring objects and sites of conflict between states. Davatoğlu highlighted Bessarabia, Kashmir and the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq and Iran (among others) as

examples of enduring hotbeds of power-political conflict (1994, p. 115–117).

Davatoğlu's geographic and geostrategic border zones share important characteristics with the complex “civil society environment” in which democracy must be safeguarded and secured: 1) they are strategically important for a state’s defense, stability, and/or prosperity, but 2) the defending state lacks the strength and tools to neutralize the strategic interests and activities of other actors. Even if there is a will and a need to seize and control the zone in which this interface with adversaries takes place, the capacity to do so is lacking (Davatoğlu, 1994, p. 124). In Davatoğlu’s geopolitical analysis, the strategic perspective and analytical focus shifts from the relative strength of states in a balance of power to their ability to maneuver credibly and effectively in the space between states (Gaddy, 2016).

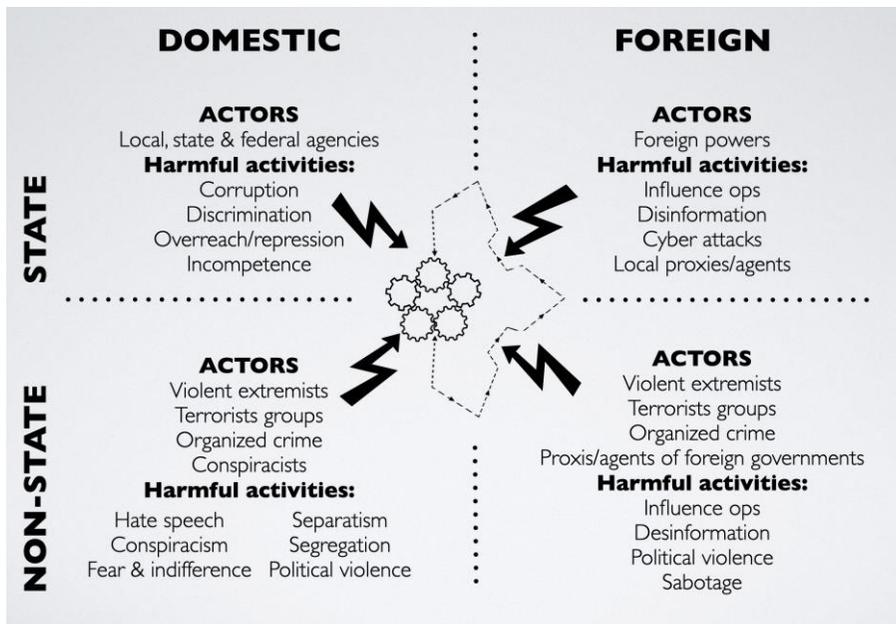


Figure 2. The sectors of the interface zone in which threats against democracy emerge. Illustration adapted from Strindberg & Svensson (2022).

Democracy as a critical asset is threatened and challenged in an interface zone where a range of phenomena and actors are active. The ability to damage these protective values, and also the ability to secure and protect them, does not depend on the relative strength of a traditional balance of power. The four sectors of the figure are not separated by solid boundaries; actors and phenomena in different sectors can influence, interact with, and exploit each other.

All these elements describe the complex and unbounded environment of civil society; the interface zone in which democracy is challenged and protected. As in Davatoğlu's border areas, whether an antagonist in the interface zone is a major power with significant resources or a local group or movement does not necessarily determine the severity of the challenge or the damage that can be inflicted on the critical asset. Rather, today's digital and connected reality requires agility and knowledge rather than physical strength and massive resources. It hinges on a combination of technical skill and the ability to identify and exploit the defending state's own vulnerabilities; attention to currents in public discourse, skill in manipulating existing discontent or suspicion, and the ability to construct credible counter-narratives. Also, in parallel with in Davatoğlu's border areas, the interface zone is strategically important for the defending democratic state at the same time as it lacks the ability to control the zone by force or coercion. In this context it is important to note that democratic states do not compete with non-democratic states on a level playing field. For a state seeking to defend democracy, any attempt to "seize" the interface zone – through surveillance, censorship or other means of coercion and force, for example – may itself do serious and lasting damage to democracy.

Conclusion

The traditional means and concerns of power and security remain as prominent today as ever before; states protect their territories, monitor their borders and maintain law and order in society. But

the interface zone – and thus democracy as a critical asset – remains vulnerable to attack from a range of actors and phenomena within, outside, and across the borders of any given state or society. A range of actors – governmental and non-governmental, domestic and foreign – are already engaged in attacks on democracy, social solidarity and trust in government, in countries throughout the Western world. In addition, damage can be caused by a range of anti-democratic social phenomena, as well as by misguided or draconian attempts by authorities to protect democracy.

Democracy is threatened and attacked in a complex and multidimensional and borderless environment. It is in this environment, the interface zone, that the state must translate its democracy-protecting and democracy-enhancing objectives and interests into action. The democratic security model has been developed to visualize democracy and the environment within which it exists and is threatened, in order to aid practical efforts to defend it.

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