Most thinkers on Global security agree that security is a ‘contested concept’. There is an agreement that it implies freedom from threats to core values but there is a major disagreement about whether the main focus of inquiry should be on ‘individual’, ‘national’, or ‘international’ security. For much of the cold war period, most writing on the subject was dominated by the idea of national security, which was largely defined in militarized terms. The main area of interest for both academics and statespeople tended to be on the military capabilities that their own states should develop to deal with the threats that faced them. More recently, however, this idea of security has been criticized for being too narrowly defined. Instead, a number of contemporary writers have argued for an expanded conception of security outward from the limits of parochial national security to include a range of other considerations. Barry Buzan, argued for a view of security which includes political, economic, societal, environmental as well as military aspects and which is also defined in broader international terms. Buzan’s work raises interesting and important questions about whether national and international security considerations can be compatible and whether states, given the nature of the international system, are capable of thinking in more cooperative international and global terms.

This focus on the tension between national and international security is not accepted by all writers on security. There are those who argue that the emphasis on the state and inter-state relations ignores the fundamental changes which have been taking place in world politics especially in the aftermath of the cold war. For some, the dual processes of integration and fragmentation which characterize the contemporary world mean that much more attention should be given to ‘societal security’. According to this view, growing integration in regions like Europe is undermining the classically defined order based on nation-states, leaving nations exposed within larger, loosely shaped frameworks like the European Union. At the same time, the fragmentation of former states like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, has created new problems of boundaries, minorities, and organizing ideologies which are causing increasing regional instability. This has led to the argument that ethno-national groups, rather than states, should become the centre of attention for security analysts.

At the same time, there are others who argue that the stress on national and international security is less appropriate because of the emergence of an small global society in the post-cold war era. Like the ‘societal security’ theorists, they point to the fragmentation of the nation-state but they argue that more attention should be given, not to society at the ethno-national level, but to global society. These writers argue that one of the most important contemporary trends is the broad process of globalization which is taking place. They accept that this process brings new risks and dangers. These include the risks associated with such things as international terrorism, a breakdown of the global monetary system, global warming, and the dangers of nuclear accidents. These threats to security, on a planetary level, are viewed as being largely outside the control of nation-states. Only the development of a global community, they believe, can deal with this adequately.

Some other thinkers focus on the transformation on states rather than their demise in the international system and therefore the way the security inquiry that going along will shift. According to Joseph Friedman, the events of 9 September 2001 in United States launched a new era of global violence not only between states but only between sub-states. For many of those who feel like this, the post-September 11 era is a new and extremely dangerous period in world history. Therefore to understand or to know if our world is not