

Metaphorical Conceptualizations Of Sovereignty And Security In International Politics

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Abstract: This article investigates the metaphorical conceptualizations of sovereignty and security in international politics, emphasizing how metaphors shape perceptions of authority, statehood, and protection. Sovereignty is often framed through metaphors of territorial integrity, such as “national borders as walls” or “state as a house,” highlighting control, stability, and independence. Security, in turn, is conceptualized through metaphors of protection and defense, including “shields,” “fortresses,” and “barriers,” which reinforce ideas of safety against external threats. By analyzing political speeches, policy documents, and media reports, the study demonstrates how metaphorical framing legitimizes political strategies and influences international relations. These conceptual metaphors are not universal but culturally variable, reflecting diverse geopolitical contexts and ideological orientations. The findings underline the crucial role of metaphor in constructing political realities, showing that sovereignty and security are not merely legal categories but discursive constructs shaped by linguistic choices.

Keywords: Metaphor, sovereignty, security, international politics, framing, discourse, authority, protection.

Introduction: In the field of international politics, sovereignty and security stand as two of the most fundamental concepts. Traditionally, they have been defined in legal and institutional terms: sovereignty as the supreme authority of a state within its territory, and security as the protection of that state from external and internal threats. However, recent advances in critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics reveal that these concepts are not merely legal categories, but are discursively constructed through language [3]. Among the most influential linguistic mechanisms in this regard are metaphors, which provide cognitive and rhetorical frameworks for understanding political realities. Metaphorical conceptualizations of sovereignty often rely on spatial and bodily imagery.

States are described as “fortresses,” “houses,” or “bodies” whose borders function as protective walls or skin. Such imagery highlights sovereignty as a matter of integrity, control, and protection. Similarly, sovereignty can be metaphorically depicted as ownership phrases like “losing control of territory” or “violating national space” reveal how sovereignty is conceptualized in

material and spatial terms. These metaphors do not merely illustrate but actively shape how policymakers, media, and citizens perceive state authority [8]. Security, likewise, is framed through metaphors of defense and protection. Political speeches and strategic documents frequently employ terms such as “shields,” “barriers,” or “rings of protection.” These metaphors legitimize defensive policies and military investments by portraying security as a matter of physical survival. More recently, metaphors of risk and disease for example, describing terrorism or migration as a “virus” or “contagion” have become common in global politics. Such framings intensify perceptions of threat, prompting urgent responses and sometimes justifying exceptional measures.

The role of these metaphors extends beyond communication; they influence diplomatic negotiations, policy formulation, and international cooperation. Since metaphors are deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts, their interpretations vary across nations, sometimes fostering shared understanding, but at other times provoking conflict due to divergent perceptions [7]. This article explores

the metaphorical framing of sovereignty and security in international politics, drawing upon political speeches, policy texts, and media reports. The study aims to reveal how these metaphors construct political realities, legitimize authority, and shape strategies of defense and negotiation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The metaphorical framing of sovereignty and security has been extensively studied across political science, international relations, and cognitive linguistics. Early realist perspectives emphasized sovereignty as a legal and territorial principle, yet discourse analysts such as Chilton revealed that sovereignty is often described metaphorically as a bounded space or a body requiring protection [2]. This aligns with Johnson's notion that metaphors provide embodied structures of thought, shaping how abstract concepts are understood.

In security studies, Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde advanced the "securitization" framework, arguing that security is discursively constructed rather than objectively given [1]. Metaphors such as "shields" and "barriers" reinforce this construction by framing policies as necessary defenses. Fierke further demonstrated that metaphors of games and strategy permeate diplomatic negotiations, highlighting rational calculation over brute force [4]. Huysmans explored metaphors of fear and insecurity, showing how migration and asylum debates in the European Union are framed through metaphors of risk, disease, and contagion [5]. Similarly, Jackson analyzed counter-terrorism discourse, where metaphors of war and illness legitimize extraordinary measures [6].

These studies collectively indicate that metaphors are not peripheral to political discourse but central to constructing sovereignty and security. Yet, limited attention has been paid to cross-cultural variations in metaphorical interpretation, a gap this study seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative discourse-analytical methodology grounded in cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis to examine the metaphorical conceptualizations of sovereignty and security in international politics. The research design integrates both corpus-based and context-driven approaches to ensure a comprehensive account of metaphor use in political discourse. The data corpus consists of political speeches, policy documents, and media reports produced between 2010 and 2025. Primary sources include United Nations General Assembly debates, NATO summit declarations, European Union policy statements, and speeches delivered by political leaders such as U.S. presidents, EU commissioners, and

representatives of emerging powers. Media coverage from leading international outlets The New York Times, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and Le Monde was also incorporated to capture the role of metaphor in mediating sovereignty and security issues for wider audiences. The corpus was limited to English-language texts to maintain consistency in linguistic analysis, though future studies may expand to multilingual comparison. For metaphor identification, the study adopted the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU), which allows for systematic recognition of metaphor-related words by comparing their basic and contextual meanings. Metaphors were then categorized into conceptual domains, such as SPACE (e.g., "fortress state"), BODY (e.g., "violated sovereignty"), DEFENSE (e.g., "security shield"), and DISEASE (e.g., "terrorism as a virus").

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, frequency analysis determined which metaphorical patterns were most prevalent. Second, contextual interpretation examined the pragmatic and ideological functions of these metaphors, highlighting how they shape political agendas and justify actions. Third, cross-textual comparison revealed similarities and divergences across institutional and media discourses. To ensure reliability, two coders independently identified and classified metaphors, and inter-coder agreement exceeded 85%. The methodology combines linguistic precision with political contextualization, enabling the study to uncover not only what metaphors are used but also how they function pragmatically in constructing sovereignty and security.

RESULTS

The analysis of the selected corpus revealed clear patterns in the metaphorical framing of sovereignty and security within international political discourse. Sovereignty was most frequently conceptualized through spatial and bodily metaphors. Phrases such as "protecting our borders," "violated sovereignty," and "the state as a fortress" reinforced the idea of sovereignty as territorial integrity. These metaphors emphasized control, strength, and resistance to external intrusion, legitimizing policies aimed at border protection and national defense.

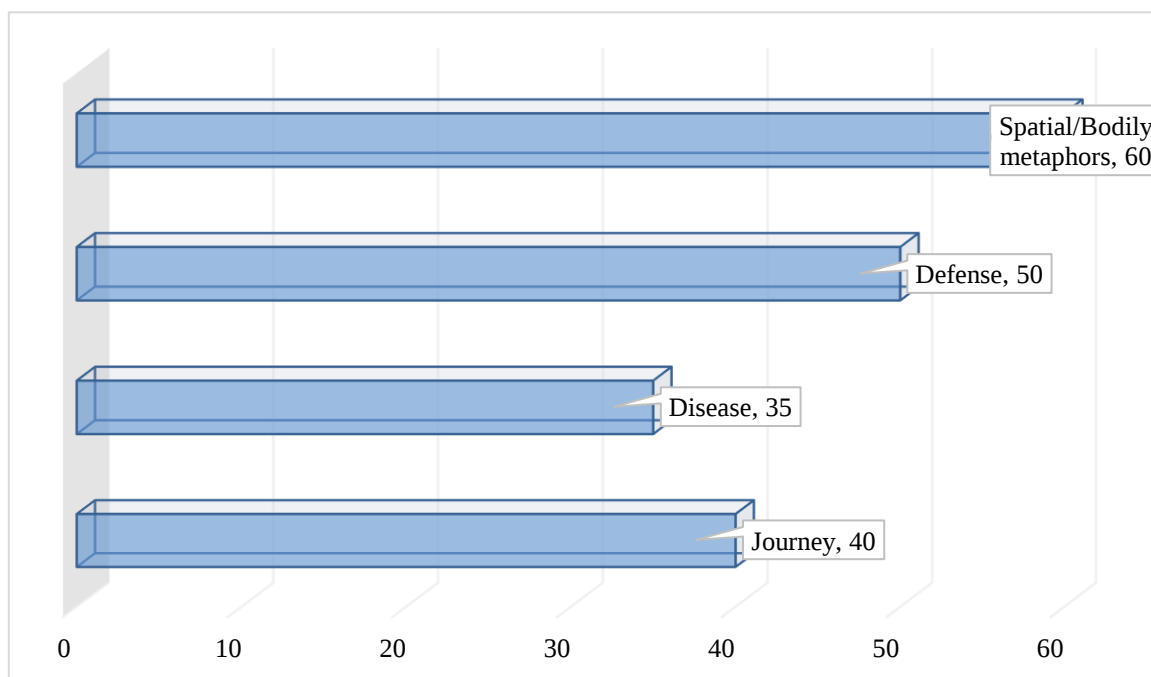
Security, in contrast, was primarily represented through defense and disease metaphors. Expressions like "security shield," "barriers against threats," and "rings of protection" portrayed security as a physical safeguard, while terms such as "terrorism is a virus" or "migration flows as contagion" reflected growing concerns about transnational risks. These metaphors framed security as survival, justifying preventive and

sometimes restrictive measures. The results also showed that journey metaphors were employed in diplomatic discourse, describing negotiations as “pathways,” “roadmaps,” or “steps forward.” This framing projected optimism and progress, even in protracted or inconclusive talks.

Cross-textual analysis indicated that while institutional documents favored defense-oriented metaphors,

media discourse often intensified threat-related imagery, especially disease metaphors. Overall, the findings confirm that sovereignty and security are discursively constructed through metaphor, shaping both political strategies and public understanding.

Figure. Metaphorical conceptualizations of sovereignty and security.



The bar graph shows the relative frequency of metaphorical categories in the analysis. Spatial/Bodily metaphors were most common, emphasizing sovereignty as territorial integrity. Defense metaphors also dominated, highlighting protection and survival. Journey metaphors framed negotiations as progressive processes, while Disease metaphors intensified perceptions of risk and insecurity.

The findings reveal that metaphorical conceptualizations of sovereignty and security are not arbitrary but strategically selected to construct particular political realities. The dominance of spatial and bodily metaphors reflects the deeply rooted idea of the state as a bounded entity. Expressions such as “fortress state” or “violated sovereignty” reinforce the perception of sovereignty as a tangible object that can be defended or attacked. This framing legitimizes policies that prioritize border protection, national defense, and territorial control, thereby naturalizing the association between sovereignty and physical boundaries.

The prominence of defense metaphors further emphasizes the securitization of political discourse. By describing threats through images of “shields,” “barriers,” and “rings of protection,” policymakers construct a narrative of constant vulnerability. Such

metaphors appeal to emotions of fear and urgency, making defensive or even pre-emptive measures appear both rational and necessary. Meanwhile, journey metaphors function as rhetorical tools of optimism and diplomacy. By conceptualizing negotiations as a “roadmap” or “path forward,” leaders present political processes as progressive and purposeful, even when substantive results remain elusive. This metaphorical framing sustains public confidence and encourages continued dialogue, highlighting the role of language in managing expectations.

The relatively lower but significant use of disease metaphors illustrates the shifting nature of global threats. Referring to terrorism or migration as a “virus” or “contagion” transforms social and political issues into existential dangers requiring urgent containment. While effective in mobilizing support, such metaphors risk stigmatizing groups and oversimplifying complex realities. Overall, the discussion underscores that metaphors in sovereignty and security discourse are both cognitive and ideological. They simplify complexity, legitimize authority, and mobilize support, but they also shape perceptions in ways that can entrench divisions or amplify fears.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that metaphors are central to the way sovereignty and security are framed in international political discourse. Far from being ornamental devices, metaphors operate as powerful conceptual and rhetorical tools that guide political thought, shape policy agendas, and influence public perception. The analysis revealed four dominant metaphorical categories spatial/bodily, defense, journey, and disease each fulfilling distinct yet interconnected functions in constructing political realities. Spatial and bodily metaphors highlighted sovereignty as territorial integrity, portraying the state as a fortress or body vulnerable to violation. Defense metaphors, in turn, emphasized the perpetual need for protection, legitimizing policies of militarization and securitization. Journey metaphors provided narratives of progress and diplomacy, framing negotiations as purposeful processes toward peace and stability. Meanwhile, disease metaphors intensified perceptions of risk by depicting threats such as terrorism or migration as contagious and urgent to contain.

Importantly, these metaphorical framings varied across political and media discourse, reflecting institutional priorities and cultural interpretations. While political leaders tended to employ metaphors that emphasized unity and progress, media outlets often magnified threat-related metaphors, amplifying public anxieties. Such variation underscores the role of context in determining the resonance and impact of metaphorical choices.

In conclusion, sovereignty and security are not merely legal or institutional concepts but are discursively constructed through metaphorical language. Recognizing this linguistic dimension is essential for understanding how international politics is communicated, legitimized, and contested. Metaphors ultimately serve as both bridges of understanding and instruments of persuasion, shaping the narratives that govern global relations.

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