



REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY: WHY IS THIS CONCEPT STILL WORTH DEVELOPING?

REGIONALNY KOMPLEKS BEZPIECZEŃSTWA:
DLACZEGO WARTO ROZWIJAĆ TĘ KONCEPCJĘ?*

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ABSTRACT

The Theory of Regional Security Complexes (RSC) provides a conceptual framework to encompass the emerging new post-Cold War international security order. It proposes a model of regional security which makes it possible to analyse, explain and predict the development of the situation in a given region. It is based on the assumption that it is the regional level, not the global or the level of a single state, that constitutes the optimal basis for conducting security analyses.

So far, few researchers have attempted to challenge the theoretical assumptions of the RSC concept, and few have tried to develop or supplement it. At the same time, it is clear that the emerging new types of challenges, changing the state's behaviour, force the revision or updating of some existing theoretical frameworks. It also applies to the Regional Security Complex theory and the adaptation of its conceptual framework to the surrounding reality so that it can continue to be reliably studied.

ABSTRAKT

Teoria Regionalnych Kompleksów Bezpieczeństwa (RKB) stanowi ramę koncepcyjną pozwalającą objąć wyłaniający się nowy porządek bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego po zimnej wojnie. Zakłada taki model bezpieczeństwa regionalnego, który pozwala na analizowanie, wyjaśnianie oraz przewidywanie rozwoju sytuacji w danym regionie. Jest to związane z poglądem, iż to poziom regionalny stanowi podstawę do przeprowadzania analiz bezpieczeństwa.

Dotychczas niewielu badaczy podjęło próby podważenia założeń teoretycznych koncepcji Regionalnego Kompleksu Bezpieczeństwa. Niewielu z nich próbowało ją poszerzyć lub uzupełnić. Natomiast pojawiające się nowe rodzaje wyzwań, wpływające na zachowania państw, wymuszają rewizję lub aktualizację niektórych istniejących ram teoretycznych. W konsekwencji wpływają na transformację teorii RKB w celu dostosowania ram koncepcyjnych do otaczającej rzeczywistości, aby móc ją rzetelnie badać.

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This article considers the possibilities of further evolution of the RSC theory and, in particular, analyses the state of its development to date and proposes solutions to complement it and adapt it to newly emerging phenomena.

Keywords: adaptation; regional security; Regional Security Complex (RSC); multidomain sector; development of theory

Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy możliwości rozwoju tej teorii, przedstawia uwagi naukowców co do założeń RKB oraz proponuje rozwiązania mające na celu jej uzupełnienie. Ponadto zawiera autorską propozycję rozwinięcia koncepcji RKB, pozwalającą na jej adaptację do nowo powstających zjawisk o unikalnym charakterze.

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacja; bezpieczeństwo regionalne; Regionalny Kompleks Bezpieczeństwa (RKB); sektor multidomenowy; rozwój koncepcji

INTRODUCTION

The theory of Regional Security Complexes (RSC) was developed in the 1980^s by representatives of the so-called Copenhagen School – B. Buzan and O. Wæver. This concept concerns regional security and offers the possibility to conduct security research in different parts of the world (Buzan, 1983). It was in line with the assumption that a tool was needed to identify the essence and specificity of international relations at the regional level. Additionally, it is worth noting that this theory was meant to fill the gap between the two previously dominant perspectives of security studies, i.e., the plane of a single state and the global plane – the perspectives which limited the view of security issues by isolating the actors of the international relations environment from the context of their nearest environment, i.e., the region and the relations which prevail in it between individual actors (Buzan, 1993, pp. 344–346).

Over the nearly 40 years of the existence of this theory, it has undergone some modifications, e.g., a change consisting in widening the spectrum of sectors (initially only two sectors were referred to as political and military) allowing the security issues to be viewed from the perspective of relations occurring at economic, environmental, or social levels. However, the core and main assumptions of the RSC theory have remained unchanged, creating opportunities for research on regional security and proving that it is a valid and willingly used research tool (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 10).

It should be borne in mind that this theory refers to the phenomenon that is security. It is characterised by the fact that it is both a state and a process (Pokruszyński, 2009, pp. 7–8; Mickiewicz, 2018, p. 35). With this in mind, it seems

right that the theory of RSC, if it is to be a valuable analytical tool, should be compatible with the phenomenon it studies. Therefore, in addition to its fixed assumptions, it should be adaptable, so that it can be properly adjusted to the changing security environment and offer opportunities to study new phenomena or even dimensions of security. This is also related to the postulates, which appear among researchers, to develop or complement the conception with the contents which were not developed in the presented original version of the theory. The very dynamic changing security environment creates a space in which new options appear, based on the possibility of introducing changes and developing conceptual frameworks that allow for more precise analysis of newly emerging phenomena.

Considering the indicated aspects and needs, this article aims not only to present the basic assumptions of the theory of Regional Security Complexes but also to indicate the critical remarks of the research community in the context of the existing conceptual gaps and proposals to fill them. It will show the trends of changes and indicate the emerging new phenomena in the security environment, which are characterised by a multi-sectoral and asymmetric character. The article ends with the author's proposal to develop the concept of regional security complexes concerning the indicated multi-sectoral phenomena and subject it to the polemics of the research community.

The research used the systems analysis method to analyze the functioning of the Regional Security Complex Theory and develop theoretical assumptions about the possibility of developing the RSC concept. The comparative method was also used to show the criticisms of other researchers in the context of the Regional Security Complex Theory and its application in its current form to the changing reality. Finally, the factor analysis method was used to answer the question of how emerging phenomena in the international environment, of an unprecedented multi-sectoral nature, can influence the development of the Regional Security Complex Theory.

REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX – BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE THEORY

The concept and theory of the 'regional security complex' were first presented by Buzan in 1983 in his book *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, while its further development took place after the

Cold War. The concept of regional security known as the Theory of Regional Security Complexes (RSC) was created by researchers forming the so-called Copenhagen School. Its representatives are Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, who, while researching security, questioned the commonly accepted approach oriented towards considering this issue solely from a political and military perspective. Instead, they adopted a broader view, claiming that it should be examined from the perspective of five dimensions: political, military, economic, social, and environmental (ecological) (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 10).

The Theory of Regional Security Complexes – as conceived by its creators – is intended to provide a conceptual framework to explain the emerging new order of international security after the Cold War. It is based on the assumption that the regional level is the basis for security analyses. The national security of a state is too narrow, while international security is broader because it is based on relations between states. Furthermore, the state perspective tends to place the state “at the centre” of events. The global perspective, on the other hand, is too broad and too general, because security issues are not the same or equally integrated everywhere in the world. Moreover, they vary from place to place. The regional level, on the other hand, as an intermediate level between the two, binds the interdependence of national security and global security and constitutes the theatre where most of the activities related to the creation of international security take place. It should be added that relations between states at the regional level form a subsystem concerning the international system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 40–43).

Regional security complexes are formed by the states that are part of them, therefore, the study of security from a trans-state perspective is not dictated by the desire to diminish the importance or role of states. According to the RSC theory, states are the primary actors in international relations because they are the ones that create regions and are responsible for the processes associated with securitisation¹ and desecuritization². This allows for the creation and functioning

¹ The classic definition of securitisation was created by B. Buzan and O. Wæver. Securitisation is “a discursive process through which, within a political community, an intersubjective understanding is constructed that treats something as an existential threat to an essential referent object (a security object, i.e. state, territory, society, identity, economy, environment) and enables the use of immediate and extraordinary measures to address that threat” (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2021; Ziętek, 2017; McDonald, 2008).

² Desecuritization is the opposite process to securitisation. It means that a problem that was previously an existential threat is treated as a part of normal political reality. As such, it can be combated by ordinary means. Moreover, with the help of desecuritization, an existential security

of forms of existence such as regional security complex (Szydzisz, 2019, p. 18; Hansen, 2011, pp. 58–60)³.

An additional advantage of the theory is that it minimises the tendency to overestimate the role of world powers as the states that decide on the level of security in the world. Attention is paid here mainly to local factors that build, as it were, the framework of the regional order and where the regional security complex is a pattern of the balance of power, rivalry and alliances of the most important forces in the region. It is only on such an arrangement that the penetration of external power forces can be imposed (Lake, 2007, pp. 50–53).

The regional security complex is not necessarily the same as a geographical region, as it is an analytical tool socially constructed depending on the activities of actors in the international environment in the security context. Such a region may change depending on what will be secured by them (Acharya, 2007, pp. 633–634; Fawn, 2009, pp. 10–12; Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002, p. 575; Mansfield & Milner, 1999, pp. 590–592). Admittedly, it is based on the geographical factor (geographical proximity), but in the sense of space rather than commonly accepted areas with defined physical boundaries. It is a group of states in geographical proximity, between which security interactions need not necessarily reflect traditionally accepted geographical or geopolitical regions. Hence, the regional security complex with its structure and boundaries does not always match and completely overlap with the commonly accepted geographical regions (Thompson, 1973, pp. 91–93; Dumała, 2009, pp. 17–19; Hettne, 2005, p. 544).

A regional security complex means “a set of units in which the major processes of securitisation, desecuritization, or both at once are so intertwined that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved independently of each other” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 44; see also Thompson, 1981, pp. 216–218). This definition is also close to other researchers dealing with the issue of regional security complexes. For example, D. Lake and P. Morgan support the assumption that the borders of the region are defined by security ties manifested in the mutual perception of opportunities, challenges, problems, and threats (Zajączkowski, 2013, p. 73).

problem can be “downgraded” to the extent of not being perceived as a security problem and, as it were, can cease to exist in the public consciousness as a threat (Szydzisz, 2019, p. 27).

³ More on this topic, see: Williams, 2003, pp. 511–531.

Depending on the currently existing configuration in the complex, it can change in three ways: maintain the status quo, undergo an internal transformation, undergo external transformation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 53). An unusual phenomenon related to the change of the regional security complex is the so-called “overlap” (Adler & Greve, 2009, pp. 62–64). It refers to the situation when one or more global powers enter directly into the regional complex, which leads to the suppression of the previous individual regional security dynamics. This is not the same as superpower intervention in the regional arrangement (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 14–15; Bryła, 2012, p. 22).

The classical theory of the RSC concerned states as the units that make up a region and focused on two sectors, i.e., political and military. However, this concept was developed by expanding the group of actors that can be taken into account in the context of regional security studies to include non-state actors. Another novelty offered by the RSC was the inclusion of other sectors considered in the context of security: economic, social, and environmental. In addition, there was a move away from an understanding of relations between actors that would be based only on the principle of force (Fijałkowski, 2012, pp. 153–155).

Sectors themselves are a tool for looking at the international security system in a way that highlights a particular type of relationship between the actors in the complex. With the help of sectors, it is possible to distinguish the types of these interactions, for example, into political, military, economic, social, and ecological (Sadurski, 2020, pp. 235–238). And this makes it possible to believe that it will be possible to find in complexes the relevant actors that will be characteristic of a given sector (apart from those that may occur in all of them, such as states), as well as the characteristics of a given sector and related activities. Through the sectors, it will be possible to show the developmental tendencies of the different types of threats in a given complex and indicate the diversity in their perception in the context of the sector type (Hama, 2017, p. 4).

A CRITIQUE OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

The theory of Regional Security Complexes, like any theory, has its supporters and opponents. Few researchers have attempted to undermine the theoretical assumptions of this concept or tried to expand or supplement it. On the other hand, there are mostly attempts to use and apply this theory to study particular regions in terms of security and to analyse its dynamics at particular levels of

international security (Buzan, 1988, 2011; Senanayake, 2020)⁴. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to present the critical arguments put forward against this concept especially in a situation where this theory, as well as the object of research, concerns security, i.e., a state and process that is subject to constant change under the influence of the surrounding reality (Jarzabek, 2019, pp. 25–26). No theory is perfect, but these remarks will allow us to grasp the problematic issues and thus try to supplement them with additional valuable content. It will also enable to take measures to adapt the theory itself to the ever-transforming security environment making it constantly relevant to the emerging new phenomena in the international relations environment.

Amitav Acharya alleges that the RSC theory pays little attention to the role of regional institutions as factors leading to changes in the structure of a particular complex. He also argues that the concept discusses the relationship between regional and global powers, while no attention is paid to the relationship between regions. Another observation is the lack of a general definition presented by Buzan and Wæver discussing the existing regional order. Various possible types of regional orders are presented, e.g., alliances, the concert of powers, security community. No explanation discusses how the different types of RSC are related to specific examples of regional orders (Acharya, 2007, pp. 636–638).

Safal Ghimire polemicises the Theory of Regional Security Complexes in terms of the lack of clear criteria in the process of creating a regional security complex. He believes that the theory does not sufficiently describe the theoretical process of “ordering” the region from the level of the pre-complex, through the protocomplex, to the emergence of the RSC. There is also a lack of development regarding the possible transformation of states considered as “isolators” and “buffers” to, for example, the level of regional power. The Theory of Regional Security Complexes mentions such a possibility but does not provide details about it.

The next objection is the theory’s focus on a descriptive presentation of regional powers individually and less on predicting their strategic interdependence. Ghimire believes that issues that link states and regions at the global level, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber security, aviation security or climate security, which should also be considered in this way, are overlooked. There is also a lack of predictions relationship between regional

⁴ See also: Troitskiy, 2015; Walsh, 2020; Fijałkowski, 2010; Musioł, 2015.

complexes and the extent of external transformation that may take place, which, according to S. Ghimire, still needs to be investigated (Ghimire, 2019).

In turn, Najmīyeh P. Esmāeili et al. raise issues related to the fact that it is impossible to determine which of the regional variables proposed by B. Buzan (anarchic environment, power distribution, interaction pattern, regional boundary) is the most important and is the starting point for the analysis of other variables. He wonders which one of them can shape the relationship between other variables and accuses the RSC theory of lacking a clear explanation of this problem. On the other hand, as an addition to the concept, this researcher proposes the use of an additional fifth variable, called “problem”, which can constitute this starting point for the analysis of other variables and act as a link between them. This is because although, on the one hand, regions have a lot in common, they differ from each other in some aspects and characteristics that cannot be assigned to one of the four categories of variables presented by Buzan (Esmāeili, Salimi, & Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2021, pp. 136–139).

Tomasz Pawłuszko also draws attention to the variables forming the regional security complex, and in particular one of them, i.e., anarchic. He states that it is understood as “two or more participants in a given system” and questionable due to assigning too narrow a meaning to it.

Another problem that the aforementioned researcher points out is the theory’s focus on state-centrism. He notes that there are now cross-border phenomena of great security significance that are managed by non-state actors. For this reason, an approach focused only on states may not be sufficient to describe the relations prevailing within regional international relations and, consequently, the complex itself (Pawłuszko, 2015, pp. 66–67).

A similar view is presented by Petr Zelinka, who also draws attention to the existence of non-state actors who influence the dynamics of regional security. Zelinka accuses the authors of the RSC concept of failing to sufficiently define the place of such actors, taking them into account only when they constitute a significant force in a given region, which influences the distribution of power within it.

A partial explanation of the state-centric approach is that, in principle, only states can securitise or not a phenomenon. Moreover, the state can take extraordinary measures consisting, for example, of a better capacity to mobilise resources as opposed to non-state actors (Zelinka, 2008, pp. 61–65).

Jarosław Jarząbek also raises issues related to the growing importance of non-state actors as a kind of novelty in international relations, whose power

and impact on regional security is increasing (Jarząbek, 2019, pp. 26–29). An example of such an entity is a transnational corporation, whose revenues can reach a higher level than those of some states so that they have adequate power and gain opportunities to effectively influence the policy of states (Babic, Heemskerck, & Fichtner, 2018). The contemporary catalogue of threats should also include new forms of attacks and forms of influence on states and communities involving the use of the Internet (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2021; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [CISA], 2021). The development of military technology has contributed to the possibility of using, for example, drones as means of combat (Pledger, 2021; Hernandez, 2021) or increasing the capacity and effectiveness of missile weapons. These types of threats have a common feature – they make it possible to launch an attack at a distance, far from one's territory. This, in a way, undermines the conceptual dogma of the RSC theory referring to geographical proximity as a factor determining the emergence and existence of the complex due to the stronger impact of threats operating at shorter distances (Jarząbek, 2019, pp. 31–36).

THE MULTIDOMAIN SECTOR AS THE AUTHOR'S PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP THE RSC THEORY

The theory of Regional Security Complexes assumes the existence of five sectors in which security relations are considered. Sectors are a tool that makes it possible to look at a certain type of relationship between states in a given region autonomously. This makes it possible to determine how strong the interactions linking states within a given sector are and to assess its validity in comparison to other sectors and the context of the complex as a whole. Sectoral grouping of threats and states' responses to them also helps to show the direction of development and determine the importance of given types of threats in the future in a given regional security complex (Albert & Buzan, 2011, pp. 415–416).

Emerging new types of challenges, as well as the dynamically transforming structure of international security, is changing states' perceptions of problems, opportunities, possibilities, and threats. At the same time, this also affects the theory of Regional Security Complexes as a tool for studying security in the region. Accordingly, newly emerging and emerging phenomena such as the aforementioned transnational corporations, private military companies, cyber-crime, international terrorism, the emergence and growth of non-state actors in

the world (Herd, Puhl, & Costigan, 2013, pp. 1–3) force the theory of Regional Security Complexes to transform to better adapt to the surrounding reality to continue to reliably study and describe it.

Moreover, the attention paid to the possibility of changes in independent variables in the event of the occurrence of certain factors gives reason to believe that the assumptions of the theory, although well thought out and very well structured, do not constitute an inviolable concept. This is a result of the fact that, firstly, the theory is meant to be a description of a dynamically changing security reality. Secondly, the theory was created, as it were, based on a permanently functioning environment, a system that is in a constant process. Therefore, even though the assumptions of the theory constitute a certain unchangeable constant, within the framework of this process there are situations when a “reversal” of this constant occurs, which affects long-term transformations in the regional security complex. It should be borne in mind, however, that such an anomaly or aberration is extremely rare and should be treated as a possible peculiarity resulting from special conditions that arise within the framework of specific, deep dependencies between states in a given region, which may be a derivative of many centuries of tradition resulting, for example, from the common neighbourhood of these states.

In line with the arguments presented earlier – that there are new phenomena with unprecedented characteristics that pose challenges to the states that are part of individual regional security complexes – the theory itself, to remain relevant, must have the appropriate tools to take them into account and adequately describe them. For example, such a new phenomenon in the world (especially in the Arctic) is climate change leading to a real cascade of complex consequences (Trombetta, 2008). They represent a major challenge for the countries of the region and, to a proportionately lesser extent, those outside it. Before their occurrence, it was possible to characterise the relations linking states in regional security complexes according to the specifics of the sectors presented by the authors of the RSC theory. However, climate change, apart from the fact that it has different effects in different parts of the world, additionally poses a challenge characterised by universality towards particular five classical sectors, affecting each of them at the same time. This situation results, on the one hand, in problems, opportunities, possibilities and threats related only to individual sectors. On the other hand, however, we are dealing with a kind of *novelty* consisting in the emergence of such challenges which at the same time combine features characteristic for at least two separate sectors. Therefore, they cannot, and in principle should not be classified in any of the existing classic sectors, because they contain in themselves features about another

sector at the same time (and a reductionist approach could lead to an incorrect picture of reality). These phenomena, due to their complex characteristics, require flexible and comprehensive state action. This, in turn, leads to the formation of specific relations between the countries of the region, which correspond to the characteristics of this particular phenomenon. An example of the response of states to the emergence of a challenge involving the characteristics of several sectors is the establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, whose cooperation is aimed at protecting the environment, ensuring the safety of navigation in the Arctic Ocean, ensuring the security of Arctic states and performing tasks for civil protection and social security (Østhagen, 2016; Arctic Coast Guard Forum [ACGF], n.d.).

The author believes that new challenges are emerging in the international security environment, which the theory of Regional Security Complexes in its classical formulation is not able to define or properly take into account due to the lack of an appropriate framework or conceptual capabilities to study them. Referring to the above-mentioned postulates that the theory of Regional Security Complexes should be transformed in response to emerging changes, if it is to continue to be a useful tool for security studies, in the author's opinion, it would be advisable to supplement this theory with an additional sector – a multidomain sector, which will be a response to the epistemic need raised above, related to climate change, cybercrime, terrorism, the influence of transnational organisations, and the resulting new phenomena characterised by asymmetry and multisectoral. This sector is characterised by the fact that it combines single features from at least two different sectors hitherto operating within the theory (ontological changes).

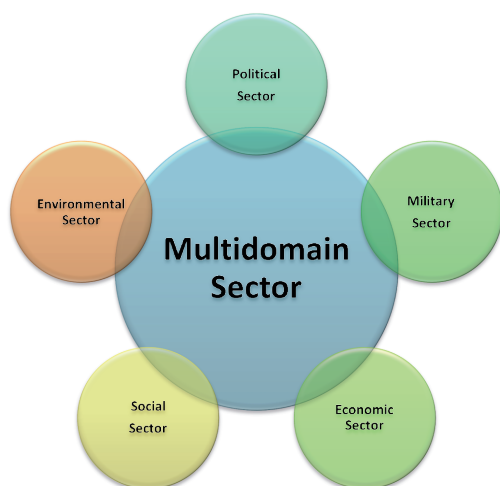


Figure 1. The Multidomain Sector and Its Relation to the Classical Sectors of the RSC

Source: Author's own study.

Developing the theory of Regional Security Complexes with another multi-domain sector will allow:

- the inclusion in research of new factors and challenges to which classical RSC theory did not provide answers;
- to examine emerging new challenges arising from the rapidly changing international security environment;
- the possibility of classifying new challenges and phenomena which, by their very nature, could not be clearly attributed to any of the previous sectors;
- a closer examination of the mechanisms at work in relations between states within the various RSCs;
- a better assessment of the security situation of the RSC;
- an attempt to more accurately and effectively anticipate further developments within the RSC and its future development;
- the adaptation of RSC theory to the new, rapidly changing security environment and the resulting possibility of its continued use in security research.

SUMMARY

The concept of regional security known as the theory of Regional Security Complexes was created by researchers forming the so-called Copenhagen School. It is a conceptual framework for the emerging new order of international security after the Cold War. It assumes such a model of regional security that allows analysing, explaining and predicting the development of the situation in a given region. This is connected with the view that it is the regional level that constitutes the basis for security analyses. It is emphasised that regions form specific security subsystems in the global security system, in which the dynamics of internal interactions between states fearing their neighbours and their regional allies dominate. And the whole world consists of regions forming security complexes. Among the cited advantages of this theory, it is mentioned that it presents a key level of analysis on security, allows empirical research, and additionally provides a way to predict the security dynamics in different regions.

A theory concerns security, i.e., a phenomenon which is both a state and a process. Accordingly, it may be assumed that it should be equally characterised

by adequate features to constitute an effective and up-to-date research framework concerning the constantly changing security environment. This leads us to believe that the theory can and should undergo transformation and development. This view was already reflected when it was noticed that security should be studied more broadly than just the political and military dimensions. Hence, this perspective was broadened to include the economic, social and environmental (ecological) dimensions and, as a consequence, the number of security sectors within the concept was increased from two to five, each responsible for a particular security dimension.

In this form, it has been used for years, which proves the effectiveness of the adopted basic assumptions. However, the changing security environment manifested in the emergence of new phenomena of an unprecedented, asymmetrical and multi-vector character, as well as the conceptual gaps found, have led some researchers to attempt to extend or supplement it. This can be seen in such postulates as, among others, an attempt to introduce an additional variable describing the regional security complex, the inclusion of non-state actors or the development of already existing issues concerning buffer zones and their formation, as well as defining the conditions and stages of formation of regional security complexes themselves. These are further examples supporting the view that this theory should be updated and worth developing.

The author of this article also attempted to develop this theory in the context of the emergence of new phenomena affecting the security environment. Emerging new types of challenges affect changes in the perception of international relations actors of problems, opportunities, possibilities, and threats. This has an impact on the theory of Regional Security Complexes, which is a tool for the study of security in the region. Accordingly, newly emerging phenomena force the RSC theory to transform to better adapt to the surrounding reality to study it reliably. An example of such a factor is climate change, which leads to many complex phenomena. Their characteristic feature is that their impact cannot be attributed to only one dimension (sector) of security that is present as predicted by the theory. These are phenomena that simultaneously combine features of at least two separate sectors. Therefore, the author of this article has proposed to develop the theory of RSC with a new, additional sector – the multidomain sector. The proposed sector is universal and can be applied to the research of any region. It applies to phenomena that can appear in any region of the world. Its implementation within the current structure seems to be an appropriate step

in answering contemporary security challenges. This leads to the development of the Theory of Regional Security Complexes, which thus undergoes transformation and constitutes a still valid analytical and research framework for the international security environment.

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