Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2014, Vol. 7, pp. 94-108

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

New horses for new courses: the necessity of human security in the post-Cold War world

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In the post-Cold War world, a number of new, non-state based security threats have emerged. As a consequence, classical, state-based international relations theories are no longer sufficient for the analysis of threat scenarios and the preservation of security. The proliferation of sub-state threats such as civil war, genocide and human rights abuses has further compounded the need for new approaches to the study of international relations, and also increased the need for students of international politics to pay attention not only to the states in the international system, but also the people inhabiting them. This article will argue the case for the human security doctrine, whereby the referent object of study is changed from states in the international system, to the individuals inhabiting them. It will demonstrate that such an approach serves to secure increased security not only for civilians, but also for states.

INTRODUCTION

When Germans from both sides of the Berlin Wall started tearing it down in 1989, international relations scholars across the world were taken by surprise. The realist paradigm's focus on the bipolar relationship between the Soviet Union and the USA and the anarchic nature of international society had seemed perfectly suited for analysing and explaining the machinations of the Cold War, but still failed entirely to predict its end. This was of course a severe blow to the school's credibility, and in the 1990s followed a general confusion in which a plethora of new international relations theories saw the light of day. The fall of the Soviet Union caused some to take an optimistic view on the new situation, with US President Bush famously declaring the beginning of a 'new world order' of human rights and internationalism, and historian Francis Fukuyama to declare 'the end of history.'[1] This optimism came to an end with the terror attacks on the New York

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[1] F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', (Summer 1989) *The National Interest*.

City World Trade Centre on September 11th 2001, and saw the younger President Bush – the former's son – launch the War on Terror, which came to define the first decade of the 21st century.

It has become increasingly clear over the past two decades that the old explanations of international relations and security hold decidedly less traction in the new, post-Cold War world. While previous wars entailed stand-offs between sovereign nations, most violent conflicts in the 21st century international system take place on a subnational level, either in the form of civil wars or in the shape of threats such as international terrorism, which have no concern for nation state borders. For such threats, realism and other theories of international relations which use the state as their referent object of analysis, lack explanatory power.[2] Factions, such as al-Qaeda or al-Shabaab, have no sovereign territory, legal subjects or international recognition, but are still highly salient security threats which traverse borders. The same goes for other forms of civil strife and humanitarian disasters; whether genocide, civil war or environmental disasters. With traditional forms of inter-state conflict declining in occurrence, it seems apparent that new theories are needed to explain the changed situation.

One theory which has aimed to fill this gap is that of human security. Proponents of human security argue that analysis of the new security threats of the 21st century requires that the referent object of analysis is changed from the states in the international system, to the people inhabiting them. At its heart, the purpose of this change is to protect the people inhabiting the international system, who have all too often suffered in wars or civil conflict they never desired or initiated. Thus, if a state either cannot, or – in the case of e.g. genocide or violent repression – will not provide its citizens with security, other states are required to step in and either offer, or forcibly provide, that security. Some theorists have emphasised the need for human *security* alongside traditional concerns of human *development*, arguing that affixing a 'security label' gives the issue increased political saliency,

[2] For realism's emphasis on the value of state-based analysis, see e.g. K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (London, 1979), J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY, 2001). For the seminal, first prominent work of realist theory, see H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, NY, 1948).

increasing the chance of effective action being taken.[3] While some have protested that such a reorientation of focus obfuscates states' focus and may prove detrimental to national security, human security in fact also allows for the more convincing study of subnational security threats, such as international terrorism or civil conflict which risk spreading across borders. This article will argue that state security is pointless in isolation, and only actually valuable if the citizens of the polity are considered safe as well. It will also argue that such safety is best achieved when the state is also safe, and, that human security offers a framework wherein state and personal security are seen as interdependent. It is, therefore, both an important humanitarian tool, and an efficient analytical method of emerging threats against states. After first outlining the arguments in favour of human security and accounting for the debates and disagreements between human security scholars, the article will consider and counter the main criticisms that have been directed against the concept. It will then finish with a restatement of human security's importance in the post-Cold War world, particularly compared to traditional theories.

THE CASE FOR HUMAN SECURITY

Human security started garnering attention with the publication of the 1994 UN Human Development Report. In one of the most famous elaborations of what has become known as the *broad* school of human security, the report argued for an extension of the 'security' concept from military threats to seven subcategories of threat against the individual: economic; food; health; environmental; personal; community; and political security threats.[4] The crux of the argument, which has been adapted by the Japanese and Norwegian governments as a basis of their

[3] T. Owen, 'The Critique that Doesn't Bite: A Response to David Chandler,' (2008) 39.4 *Security Dialogue* 450. The idea of 'speaking security' and thus 'creating' security threats has primarily been developed by O. Wæver, cf. 'Securitization and Desecuritization' in R.D. Lipschutz (ed.) *On Security* (New York, NY, 1995) and 'The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders' in M. Kelstrup and M. Williams (eds.) *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community* (London 2000). For the first, authoritative elaboration of securitisation theory, see B. Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO, 1998).

[4] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994 – New Dimensions of Human Security* (New York, NY, 1994).

security policy,[5] is that being safe from the threat of violence is not enough: if you hunger, are ill, or suffer the risk of political repression or environmental disaster, you cannot be considered secure, as such. Traditionally, international relations scholars would not have concerned themselves with these issues as they do not have their origin in state or interstate conflict. Human security scholars instead argue that state-based theories of international relations are unsuitable for the study of international security, and that the anthropomorphisation of states both ignores problems specific to a certain state, as well as possible variation of conflict levels and nature within states.[6] State-based theories also fail to recognise that threats existing on such subnational levels may very well spread across borders, e.g. in the form of refugee streams or the spread of international terrorism networks. For this reason, national security and human security cannot be divorced from each other in a world where instances of inter-state conflict have decreased, while subnational strife and violence has increased: human security does not negate or threaten national security, but provides new tools for facing the new threats that exist against both states and their citizens.

In contrast, even if not in outright opposition, stands the *narrow* conception of human security. Here, the argument goes that while it is commendable to want to bring issues such as the right to education and the right to not be hungry into the security realm, these issues are, ultimately, better dealt with within the more established field of human development. Treating all issues under the same flag risks undermining aid efforts, and may ultimately undermine human security's utility for policy formulation.[7] Narrow human security policies have notably been adopted by the Canadian government as the guiding principle for their foreign and security policy; motivated by the desire to be 'narrow and operable' rather than 'broad and ideal'.[8] This is arguably the main fault-line between proponents of the

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[5] Cf. T. Owen, 'Human Security – Conflict, Critique and Consensus: Colloquium Remarks and a Proposal for a Threshold-Based Definition,' (2004) 35.3 *Security Dialogue*, 373-387 or S. Tadjbakhsh and A. Chenoy, *Human Security: Concepts and Implications* (London, 2007).

[6] P.H. Liotta and T. Owen, 'Why Human Security?' (2006) 7.1 *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 37-54.

[7] Cf. G. King and C. Murray, 'Rethinking Human Security,' (2001/02) 116.4 *Political Science Quarterly*, 585-610 and N. Thomas and W. Tow, 'The Utility of Human Security: Sovereignty and Humanitarian Intervention,' (2002) 33.2 *Security Dialogue*, 177-192.

[8] Liotta and Owen, 'Why Human Security?'

narrow and broad schools: is it worthwhile to strive towards an ideal state of affairs, or will more good ultimately be done by accepting the discipline's restrictions and working to implement them?

This division may, at first, appear to discredit the usefulness of human security. If the proponents themselves cannot agree on the concept's purpose or aims, then what chance does it stand of influencing world affairs? One resolution of this conflict has been to reject the dichotomy entirely. Taylor Owen has argued that the distinction illustrates the breadth of scholarship, but ultimately makes the discipline seem more fragmented than it is: the ultimate goal, protection of civilians rather than states, remains common to both broad and narrow human security.[9] This is both a valid retort to critics of the human security concept, and a cautionary note for proponents caught up in academic tribalism. For those critical of human security's compatibility with national security, [10] a mechanism is provided whereby potential threats can be assessed and countered according to urgency and saliency. Meanwhile, proponents are reminded that ultimately, the discussion of human security and its place in the world should start with making a good case for changing the referent object from states to civilians. Only after that does it become a worthwhile exercise to formalise rules for its execution, or argue for its most efficient implementation.

FACING DOWN THE CRITIQUE

No challenge of dominant paradigms goes unnoticed, and human security is no exception. Critique has varied: on the one hand, there is the long-standing critique that applying security labels to non-security related issues hollows the concept of potency and makes the term 'security' so wide that it becomes useless.[11] This is a charge levelled not at human security specifically, but one shared with the wider school of securitisation. Other criticisms are more direct. Closely related to the

[9] T. Owen, 'The Critique that Doesn't Bite'; M. Martin and T. Owen, 'The Second Generation of Human Security: Lessons from the UN and EU Experiences,' (2010) 86.1 *International Affairs*, 211-224.

[10] E.g. D. Chandler, 'Human Security: The Dog that Didn't Bark,' (2008) 39.4 *Security Dialogue*, 427-438.

[11] See e.g. R. Paris, 'Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?' (2001) 26.2 *International Security*, 87-102, for one of many critiques on the subject.

first charge, human security has been accused of being kept 'so vague it verges on meaningless', primarily due to the unwillingness of human security theorists to name some threats to human security as more relevant than others.[12] Critical scholars have accused human security of being an easy way for imperialist-minded states to take 'the image of the velvet glove on the iron hand of power,' whereby status quo *realpolitik* and Western interventionism is given an air of respectability and enlightened cosmopolitanism.[13] Finally, there has been a general worry among security theorists about the possibly detrimental effect of human security on national security: if all and no threats are prioritised, it may lead to governments '[opting] out of taking responsibility for foreign policy', and instead encourage 'a shift from strategic thinking to sound bites and ad hoc policy-making'[14].

These are all relevant critiques, and human security, as a concept, is developed further by facing and engaging with them. To begin in due order, the allegation of widening the concept of security is a long-standing one often presented by proponents of state-based theories of security. It is undeniably true that if strictly and absolutely restricted to state security, the security label has a well-defined remit and is suitably defined. The issue, however, is to what extent state security as such is worth studying in today's world. Traditionally, states have had the right to retain sovereignty within their own borders and enjoy non-interference; only by everyone respecting each other's' sovereignty, it has been argued, can war be prevented. This system of nation-states going about their business freely dates back to the Peace of Westphalia, which concluded the Thirty Years' War in 1648, for which reason the system is commonly called 'the Westphalian system'. To an extent, this arrangement made sense in the days when war consisted of two geographically well-defined states warring against each other, but war between nation states is at a very low level in the 21st century. Conflict, instead, occurs on a subnational level in the form of civil strife, genocide, civil war, transnational security threats such as international terrorism, and large people movements as a

[12] Ibid, 102.

[13] K. Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge, 2007), 323-325; M. Duffield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Radicalisation of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance,' (2002) 33.5 *Development and Change*, 1049-71.

[14] D. Chandler, 'Human Security', 436. See also Paris, 'Human Security' and B. Buzan, 'A Reductionist, Idealistic Notion that Adds Little Analytical Value,' (2004) 35.3 *Security Dialogue*, 369-370.

result of resource scarcity, environmental disaster or war. If security studies remain focused on the safety of states, human security proponents can retort: of what use is security studies if it only concerns the safety of abstract state apparati, rather than the people who inhabit them?

If traditional security scholars consider human security an irrelevant feel-good tool, critical theorists, instead, seem to think of it as a Trojan horse. The point that human security risks getting co-opted by imperialist or expansionary purposes is an important concern, but ultimately misguided, and most likely rooted in attempts by the UK and the US to cast the controversial 2003 Iraq War in humanitarian terms after no weapons of mass destruction were found, thus negating the original *casus belli*.[15] A quick survey of which states have adopted human security as the guiding principle for their foreign policy reveals the rather non-threatening troika of Japan, Norway and Canada, and human security projects which have been successful include the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Establishment of the International Criminal Court, as well as the development of an improved rapid response capability for the UN.[16] If human security has, indeed, been co-opted thus far, the results have been very benign.[17] There is a possible caveat to this defence, though: Behringer found that most human security policy victories have been the result of middle-power leadership, and dependent on US support or, at the very least, non-opposition.[18] It seems, then, that there is a far greater risk of human security being stonewalled by non-compliant great powers, than of said great powers hijacking it for their own purposes. To whatever extent there is a risk of such great power hijacking in the future, it is better countered by strengthening human security and its integration in international organisations, making its criteria subject to multilateral agreement within organisations such as the UN.

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[15] See e.g. A. Bellamy, 'Ethics and Intervention: The 'Humanitarian Exception and the Problem of Abuse in the Case of Iraq,' (2004) 41.2 *Journal of Peace Research* 131-147 or P. Lee, *Blair's Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality*. (Basingstoke, 2012).

[16] R. Behringer, 'Middle Power Leadership on the Human Security Agenda,' (2005) 40.3 *Cooperation and Conflict* 305, 342.

[17] Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, *Human Security*; Owen, 'The Critique that Doesn't Bite,' 450.

[18] Behringer, 'Middle Power Leadership.'

Finally, there is the allegation that human security risks undermining national security. While the above argument that national security without human security is largely pointless still stands, a loss of national security may still cause a corresponding loss of a previously existing state of human security. An analogy can be made to that of a house: having a house with well-built walls and an insulated roof does not necessarily mean that its inhabitants are safe, or at all content. However, if they are secure, they will be less secure if said house is torn down, and they are left to the elements.[19] The specific concerns vary, from being concerned that human security's lack of prioritisation of threats will harm the state's ability to face such threats, to doubts whether securitisation of non-traditional security matters risks prompting militaristic, counter-productive responses that, in the end, do more harm than good. First of all, the criticism against human security's supposed unwillingness to prioritise threats is misguided. The reluctance is not specifically against prioritisation, but against prioritisation irrespective of context. [20] For instance, if policy-makers were to prioritise environmental disasters as the main relevant threat, they would effectively be misprioritising, until there actually was an environmental disaster to deal with. The same goes for traditional threats such as national security: why prioritise military, state-based threats as the paramount danger, if there is no credible risk of war or inter-state conflict?

One particularly convincing solution to the problem of prioritising targets has been presented by Taylor Owen in the form of the threshold-based approach, wherein a matter is classified as a human security issue according to severity and temporality rather than cause.[21] This method also serves the purpose of singling out issues better dealt with through long-term operations under the framework of human development. For instance, the aftermath of a typhoon in East Asia may elicit enough suffering to make it a human security issue, and a genocide carried out by a central African dictator may similarly make the situation severe enough to pass the threshold. A lack of education provision in a region, meanwhile, would

[19] A similar point is made in K. Booth in his account of 'utopian realism': 'Security and Emancipation,' (1991) 17 *Review of International Studies*, 313-326.

[20] Martin and Owen, 'The Second Generation.'

[21] Owen, 'Human Security' and 'The Critique that Doesn't Bite'; Martin and Owen, 'The Second Generation.'

be unlikely to ever cross the threshold. It also has the advantage of bridging the broad-vs.-narrow debate, arguing that the two must work in tandem to protect 'the vital core of all human lives'.[22] This means that any response by the international community to a human security crisis would be designed with the specific situation in mind, rather than being dogmatic and pre-determined, and should ideally work as a bulwark against military means being unnecessarily deployed to solve non-military issues. Owen's is not the only framework for human security action, but one which, here, serves the purpose of lending human security credibility and operability, which is vitally important given the concept's relative youth. Indeed, it appears as if most deficiencies of human security can be traced to disagreements typical of the early days of any discipline, rather than an innate unworkability.

SPRING CLEANING: OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

International society is a constantly evolving, never static organism. In the course of history, and as it is likely to remain, paradigmatic explanations will suddenly be faced with new events which they are unable to resolve, understand, explain or handle. The myriad of theories that found a space in the vacuum left by realism's fall from pre-eminence have enriched the international relations discipline, and the continuing sparring between different explanations of the world forces all its students to hone their arguments and fill gaps in their reasoning. Human security may never reach the heights once held by realism during the Cold War – and indeed, it should not; theories taken as self-evident or unassailable atrophy and fail to develop with the times – but it fills a valuable space in the literature by focusing on the people inhabiting the international system rather than the states to which they are supposed to pledge their allegiance. As has been argued above, this is good for a number of reasons. Firstly, it forces reflection on the meaning of security. It may very well be that state-based theories can analyse the security of states as discrete entities, but what use is that if the citizens within it remain unsafe? Who should ultimately benefit from state security, if not its inhabitants? Secondly, the proliferation of non-state based threats does not only affect civilians, but also poses problems for states. To insist that the abstract conception of the state, in such a context, is most needing of protection, is simply not convincing.

[22] Owen, 'Human Security,' 383.

Rather, it is a knee-jerk relic of the Cold War which is unhelpful in tackling modern challenges.

It is evident that human security is gaining ground. Since the 1994 UNDP report land mines have been banned, an International Criminal Court has been established. [23] Furthermore, the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide spurred movement towards the development of a doctrine declaring the responsibility of international society to protect civilian populations, notably advanced by the Canada-initiated International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS).[24] This commission launched what is called the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P, and entails a distinct departure from earlier discussions on the right to intervene. Through R2P, focus is back where it belongs: with the oppressed, the sufferers, and those in need of aid, rather than with the interventionists. [25] Propagated by both UN General Secretary Kofi Annan and his successor, Ban Ki-Moon, R2P is the first, tentative step towards an international order in which the needs and rights of civilians are prioritised above all else; a distinct departure from the nominally ideology-free *realpolitik* of the Cold War. That is not to say that international society is quite there yet. One issue with R2P is that sovereignty, whatever one might think of it, remains a commonly recognised right all over the world. While there is a philosophical argument to be made that sovereignty has to be earned, and can be revoked if misused, there is scepticism among the BRICS countries [26] and other African, Middle-Eastern and Asian nations that humanitarian interventions risk being used as a front for more insidious purposes, essentially harking back to Booth's critique of human security as a way to put a

[23] While it is questionable if the ICC will ever work properly before it is recognised by the United States, and extradition of US military personnel is possible, the establishment of an international body for the prosecution of crimes against humanity is undeniably a huge step forward. The only similar project was the Nuremberg Trials after World War II, which by necessity were ad hoc and only treated military and civilians associated with Hitler's Third Reich.

[24] For the full commission report of the ICISS, see G. Evans and M. Sahnoun, 'The Responsibility to Protect,' (2002) 81.6 *Foreign Affairs*, 99-110.

[25] Ibid, 101-102.

[26] BRICS: A common acronym for the economically fast-growing powers of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

velvet glove on an iron fist.[27] Indeed, some scholars have argued that the – possibly incorrect – invocation of R2P in the case of NATO's Libyan intervention risks having tainted it, what with the mission ending with the forcible deposition and execution of Muammar Gaddafi.[28] Even if the human security agenda is mainly led by middle-powers with no or little history of colonial ventures – and in Canada's case, actually being an ex-colony – it is understandable that suspicion still exists in the developing world over the intentions of Western interventionists.

Despite the obstacles which still need to be scaled, human security is poised to take an increasingly prominent place in 21st century international relations literature. There is much to be done before the UN's commitment to R2P materialises into a truly efficient doctrine of civilian protection, but even the watered-down and embattled version currently formally adopted by the UN is a valuable development of the UN's mission to protect humans across the world. The main challenges ahead are to rebuild trust between the Western, industrialised states and the rest of the world, and to clearly demarcate the mandates of any operations undertaken through human security or R2P. The NATO intervention in Libya was made possible by widespread regional agreement on the necessity for intervention, but had no mandate beyond the moral one to aid in the overthrow of Gaddafi. While it is nigh-on impossible to aid a side being brutalised in civil war without inadvertently aiding the defeat of the brutalising party,[29] Western powers would benefit from practising restraint and remaining sensitive of the sensibilities and norms of regional powers. While it would be tempting to advocate a gung-ho response to the Syrian conflict and the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad – and remain within the confines of human security's provisions – it would, most likely, lead to increased suspicion of the doctrine and damage the prospects of future R2P operations. Brutalising leaders should be bereft of some of the protection lent them by sovereignty, but more appropriate punitive measures may be trade blockades and increased pressure for mediated ceasefires. Time will tell exactly how it develops, but it should be clear to any

[27] A. Bellamy and P. Williams, 'The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect,' (2011) 87.4 *International Affairs*, 847-850. For Booth's critique, see *Theory of World Security*, 323-325.

[28] J. Morris, 'Libya and Syria: R2P and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum,' (2013) 89.5 *International Affairs* 1265-1283.

[29] R. Betts, 'The Delusion of Impartial Intervention,' (1994) 73.6 *Foreign Affairs* 20-33.

international scholar that human security is here to stay, and its success is in all our interests. The prolonged game of state-based, nuclear chess that was the Cold War is thankfully long gone, and a new world requires new forms of analysis, and new military doctrines.

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