

## THE HUMAN SECURITY AGENDA IN WORLD POLITICS

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**Keywords:** human security, broadening, deepening, critical security, security/development nexus, early prevention, sustainable human development

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### Summary

The human security agenda in world politics is commonly viewed as a conceptual challenge to the realist approaches to security that have, until recently, dominated both academic Security Studies and, to some extent, the practice of international politics. Where realist approaches privilege the state as the primary referent for security (whose security is to be protected), proponents of human security emphasize the ways in which states often compromise the security of their own citizens. In particular, where repressive political regimes generate insecurity for their citizens through the denial of basic human rights, the human security agenda foregrounds attention to the security concerns of individual men and women. Second, where realist approaches posit a narrow, conception of security, focused on the threat and use of military force, many formulations of human security argue for a broader, more holistic - or development-centered - understanding of security in which economic, health and environmental concerns are recognized as important sources of insecurity.

Although it is often assumed that recasting security in holistic and people-centered

terms opens up space for a new, more 'progressive' form of security politics, many critics fear the analytical and political dangers that may accompany a broad, development-centred conception of security. Crucially, critics argue that ideas about human security cannot be separated out from the wider power relations that structure the international system. In this respect, where human security becomes a justification for heavy handed forms of military intervention, it may signal the emergence of what critics have called a new, post-imperialist regime of power.

## 1. Introduction

Since the publication of the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) *Human Development Report (HDR) 1994*, the human security agenda in world politics has been framed as a normative and practical challenge to traditional approaches to security in theory and practice. Most notably, the ideas that underpin the human security agenda represent an important departure from the realist approaches to international politics that, until recently, dominated mainstream thinking about security in academic and, to some extent, policy circles. Realist approaches to security have traditionally privileged a narrow conception of security that focuses on issues related to the threat and use of military force. In this view, threats to security are defined as existential threats to the sovereignty, values and territorial integrity of states. Although these ideas enjoyed considerable institutional and discursive power in the context of the nuclear stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union, the historic political changes signaled by the end of the Cold War helped to open up space for 'new thinking' about global peace and security. Crucially, in the years following the end of the Cold War, the idea of human security provided something of a rallying point for policy-makers and academics who wished to combine calls for a post-Cold War 'peace dividend' with an alternative, more holistic and people-centered approach to security.

Human security departs from the defining assumptions of traditional realist thinking in two key ways. First, the idea of human security marks a break with the traditional privileging of the state as the primary referent for security (that which is to be secured) and signals a new emphasis on the security concerns of individual men and women. For proponents of human security, the national security priorities of states do not always best reflect the security concerns of their citizens; rather than serving as the ultimate security providers in global politics, states often threaten the security of their own populations. In particular, repressive political regimes may generate insecurity for their citizens through the denial of basic human rights, the unequal distribution of resources or the use of armed force as a means of internal repression. Second, many proponents of human security seek to broaden the concept of security beyond the confines of a military-based focus in favor of a broader security agenda that emphasizes the ways in which economic, health and environmental concerns also contribute to diverse forms of 'insecurity' in the daily lives of many people around the world. As the UNDP puts it, security should no longer be defined solely in terms of 'freedom from fear' issues, such as military threats and organized violence, but should also involve the ways in which 'freedom from want' issues, such as poverty and under-development, undermine the security of human populations. The aim here is not to neglect or ignore the continued importance of military security questions, but is rather to develop a more holistic - or broad, development-centered - approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of

military and non-military aspects of security and the extent to which the well-being of human populations is often as much, if not more, at risk from non-military sources of harm.

Implicit in this approach is the notion that recasting security in holistic and people-centered terms opens up space for a new, more 'progressive' politics of security where the meanings and practices associated with 'security' are decoupled from their traditional statist and military-focused associations. From this perspective, broadening the concept of security to include economic, health and environmental concerns provides a means to shift political attention and resources away from the high military spending priorities of many states towards development projects centered on the economic and social welfare of populations. Yet although many observers view the emergence of the human security agenda as part of a broader process of normative change in international politics, a process characterized by the development of norms and conventions such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions and the International Criminal Court, the emphases of this agenda have proved to be controversial.

Although the people-centered character of human security remains a core element in this approach, there is a troubling tension between the focus on individual human beings as the referent for security and the continued dominance of states as the primary agents of security in world politics. In this respect, many conceptions of human security revert to a complimentary understanding of the relationship between states and individuals; where individuals are to be protected from harm, the primary agent of rescue is likely to be the state. The concern here is that the universalist, humanitarian assumptions that underpin the human security agenda, and its implied criticism of non-liberal regimes, have become a justification for the most powerful states in the international system to erode the principles of non-intervention that protect the sovereignty of the weak. Moreover, where liberal universalism becomes a justification for intervention, economic sanctions or military force may, paradoxically, bring harm to the civilian populations that human security purportedly seeks to protect.

Second, the expansive, open-ended character of early formulations of human security - most notably, that of the HDR 1994 - has been subjected to considerable criticism, even among academics and policy actors sympathetic to the idea of human security. Whereas a broad, development-centered approach, somewhat similar, though not identical, to that of the UNDP, can be seen in the Japanese government's human security foreign policy, some of the other middle power states spearheading the human security agenda have favored a narrower 'freedom from fear' approach focused on the safety of people from threats related to organized violence. This can be seen in the foreign policy of the Canadian government and in the early work of the Human Security Network (HSN) whose members include Canada, Austria, Ireland and Norway. These conceptual differences are also reflected in some of the important research initiatives now proliferating in this area. The 2003 *Human Security Now* document, prepared by the influential Independent Commission on Human Security (ICHS) and supported by the Japanese government, comes closest to the development-centered conception of human security originally promulgated by the UNDP. By contrast, the *Human Security Report (HSR) 2005*, compiled by the Human Security Centre at the University of British

Columbia and funded partly by the Canadian government, reflects the narrower 'freedom from fear' approach favored by Canada and members of the Human Security Network.

Significantly, the conceptual tensions that lie at the heart of the human security agenda resonate well with the academic literature on security where the issues raised by 'broadening' (that is, the inclusion of non-military concerns on the contemporary security agenda) and 'deepening' (problematizing the role of the state as the primary referent for security) have animated debates among Security Studies scholars over the course of the last two decades. On the one hand, the idea of human security has gained currency among critically minded scholars in Security Studies, and in the discipline of International Relations more broadly, who wish to challenge the dominance of realist accounts of international politics. In this view, a holistic and people-centered approach to human security elicits an important normative challenge to the military emphases and state-centeredness of orthodox Security Studies. On the other hand, human security has provoked controversy amongst scholars who fear the political consequences of extending security practices into ever increasing numbers of areas of everyday life. From this perspective, the existing meanings and practices associated with security are bound up with deep-rooted structures that are not so easy to change; the cards are stacked against the potential for human security thinking to transform the power relations that characterize the darker elements of contemporary security politics. Crucially, although human security can, in many respects, be characterized as a policy-led agenda, this academic literature has an important role to play in deepening our understanding of the political and philosophical issues at stake in 'narrow' versus 'broad' conceptions of both human security and security more broadly. Indeed, a more theoretically informed analysis of the implications of human security becomes increasingly important to the extent that human security thinking begins to inform contemporary security and development practices.

The implications of the human security agenda are highly ambiguous. Even though many of the leading powers in the international system continue to eschew explicit use of the term human security, security policies of the North have increasingly begun to reflect the convergence of security and development that human security represents. Central to this is the idea that weak or failing state structures, poverty and under-development, and environmental scarcity or degradation may contribute to insecurity and instability at local/national, regional and even international levels. Significantly, these sorts of linkages have achieved considerable salience in the context of the post-September 11 security environment and the US-led 'war on terror' where arguments about the relationship between economic and political under-development and the rise of global terrorist networks have heightened awareness of the role of 'soft power' strategies, such as development and aid. The difficulty is that the national security imperatives of the war on terror will lead contemporary security and development practices in directions quite contrary to the initial insights of human security thinking. Where early formulations of human security emphasized solidarity between poor people in the global North and South, the post-September 11 security environment frames poverty and under-development as threats to rich Northern countries. In this respect, critics fear that, rather than providing a counterweight to the assumptions of traditional national security thinking, human security risks being incorporated into the very

structures it initially sought to oppose.

## 2. The UNDP's Development-Centered Conception of Human Security

The UNDP's HDR 1994, which was written as a contribution to the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development, can be seen as one of the key agenda-setting initiatives in relation to the introduction of the human security concept. Although the UNDP's approach is by no means the only influential approach in the literature, it is commonly regarded as a key departure point in academic and policy debates about human security. As Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong suggest in their comprehensive study, *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History* (2006), in initiating the human security agenda, the HDR 1994 was a key contribution to both reconfiguring the accepted parameters of the concept of security and unsettling orthodox assumptions about the security role of the state.

In the UNDP's formulation, human security is defined as 'safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression' and 'protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life'. On this basis, security is broadened to include seven key dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security. Moreover, there are four further defining elements to the UNDP's approach: first, human security is a '*universal* concern ... relevant to people everywhere'; second, 'its components are ... *interdependent*', especially in the context of globalization where security problems 'are no longer isolated events, confined within national borders' but have 'consequences that travel the globe'; third, it is '*easier to ensure through early prevention* rather than later intervention'; and finally, in recognition of the ways in which there may be tensions between the security interests of states and those of their citizens, human security is defined as '*people-centered*' (original emphasis).

A core aspect of the significance of this approach lies in its broadening of the concept of security to include a range of non-military areas of concern. Indeed, in extending the parameters of 'security' to include economic, environmental and health factors, there is a clear departure from conventional understandings of security that rely on a hierarchical division between military and non-military aspects of security. In the UNDP's view, economic, environmental and public health issues can be understood in terms of 'safety' and 'protection' to the extent that, in many parts of the world, more people die from lack of access to clean water or adequate medical care than from the effects of organized violence or military force. On the other hand, critics have argued that once security is broadened in this manner it becomes increasingly difficult to specify where the boundaries between security and development can be drawn. At what point do economic and environmental concerns cross the threshold from standard development issues to become security threats? Is it a question of severity of impact, the numbers of persons affected, or the numbers of deaths involved?

For the UNDP, the answer to this is clear. Where human development is understood as a process that seeks to extend human capabilities and the ability people have to exercise choices over their lives, human security is defined more narrowly as 'safety' and 'protection' in situations where the established patterns of daily life are disrupted by

lack of access to food, disease and political repression. In other words, human security is about ensuring that basic human needs are met in ways that guarantee the safety and survival of communities and their ways of life, while human development is a much broader process that seeks to advance human capabilities and equality of opportunity through a range of strategies, from democratic governance and thriving markets to the creation of conditions that enable both diversity of cultural expression and local ownership of the means through which development is achieved.

Yet although security and development are understood as distinct concepts, there is also a recognition of the ways in which security and development are fundamentally interconnected. From this perspective, the achievement of human security is viewed as a prior step that can help to create the safety in which human choices can be exercised freely. At the same time, under-development or development failure fuels the conditions - poverty, hunger, inequalities between groups - in which the outbreak of violence becomes possible. Thus, in a move that prefigures now more commonplace arguments about the nexus between security and development, the HDR 1994 argued that, whereas a stable security situation helps to create the conditions in which effective development projects become possible, success in development terms can reduce the role of socio-economic tensions in fomenting conflict and instability.

Not unsurprisingly, the four further defining elements of this conception of human security, described above, also depart from the assumptions of traditional conceptions of security and draw on the broader development-centered ethos associated with the work of the UNDP. In emphasizing the universal, interdependent and indivisible character of human security, the UNDP begins to suggest an alternative understanding of world politics that is very much at odds with the realist approaches to security that have traditionally dominated security in theory and practice. For realist thinkers, the primary actors in world politics are sovereign states whose autonomously defined interests are governed by calculations of self-interest. In this view, the anarchic character of the international system - that is, the absence of a common government that can impose an overarching form of political order - is necessarily a self-help system in which states must prioritize their own security and survival. As a consequence, international politics is an insecure, mistrustful, and often highly dangerous arena in which states can never be certain that today's partner in cooperation will not become tomorrow's enemy in war. By contrast, in conceptualizing human security as universal and interdependent, the UNDP suggests, not so much the logic of us versus them, friend against enemy, that permeates accounts of security based on existential threats amongst territorial states, as a logic of us *and* them, vulnerable together, in a globalizing world.

## **2.1 The Universalism of Human Life**

It is important to recognize that, whereas realist approaches foreground an ontology of territorial states, the UNDP's conception of human security is founded upon ethical claims about the universalism of human life. In this view, the demand for human security rests upon recognition of the right of all humans to be treated with dignity. Crucially, the idea of our shared humanity is given greater weight than the forms of difference that divide us. Threats to human security, such as poverty, environmental degradation and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, are a source of concern for people in the

rich North as well as those in the global South. Moreover, education, health and basic human rights, economic and social as well as civil and political, should be available to all humans and should not be denied on the basis of gender, religion, race or ethnicity.

## **2.2 Interdependence and Solidarity**

With regard to the interdependent character of human security, it is not just that the global character of many contemporary security problems renders them impossible to contain within the sovereign borders of territorial states, or that material inequalities in the international system may create boomerang effects that rebound on rich Northern countries. For the UNDP, the 'global flows' of people and goods that comprise what John Ruggie has called the 'dynamic density' of interdependence and globalization, are a potential source of bringing people together in common cause rather than a rending apart. Significantly, this understanding challenges the assumptions of realist theories of security where the constraints exerted by the anarchic character of the international system lead states to fear the vulnerabilities that may arise from mutual dependence. In contrast to realism, the UNDP's conception of human security involves recognition of the potential for solidarity among the peoples of the world, an emphasis that gestures towards notions of commonality between the global North and South and stems from the UNDP's long-standing experience of development cooperation with Southern countries.

In this respect, UNDP practice has been notable for its commitment to the idea that development cooperation offers a means to build good relations between North and South, a principle that has not always been evident in the ethos and practices of other international development institutions. Central to this approach is recognition of the need to acknowledge the role of material inequalities in shaping the character of the international system, the responsibilities that the former colonial powers have towards the former colonies of the South and, ultimately, a belief in the role that security and development cooperation can play in fostering global peace. Indeed, the UNDP's understanding of human security is closer to the Palme Commission Report's (1982) concept of 'common security', with its emphasis on cooperative solutions to security problems and economic gains for the South, rather than the politics of friend against enemy on which variants of political realism tend to draw.

## **2.3 Early Prevention**

The argument that the achievement of human security must involve early prevention rather than later intervention also departs from conventional understandings of security. If protecting people from malnutrition, disease and repression requires early prevention, this suggests the need for longer-term development efforts to address human needs and well-being rather than the short-term, reactive and often military-focused character of traditional security practices. Crucially, it is argued that, efforts aimed at early prevention can help to reduce the direct and indirect costs of allowing human security problems to spiral out of control. Where under-development or severe inequalities between groups threaten to exacerbate tensions within a society, for example, attempts to address these issues at an early stage may help to circumvent the slide towards violence or internal war. Increasing the level of resources allocated to economic and

social development may be less costly, therefore, than the resort to UN operations at a later stage. In this respect, the HDR 1994 proposed the development of an early warning system based on human security indicators, such as socio-economic development, levels of food consumption and disparities between groups, to help identify countries heading towards crisis.

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**Pauline Ewan** completed her doctoral research in the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, where she has also taught Security Studies. She currently teaches International Studies at the University of Wales and has recently published in the area of human security.