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IN DEFENSE OF THE BROAD VIEW OF HUMAN SECURITY

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

Almost two decades after its mainstream outing in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report (HDR), the concept of human security continues to be a point of contention between those who favor a broad definition, those who prefer a narrow version and those who reject the notion altogether. What was supposed to be a simple, noble and obvious idea soon became engulfed in a cacophony of political and academic debates centered on its definitions, their advantages and weak points, and on its theoretical and practical applicability.¹

Can human security be considered a paradigm shift, or is it simply an advocacy agenda, a ‘glue that holds together a jumbled coalition’² of middle powers and development agencies that want to exist on the international scene? It is oft described as a vague concept with no analytical or practical utility; so broad that it includes everything, and therefore, nothing; and a new nemesis from Northern countries, wrapped in an excuse to launch ‘just wars’ and interventions in weak states. This chapter sets out to defend the broad approach that defines human security as freedom from want, from fear and from indignities as universal and indivisible components. It argues that as a normative concept, human security embodies a number of added values to the fields of security studies, human development and human rights, and is not a mere attempt to ‘securitize’ issues in order to solicit interventions in the name of ‘enlightened self interest’ and ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P).

Scopes and definitions

As Peter Stoett advances, ‘Defining words is a fundamental act ... When definitions are constructed in a closed and limited fashion, alternative thinking can be stifled and orthodoxy reinforced.’³ Defining the concept of human security serves to delineate reality, framework and priorities for the policy agenda. For the academic one, however, it can also be ‘a robust pedagogical process ... pushing academic discourse farther along its path of self-discovery.’⁴ Defining is after all an act, performed by an actor, and never something neutral or objective. It is therefore important to bear in mind how the definition of human security emerged from or against past theories, who is defining, for what purposes, and what consequences such an act entails for policy and academic debates.

The word ‘security’ itself, as Steve Smith puts it, is ‘an essentially contested concept.’⁵ While Buzan refers to security as ultimately a political process, ‘when an issue is presented as
posing an existential threat to a designated referent object,’ in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) security is defined as ‘The condition of being protected from or not exposed to danger; safety … Freedom from care, anxiety or apprehension; a feeling of safety or freedom from an absence of danger.’ Buzan’s definition takes as point of departure mainstream international relations theories, where the notion of ‘security’ is primarily codified as the prerogative of states (realism), and of states and institutions (liberalism) to be free from what he calls any danger that presents ‘an existential threat.’ The Oxford English Dictionary definition instead highlights the subjectivity inherent in security as a ‘feeling’ for individuals, which has relative connotations in different contexts: for some, insecurity spurs from sudden loss of access to jobs, health care, social welfare, etc. For others, it can stem from violence, conflicts, displacement, etc. From people’s perspective, security needs to be defined as a subjective experience at the micro level to gain meaning. This experience may be decidedly different from that of states’ concerns for their national security.

I therefore submit that security is, in fact, in the eye of the beholder. By extension, human security as a concept engages with the security of people and communities instead of solely that of states and institutions. Once the referent object and subject of security is moved down to individuals, the notion of ‘safety’ then broadens to a condition beyond mere existence (survival) to life worth living, hence, well-being and dignity of human beings. Thus, human security, in its broadest form, consists of three components which simultaneously delineate its scope: freedom from fear (conditions that allow individuals and groups protection from direct threats to their safety and physical integrity, including various forms of direct and indirect violence, intended or not); freedom from want (conditions that allow for protection of basic needs, quality of life, livelihoods and enhanced human welfare) and freedom from indignity (condition where individuals and groups are assured of the protection of their fundamental rights, allowed to make choices and take advantage of opportunities in their everyday lives).

In dominant state-centered security theories, the protection of territorial integrity and national sovereignty reigns supreme, and threats are recognized primarily as existential ones posed by the militarization of other states. The human security approach instead proposes that classical security theories (like the security dilemma) fail to address insecurity in a comprehensive manner, and security for the state does not automatically trickle down to that of people. Human security threats include both objective, tangible elements, such as insufficient income, chronic unemployment, dismal access to adequate health care and quality education, etc., as well as subjective perceptions, such as the inability to control one’s destiny, indignity, fear of crime and violent conflict, etc. They can be both direct (those that are deliberately orchestrated, such as systematic persecutions) and indirect (those that arise inadvertently or structurally, i.e. under-investment in key social and economic sectors such as education and health care). By putting individuals at the center of analysis, security threats (or in other words, insecurities) are recognized in terms of their ability to hamper people’s survival (physical abuse, violence, persecution or death), their livelihoods (unemployment, food insecurity, pandemics, etc.), and their dignity (lack of human rights, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, etc.).

In essence, the human security approach rides on constructivist attempts at rethinking security studies, deepening the neorealist conception by moving down to the level of society and individuals or up to the level of international or global security, and broadening it to recognize a wider range of ‘non-traditional’ threats. It recognizes that broadened threats can menace states’ essence in similar ways to that of individuals: they can hamper states’ existence (territorial integrity), their functioning (whether they have the resources and capacity to function and develop as a state) and their sovereignty (legitimacy and recognition).

Human security is not an empirical theory per se. It does not explain nor predict the
behavior of states. It is rather a paradigm and a concept that allows recognition of threats and vulnerabilities to the full potential of an emancipated life, much like the concept of ‘human development’ coined by the likes of Amartya Sen and Paul Streeten came to be propagated through the UNDP HDRs since 1990. Its absence and presence is as much an objective notion that can be measured against quantitative indicators (i.e., crime, violence, employment, freedoms etc.) as a subjective factor that requires qualitative assessment of how people ‘feel’ secure.

Rather than an empirical or positivist theory like realism or neo–realism, human security does not proclaim to be amoral. With its ‘human’ accolade, it more comfortably belongs to the field of ethics in International Relations (IR) and normative theory, dealing with what ought to be and how the world should be ordered and the value choices decision makers should make. As such it can be considered as an evaluative framework. If realism is supposed to explain why states compete in a competitive anarchical system, human security could be seen as making value judgments on whether this behavior is morally acceptable, judged against the outcomes for individuals and communities as the ‘content’ of states. And as all normative theories, its rejection by many scholars in IR is related to the positivist bias of the field. It may be worth taking a detour and considering, as Frost writes in his argument for ethics in IR, that the underlying determining structure (system, unit) that forms the basis of positivist theories is also not independent of norms and is itself largely constituted by sets of normative ideas. The state which features as the primary unit of realists’ characterization of the international system is not a ‘political reality that exists independently of the ideas and norms which people adhere to. In like manner, a system of states does not exist independently of the ideas and norms of the people involved.” Similarly, the structure of power is not independent of the values and norms which people have, and power is ‘intimately linked to specific sets of ideas which constrain what the power may be used for’.

Feminist theoreticians have already come a long way in deconstructing the nature of the state as essentially rational egoists guided by the dictates of raison d’état. The state and market, in theory and practice, embody masculinist assumptions and structures, and dominant conceptualizations of politics in male dominated terms ignore women’s realities, their active contributions and how male and female identities are shaped through social relations. Their scrutiny since the 1980s has opened up spaces for examining how international politics and core IR concepts such as war and security, are themselves gendered. Yet, the engendering agenda, much like the related attempts to put people at the center of security studies and IR, has seen formidable challenges in fields dominated by the over-focus on what are assumed to be amoral, rational states, as if they were entities devoid of social relations, and acting on the basis of national interest that is supposedly not constrained by the norms and differentiated participation of its citizens.

In defense of the broad approach

The broad definition outlined above is obviously contested, not only by those who altogether reject human security as a valid paradigm shift, but also by those who prefer to limit it to particular types of existential threats to individuals. Three schools of thought have evolved from the debates around human security in academia: a first group argues that human security lacks analytical rigor, and is, consequently, at best a ‘rallying cry’ and at worst as unadulterated ‘hot air’ as a mere political agenda. Among the most adamant critics are realist scholars who, in the tradition of Kenneth Waltz, warn against the securitization of what is not, essentially, an existential threat. A second school, while accepting the term, insists on limiting the definitions...
to ‘freedom from fear’ and direct threats to individuals’ safety and to their physical integrity: armed conflict, gross violations of human rights that lead to fears such as imprisonment and death, public insecurity and organized crime. Proponents of the narrower version argue that a useful and workable definition should be restricted to threats falling under the realm of tangible violence, measured, for instance, by the number of battle-related deaths. As their argument goes, broadening the agenda of threats to include poverty or food shortage, for example, would be the equivalent of making a shopping list of all bad things that can happen, making the concept unworkable. A third school, to which this author belongs, argues for a broad definition as essential for understanding contemporary crises, regardless of whether the concept is ‘workable’ or not, even though tools and methods have been developed to take a more comprehensive and strategic approach to interventions.

Instead of lamenting the lack of workable definitions, proponents of the broad version believe that research should be concerned with ways in which definitions insisted on by security studies circumvent political, moral and ethical concerns in order to concentrate on relations of power. From this perspective, the lack of an agreed-upon definition is not a conceptual weakness but represents a refusal to succumb to the dominant political agenda. A broad definition is therefore critical to transforming the ethos and engaging in the ‘political’ act of raising questions that are peripheral to security studies. Even though adopting the narrow definition facilitates the researchers’ work, the reality of people’s lives means that threats like poverty or disease can have an equally severe impact on people’s lives and dignity as does tangible violence. When agency is returned to people, it is the localized, subjective sense of the security of individuals that in the last analysis is of paramount importance.

One way to gauge the academic debate is to consider it as a rift between what Robert Cox has labeled as problem-solving and critical theory. For Paris, a broad definition which includes components ranging from physical to psychological, without a hierarchy of security needs, presents difficulties for policy makers to prioritize among competing goals. From his problem-solving point of view, competing demands present challenges for policy makers who need to allocate attention and resources on specific solutions to specific issues. Andrew Mack warns that a broad definition does not allow for an examination of variables and the analysis of violence and poverty for example as separate issues. Most of these positivist scholars above, who tend to accept the narrow approach, dwell in fact on its practical implications in the guise of taking a shot at the analytical nature of the broad concept. Basing themselves on Buzan and Wæver’s conception of security threats as informed by urgency, priority and gravity, they assume that securitizing some issues changes their status in the policy hierarchy, making them worthy of special attention, resources and immediate resolution, including by military means. The so-called problem of lack of prioritization and hierarchy of threats however assumes that responsibility for ‘action’ rests only with political actors limited by competing demands for their attention and resources. Yet, policy-making is not only a vertical process but can be a networked, flexible and horizontal coalition of approaches corresponding to complex situations. Furthermore, to hierarchize and prioritize among human insecurities may be a futile exercise, as threats are interdependent and the eradication of any one of them in isolation is of little effect.

It is within the critical school that debates about how far human security pushes the envelope become interesting. Shifting focus onto the individual as the referent object and subject of security is by itself a critical exercise in challenging state-based security theories as the only valued view. Yet, a set of critiques from within critical theory laments that by not engaging enough with deconstructing the politics of securitization, and by simply ‘grafting on’ the need to protect individuals to existing international practices, proponents are missing the opportunity to completely deconstruct or reformat existing security approaches.
are said to act in essence as collaborators of state-based international organizations and mostly Western powers in keeping the status quo in international relations and reinforcing dominant power relations and structures within the international system. Given the dominant liberal paradigm under which international institutions currently operate, proponents of a human security approach are supposedly reinforcing hegemonic international liberalism. What’s more, they have created a justification for even deeper and more invasive forms of interpenetration as a form of biopower. This particular dialogue is located within two different readings of human security which mirror the narrow/broad debate: a liberal/institutional position and an emancipatory version of human security.

In his critical review of a book that this author published with Anuradha Chenoy in 2007, David Chandler claims that human security was a ‘dog that did not bark.’ His main contention is that human security advocates do not directly engage with a contestation of power relations, leaving the approach open to co-option by political elites. As a result, it is the ‘universalist interest of power, understood in vague terms of biopolitical neo-liberal global governance, rather than the cosmopolitan ethics of empowerment, which drives the discursive practices of human rights regimes.’ From this author’s perspective, however, Chandler has only a partial reading and fails to distinguish between the different visions and nuances of the different human security approaches. In essence, his critique is to the narrow approach, which has insisted on limiting insecurities to threats to survival, and favors institutional responses often of the liberal/institutional or realist kind.

He posits three propositions as evidence that human security defenders not only fail to provide a radical alternative to interest-based and state-based security theories but are also co-opted by political elites. First, he claims that human security advocates exaggerate post-Cold War security threats and their independence as a ploy for action and attention, in other words, playing up to ‘realist calculations of self-interest’ instead of posing an ‘ethical normative challenge.’ In response, this author wonders why the mere recognition of menaces to welfare, dignity and the everyday life beyond the bare life (survival) is automatically associated with the imperative that something must be done by political elites and existing institutions. Threats to human dignity need to be recognized as such, even if they may or may not solicit action by political elites. If one accepts security as a personal feeling, and not the prerogative of the state, then ‘securitization’ should not automatically raise alarms to send in the troops so to say. The proponents of the narrow approach who argue for a workable definition restricted to life threatening threats may be the ones automatically accepting the efficacy and interest-based morality-in-disguise of those holding on to power and ready to respond to security/existential (in Buzan sense) threats. Recognizing that factors such as poverty or disease threaten people’s everyday lives and dignity as much as tangible violence is not an instrumental ploy to solicit action, but a logical if not an ethnical exercise. Engaging with the politics of problem-solving and the powerlessness of power is a worthy, but separate exercise.

Second, Chandler declares that by locating new security threats in the developing world, human security advocates ride the bandwagon with realists and liberals in putting an unwelcome focus on the so-called dangers of so-called failed states. The human security framework is said to facilitate the ‘problemitization of the non-Western state’, feeding into the fears of Western elites and further securing the rich consumerist West by containing the circulatory problems of world market inequalities and exclusion within the post-colonial South. In response, it must be noted that human security threats are located in the developing world only by those who believe in a division based on countries that can ‘act’ (hence project their power) in other spheres, and those that are mere recipients of such benevolence/malevolence. This too may be the narrow view of the liberal human security approach which believes that problems
of the developing world can and should be solved through interventions, financial assistance, human rights sanctions, democratization, marketization etc., all precepts for making liberal. The broad emancipatory approach would instead argue for the universal applicability of the subject, conceived in regards to people’s daily concerns – no matter where they live geographically. Relational, objective and subjective perceptions of insecurity persist as much, if differently, among inhabitants of Parisian suburbs as they do in Darfur. Urban violence, job insecurities, health epidemics, privatization of social delivery, militarization of societies, etc. that plague industrialized societies of the North are as much human insecurities as famine, wars, poverty and genocides that characterize extreme situations of some countries, notably in the post-colonial world. That is why the broader approach may not agree with some academic attempts to propose a threshold of degree of severity of threats to human life, which would then fail to recognize the insecurity felt by people in Western welfare societies. Contextual analysis instead of quantitative absolute measurements better reflects the full meaning attributed to a life worth living as what people consider vital varies across individuals, societies and cultures.

Third, Chandler claims that discussions around urgency facilitate short-term policy-making and eclipse strategic foreign policy visions. This criticism also mostly addresses proponents of the narrow approach to human security, who, when insisting on a threshold that reveals urgent threats to survival that require immediate action, may forgo strategy for short-term action depending on the currency and will available for politicians to act. Yet, for advocates of the broad approach, the mere recognition of structural violence and threats to dignity require, de facto, strategic planning, root cause analysis, preventive action, etc. Dignity-related threats are certainly not to be dealt with through short-term problem-solving approaches. They invite critical assessment of structural causes.

The misdiagnosis of the ability of the dog to bark is because critiques like Chandler’s fail to distinguish between the liberal human security approach and the emancipatory one, as there is no one human security approach in the singular. Such partial reading may stem from bias towards the comfortable materialist/empiricist trend in Anglo-Saxon academia to relegate non-material, ideational factors, such as dignity and emancipation, to intermediary roles. The crosstalk between the various communities also seems to stem from whether human security explains or at least identifies problems or proposes solutions, whether it is a framework for description or prescription. The tendency to conflate these, both by proponents and critics, has arguably added to further conceptual confusion. As discussed above, human security cannot proclaim to be a theory, much less one locating itself in the domain of positivism. It is best approached as an evaluative, ethical and critical framework. The broad emancipatory approach as opposed to the more narrow liberal version could be useful for questioning the asymmetries that exist within and between systems by finding more space for contention and pluralist voices. In evaluating the practice of state building, humanitarian intervention, and even the less tested domain of domestic policy, the broad, emancipatory version can be a useful tool to question the outcome of such power projections from the point of view of those affected.

**The broad content**

The broad approach introduces new dimensions to the traditional security paradigm, human development and human rights fields while locating itself in the area of convergence between them.
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Whose security, from what threat and by what means?

The approach can be considered an ethical rupture with traditional security paradigms (by making the security of people and communities as the ultimate goal), and a methodological one (with the idea that by securing individuals, the security of the state, the region and the international system can also be better ensured). As such, the framework postulates different answers to the three questions that have preoccupied security scholars: security of whom? Security from what? And security by what means?

Security of whom? On this question, proponents of the broad and narrow definition seem to agree. From both perspectives, individuals in addition to the state are the ‘referent objects’ of security, and by implication, their security is the ultimate goal to which all instruments and peripheral actors are subordinated. It thus poses a moral challenge to realism, for whom the moral argument is the *raison d’état* itself.

Security from what? The answer to this question is differentiated among the narrow and broad school of thought. The narrow approach prioritizes individuals in the direct line of danger. King and Murray for example restrict threats to elements over which people are ready to fight and risk their lives. Taylor Owen proposes a threshold which would take into account only the most serious threats to human lives. The broad approach recognizes menaces beyond violence and concentrates on threats to the survival, well-being and dignity of individuals. It postulates three assumptions about threats: 1) that equal weight has to be given to underdevelopment and human rights violations as threats alongside traditional insecurities, 2) that threats are inter-linked and inter-connected, and 3) that these linkages mean that instead of looking for priorities, the connections have to be sought out in order to make sure than interventions in one domain do no harm in others at worse, and multiply positive externalities at best. Consequently, the answer to ‘security from what’ can only come from an analysis of the given context and find meaning in subjectivity. Contextual analysis would recognize the relative security of a person living under $4 a day but who is well integrated in family and community, lives in a peaceful environment and disposes of a minimum of social security. On the other hand, it would also recognize the insecurity of a person with income and wealth who lives in a conflict situation, or one whose health insurance relies on his/her job in a volatile labor market.

Security by what means? As the main author of the 1994 Human Development Report, Mahbub Ul Haq saw a simple solution: human security can be achieved through development, not through arms. When the survival, well-being and dignity of individuals become the ultimate goal, constructs such as the state, institutions of political democracy and the market are relegated to secondary status as means to achieve that goal. Hence, insecurity should not be dealt with through short-term military or policing solutions, but a long-term comprehensive strategy that combines protection, provision of welfare and emancipation. The narrow approach advocates instead for a practice of prior engagement by the international community, long before interventions are supposed to take place in front of *fait accompli*. Yet, as the section below will discuss, in international politics, human security shifted from a descriptive and universal concept concerned with global justice and equity in the writings of Mahbub Ul Haq, to a prescriptive tool in international relations, ‘for others’ and ‘by others’ through its adoption as foreign policy. The capture by some states and regional organizations metamorphosed the concept into a toolbox that served specific external relations purposes. Ultimately, security should be tackled through comprehensive policies, both at home and abroad, and not only through military means.
Not the same as human development

The development of the human security concept is not only located within the rethinking that sought to deepen and broaden security studies. Within the field of development studies and political economy, it made an international debut in 1994 by the same team that coined the human development approach through the UNDP HDRs in 1990. For its authors, Mahbub Ul Haq, Amartya Sen and others, the distinction was simple: human development refers to the process of widening people’s choices to be who they want to be and do what they want to do, in other words, the enhancement of capabilities and functionings. It can be ensured through economic growth strategies that include distribution, equity and enhanced freedoms. Human security, by contrast, refers to the condition that enables people to exercise these choices safely and freely, and be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today will not be lost tomorrow. In essence, human security introduces an element of insurance to the development process and assurance that the process and outcome of development is risk-free. Human development can be summarized as ‘growth with equity’, whereas human security as ‘downturn with security.’ As Sen argues, ‘When a crisis hits, different groups can have very divergent predicaments. United we may be when we go up and up, but divided we fall when we do fall.’

The human security concept draws attention not just to levels of achievement, but to securing gains made by deliberately focusing on downside risks, such as conflicts, wars, economic fluctuations, natural disasters, extreme impoverishment, environmental pollution, ill health and other menaces. It concerns itself with the ‘stability’ of goods provided within the human development framework as opposed to their levels or trends. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr highlights the differences by stating that human development focuses on absolute levels of deprivation whereas human security emphasizes the risk of sudden changes for the worse. In contrast to the ‘freedoms to’ potentials in the capability approach (freedom to do what one wants to do and be what one wants to be), human security concentrates on ‘freedoms from,’ which as Des Gasper argues, ‘concern definite absences not just potential absences.’ In the words of Ul Haq,

Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity.
In the last analysis, it is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed.

Human security also puts additional focus on identification, prevention and mitigation of risks that are often overlooked in development strategies. In a nutshell, the concept refers to the sustainability and stability of development gains.

Human security and human rights: same content, different focus

In the policy world, human rights and human security are the two frameworks that most reinforce each other. The human security approach shares with human rights concerns for protecting freedoms, enhancing opportunities, but additionally puts focus on protection from critical and pervasive threats. As the Commission on Human Security puts it: ‘human security helps identify the rights at stake in a particular situation. And human rights help answer the question: How should human security be promoted? The notion of duties and obligations complements the recognition of the ethical and political importance of human security.’

The two frameworks share many similarities. Both are pursuant of human dignity, evoke
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morality and stress the universality of rights and their indivisibility. They also share content: human security threats in the broad definition – fear, want and indignities – find echo in the first (civil and political rights), second (economic and social rights) and third generation human rights (solidarity rights). If the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights included the broad gamut of rights, Cold War politics saw a division between first and second generation rights supported by the two sides of the bipolar divide. Their reconciliation wasn’t official until the Vienna Conference in 1993 which disclaimed any priority of rights by declaring that ‘All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated.’ It is therefore not a coincidence that the following year, the flip sides of these rights were coined as threats in the 1994 HDR which took as indivisible, universal and inter-related freedom from fear (first generation rights) and freedom from want (second generation rights). In subsequent years, the added definition of freedom from indignities was reminiscent of the third generation ‘solidarity’ rights related to self-determination, cultural rights, the right to peace, the right to a healthy environment, etc.

Yet, there are also differences between the two concepts: human rights are rooted in legal norms and international covenants and agreements. Human security raises alarms about threats and potentialities but does not have a normative/obligatory framework. As Gerd Oberleitner sums it up:

human rights and human security share the same concerns—people matter, sovereignty must know limits, common values are stronger than particular interests, and protection must go hand in hand with fulfilling needs and empower individuals. Yet, in addressing these concerns a (predominantly) normative framework meets with a (predominantly) political world view. Human rights entitle and oblige, whereas human security allows for prioritization.

At the context-specific level, human security helps identify the rights at stake in that particular context. In a simplified nutshell, and at the risk that critics from the human rights field would label this as old wine in new bottles, the human rights framework is the prerequisite and platform for human security, while human security is a condition for human rights to be fulfilled. If convergence is sought, Oberleitner hopes that ‘human rights and human security together may be able to (re)discover and convincingly demonstrate that security is a human right, too, and that human dignity must be rooted in both freedom and security.’

The broad human security approach hence combines the security, human development and human rights frameworks by adding elements to them. At the same time, it locates itself as a convergence of the three approaches. Visually, it can be located in the middle of the triangle shown in Figure 3.1.

The abuse of human security in international politics

Within international politics, the 1994 HDR was not the first to use the terms freedom from fear and freedom from want. They had already been introduced in the January 6, 1941 State of the Union Address of President Roosevelt, as part of his vision of a ‘world founded upon four essential human freedoms.’ Of Roosevelt’s plea for four freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear), the last two became the basis for the foundation of the UN. With the end of the Cold War, the UNDP HDR sought to reconcile these, coining a broad human security definition that would simultaneously encompass both freedom from fear and freedom from war.
The 1994 HDR characterized human security as ‘safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities.’ It also listed seven interconnected components or seven specific values that needed to be protected: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security. By 2003, the Commission on Human Security (CHS) in its report Human Security Now presented a broader definition:

To protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment ... It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations ... creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.

In the past two decades, the concept has seen various institutional lives in international politics, summarized in four stages:

1. The world debut in the 1994 HDR sought to seize the opportunity provided by the end of the Cold War, but was met with skepticism from the G7 during the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen for fear it would lead to violations of state sovereignty. It was subsequently adopted as a foreign policy tool first by Canada and then Japan.

2. Between 2001 and 2003, the concept was revived in the debate on the ‘responsibility to protect,’ spearheaded by the Canada supported International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), and in the discussions on the ‘responsibility for development’ initiated by the Japanese supported CHS.

3. From 2004 onwards, human security became a topic of reform agendas in the UN. In 2004, the EU adopted a Human Security Doctrine for Europe as a quest to promote its peace-building role. In the same year, the UN Secretary General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change acknowledged the broadened nature and inter-linkages of new
security threats in its report *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*. In 2005, Kofi Annan, without making specific reference to the term human security as it had not found consensus in the General Assembly (GA), used the three components of the broad definition as the thematic principles of his Report *In Larger Freedoms*. In the same year, the GA agreed to hold a debate to further define the concept in its Summit Outcome Document. 

4 In its current stage, the definitions, scope and ‘operationalization’ of the concept are being fine-tuned. A Human Security Unit was set up at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) tasked with disseminating the concept and managing the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, a Japanese initiative set up in 1999.  

The GA organized informal Thematic Debates among Member States in 2008 and 2011. The UN SG issued a Report in March 2010 (A/64/701) which was being revised for 2012, and a Special Advisor to the SG on Human Security was appointed, all with the support of the Japanese government. While the Unit at the UN has been pivotal in developing operational tools, as well as trainings for UN staff in different regions, the fact that the burden of dissemination has been centralized within one isolated unit, which also manages a dwindling Trust Fund, puts in question the genuine and durable adoption of the concept within UN agencies. Consensus on the definition may be reached by Member States in the GA, but it is highly possible that given the on-going fears of humanitarian or democracy-imposing interventions, growing fissure between Western countries and emerging powers, and turf politics between the security, development and human rights institutions, may result in consensus on a limited scope of a common minimum denominator rather than a full fledged broad definition.

Institutional politics aside, the adoption of various definitions by states and organizations in the past decade has been a telling sign of the on-going separation and prioritization of rights/securities/freedoms by political blocs, years after the end of the Cold War and the Vienna Conference which was supposed to have reconciled them. Canada’s and the EU’s approaches to human security have concentrated on fears and traditional threats, primarily stemming from violations to civil and political rights. If Canada sought to highlight its peacekeeping tradition, Japan, the proponent of the freedom from want approach, represented Asian (and emerging countries’) preferences for development concerns, which Japan promoted through checkbook diplomacy through its contribution to the UN Trust Fund and its Official Development Assistance (ODA) when the strong Yen allowed for it. If human security, in the original writing of Ul Haq, was supposed to be a convergence of the North/South differences, the subsequent definitional debates and its adoption as foreign policy tool by some states only served to reinforce the divergence.

A second misuse of the concept in international politics has been its adoption, hence relegation, as foreign and aid policy tools. Japan, Canada and the EU for example, by adopting the concept in their external affairs, treated the concept as a functional tool with the premise that the security of people in ‘other’ states/regions would trickle out to security at home. The 2004 Barcelona Report *Human Security Doctrine for Europe* presented by the LSE study group to Javier Solana as part of his quest for implementing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), for example, called on the EU to take on an ‘enlightened self-interest’ in its ‘collective responsibility to intervene’ in the ‘black holes’ outside of the Union which were generating insecurities for the citizens of the EU. Far from Ul Haq’s universal and cooperative understanding of global justice, human security as foreign policy tool became a ‘good’ that some better-off countries could provide for ‘others’. First it implied, falsely, that human insecurity was not a problem within industrialized societies, and the concept not adequate enough to be promoted as a domestic strategy. No country in the industrialized world, including Canada
and Japan, adopted the concept of human security as a principle for national policy-making. The EU doctrine also failed to talk about the pockets of poverty within its own countries, urban riots, the crisis of multi-culturalism and damning immigration policies. Second, the ‘enlightened self interest’ approach failed to take into consideration responsibility for causing many of the insecurities that lay in the periphery, ranging from imposing damning conditionality for aid, restrictive trade policies, selective interventions and forced regime changes, the imposition of democracy through military means, the sale of arms, etc. As Hampson puts it, ‘Human Security as the North’s development establishment understands it, is interventionist when it comes to the policies and practices of states in the South, but essentially laissez-faire and status quo regarding the role of the market and global governance arrangements.’

A third misuse, if not abuse, of the concept was the association of its narrow approach with the R2P doctrine which reinforced the North/South divide in international relations. No matter how much the R2P original report of the ICISS sought to put breaks on trigger-happy interventions, its association with the needy’s perspective meant that human security, when associated with R2P, has been seen in the South as yet another attempt by the West to impose its liberal values and political institutions on non-Western societies, an excuse for intervention in states’ domestic affairs and for conditionality on ODA. The main conceptual criticism to the R2P doctrine is that it stems from a narrow definition of human security which solely emphasizes extreme violations while ignoring other important fears and threats to everyday life. Among the seven categories of the 1994 HDR, only personal, political and community insecurities were considered as threats grave enough to the core of all human lives to justify interventions, while other threats such as poverty, famine, diseases and man-made environmental disasters did not warrant action by the international community. The broad approach to human security, instead of advocating the use of military force for humanitarian interventions, would argue for an a priori engagement by the international community to share responsibility for prevention rather than dealing with crises that are already underway.

The criteria set out by the R2P framework ultimately failed to separate the humanitarian from the political rationale, and consequently to alleviate the fears of the motives, i.e., the ‘ends’ of interventions as well as their means. An ethical, and not political, use of the norm and content of the broad human security would instead seek the end point against which an intervention has to be measured. In other words, actions are not considered right in themselves but are judged against their outcomes. The position echoes Noam Chomsky’s ‘simple truths’: ‘The first is that actions are evaluated in terms of the range of likely consequences. A second is the principle of universality; we apply to ourselves the same standards we apply to others, if not more stringent ones.’ Human security engagement, instead of R2P, would mean for example putting developing at the core of trade policies, upholding industrialized countries’ commitments to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by eliminating their own nuclear arsenals, setting a new code of conduct for arms sales to poorer nations, etc.

**Whither human security**

Despite the frequent characterization of the human security approach as too broad or ambitious, its essence is ethical: to prevent threats and mitigate their impacts when they materialize. Human security should not be reduced to lists or to a narrow definition, but remain flexible enough to allow for a deeper understanding of the root of insecurities and capacities to address them.

It may seem that in the policy world, terminology consensus would be necessary if a comprehensive human security programme is to be decided on and implemented. Yet, there
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is little chance that a globally satisfactory definition would be found to genuinely reconcile the concerns of the North and the South, East and West. Critics of the concept include both countries of the North, which would seek an agreement on enforcement mechanisms, and countries from the South or the emerging world, who mistrust the concept out of fear of new conditionality, unwarranted interventions and violations of state sovereignty. Yet, lack of consensual definitions in the political world, such as for example on terrorism, has not hampered action nor inhibited policy-making. Perhaps more important than a global agenda is the need to develop domestic human security policies, which no country has done so far.

Within academia, the variety of human security approaches is a necessity for critical debates. Deliberations help clarify a number of other open questions: the value of normative IR theory, inter-disciplinary convergences, what constitutes power and its legitimacy, the prerogative of states, what dignity means and how it can be measured.

Notes

1 See a summary of the variety of definitions used, critiques and counter-critiques in Chapters 1 and 2 of Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha Chenoy, Human Security: Concepts and Implications, London: Routledge, 2007. By January 24, 2012, Google Scholar gave 44,000 hits when Human Security was entered with brackets.
3 Peter Stroett, Human and Global Security: An Exploration of Terms, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p.3.
4 Ibid.
12 Ibid, p. 62
13 Gillian Youngs, ‘Feminist international relations: a contradiction in terms? Or: Why women and gender are essential to understanding the world we live in,’ International Affairs, 80, 1, 2004: 75–87.
17 See for example the Human Security Report Project produced by the Simon Fraser University.


27 Ibid.


31 Ibid, p. 488.

32 Ibid, p. 431.


34 Ibid, p. 435.


47 For a more complete comparative table, see Shahrbano Tadjbakhsh, ‘Human security,’ *Human Development Insights*, 17, New York: UNDP HDR Networks.


55 See, for example, the Handbook on *Human Security in Theory and Practice*, which this author helped produce in 2010, found at https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/HSU/Publications%20and%20Products/
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