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EMPOWERING THE HUMAN SECURITY DEBATE: MAKING IT COHERENT AND MEANINGFUL

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INTRODUCTION

The parameters of the global security debate have been flexing vociferously since the end of the Cold War permitted an expanded and more sophisticated agenda to be pursued. A new wave of academics and activists have begun to consider a broader set of conceptualisations distinct from the conspicuously realist-defined fields that dominated earlier thinking—although they were not the first.1 Amongst realists and others from different disciplines, a growing awareness emerged of the importance of considering non-conventional areas that represented security issues. The environment and water resources, amongst others, became hotly contested topics of discussion within the security studies fields once dominated by game theory, nuclear alliances and rocket counting.2

Despite ongoing realist entrenchment in and domination of a still relatively narrow conceptualisation of “security,” an increasingly recognised school of thought has attempted to redefine the security referent from the State/soldiery to the human being. The problem for both critics and proponents of the human security school has been potential incoherence due to the inevitable breadth and scope associated with the human security condition, leading to accusations of incoherence from more traditional perspectives. This article traces the evolution of the ideas in this debate and offers a way forward which, it is hoped, satisfies the dominant paradigm’s concerns in terms of a viable security conceptualisation. It then identifies visible and empirical security issues that directly affect a far greater proportion of the world’s population than those areas normally identified as security issues in the dominant Realist literature.
Apart from such “sectoral” security studies, another important movement has emerged that marks an important departure from traditional foci. This identifies the human being as the new security “referent,” or unit of analysis in traditional International Relations-speak. For example, Thomas asserts that “people, rather than states, are the subject of evidence-based analysis.” Another scholar, Sheehan, comments that:

For billions of ordinary human beings worldwide, the everyday struggle for survival...is dominated by issues of healthcare, poverty, human rights, environmental degradation and many other concerns that do not form part of the traditional security agenda.

Sheehan, whilst having expressed some doubts about expanding the concept too far, is one of the earlier scholars to express that “the calculated activities and policies of other human beings...human agency is fundamental to the definition of the security threat.... Within this definition, all traditional military threats can be encapsulated.” As we shall see below, this notion—not specifically attributable to Sheehan—lays at the core of the possible, in terms of policy change.

Other scholars, too, identify the need for a broader and deeper approach. Booth discussed the dangers of the traditional orthodoxy in terms of what security means. He fears “the consequences of perpetuating old orthodoxies in a fast-moving political landscape.” For Booth, “the price for old thinking about world security is paid, daily, in the death, disease, poverty and oppression of millions.” He argues that security is derived “from ways in which different political theories conceive the structures and processes of human society, the entities that make up social and political realities, the major threats to
privileged values and groups, the agents who can change things, and so on.”8

In other words, one’s view of the world, be it “realist” or “social constructivist,” will determine what one views as being “secure” or “insecure.”

Thakur enunciated this well when he commented that “security is an essentially contested concept because it is an intellectual and cognitive construct, not an objective fact.”9 It is a subjective problem that involves many realities depending on one’s ontology. The potential reconfiguration of the concept of security means that, for Booth and many others, the debate must be expanded; the alternative means no change in human security and international stability.

Perhaps one of the most important directions in which the debate has moved is to discuss the notion of structural causation of human insecurity, in ways not dissimilar to Galtung’s conceptualizations from 1969. Refining his contribution in 1985, Galtung determined that structural violence created settings within which individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever intending to do so, just performing their regular duties as a job defined in the structure…. Structural violence [is] unintended harm done to human beings…as a process, working slowly as the way misery in general, and hunger in particular, erode and finally kill human beings.10

This definition of structural violence ran into similar difficulties to the attempts to define human security in broad terms today. That intellectual challenge is echoed in today’s debate when scholars such as Booth claim that

human society in global perspective is shaped by ideas that are dangerous to its collective health…. It is revealed in the extent of structural oppression…it is apparent in the threats to the very environment that sustains all life; it is seen in the risks arising out of unintended consequences from developments in technology; and, as ever, it is experienced in the regular recourse to violence to settle political differences.11

Clearly defined or not, the concept of visible structures of violence populated by humans and directed by them mirrors to a significant degree Galtung’s notions of human-built structures that cause violence unintentionally. It is interesting to note that those who take the view that security
needs both broadening and deepening in line with Galtung’s beliefs are also subject to the same criticisms of it, whilst their critics neither recognize nor take seriously the extensive role of human agency in creating and perpetuating global structures of violence. For example, when urging a “broad research program” on human security, Kanti Bajpai suggests that we “focus on threats that can be traced back to identifiable human agents…not to structural…causes.” This contrasts with Bajpai’s earlier consideration of human security as meaning “direct and indirect threats to bodily safety and freedom” because, in many instances, such threats do indeed derive from structures. The argument seems to deny the role of human agency and activity in both creating structures and in populating them with action and beliefs.

Critics abound. Sheehan, although recognizing some degree of utility to the debate, feared that “if expanded too far, the concept would cease to have any clear meaning at all.” Sheehan recalls Walt’s argument that, “although a case could be made for including such things as pollution, disease and economic failure as security threats, this would represent an excessive expansion of the definition” (emphasis added). Walt also argued elsewhere that “defining the field [too broadly] would destroy its intellectual coherence and make it more difficult to devise solutions to any of these important problems.” And echoing this line, Stoett maintains that what is required is “more specificity, lest potentially progressive terms such as human security end up suffering from the affliction of conceptual promiscuity and thereby become devalued.” Or, in Freedman’s words, “once anything that generates anxiety or threatens the quality of life in some respect becomes labeled a ‘security problem’ the field risks losing all focus.”

Thus, the debate is both shifting and mired. It is shifting because scholars are recognizing that the debate can be expanded if we accept the notion that human agency can influence human security and insecurity outcomes. This marks a departure from the rigidity with which many realists viewed Galtung’s concerns about structures. But it is mired because that view is challenged by schools of thought that argue such an approach is reductionist and incoherent. Minimalists have recognized that conventional definitions are limiting and draw a line when it comes to broader debates enunciated by the likes of Booth. Maximalists are expanding the debate but seem to
have come unstuck on how to define what it is they are expressing. This polarity is reflected, perhaps not coincidentally, in the publication of two new reports for 2005 that assess security. One emphasizes “any form of political violence.” The other addresses a wider purview relating to the human security condition in a developmental framework and draws on the well-established Human Development Index (HDI) as its guide to human security—a far wider conceptualization that reflects maximalists interpretations of security and violence.

Increasingly, maximalists are pushing back the boundaries of the debate and developing more convincing analyses than before, and almost routinely identifying structural causes of human insecurity, insofar as specific institutions such as the global economy can reasonably be described as “institutions.” Furthermore, some scholars consider that to remain fixated with past models and defections and not to consider security from such a broader perspective would be irresponsible and foolhardy. Thakur, for example, remarked that “to insist on national security at the expense of human security would be to trivialize human security would be to trivialize ‘security’ in many real-world circumstances to the point of sterility, bereft of any practical meaning.” He notes also the presence of “structural coercion so severe as to turn human beings into chattels….” The essence of Thakur’s concern is far reaching. For him, “the reformulation of national security into human security… has profound consequences for how we see the world, how we organize our political affairs, and how we relate to fellow human beings.…” Thakur’s position reflects the concern of human security scholars and advocates, but also reflects the notion that structures that oppress are causing part of the human insecurity condition. He does not, however, propose any form of solution or approach to this crisis.

Proponents of the structures debate are increasing in number. Fen Osler Hampson contributes to the debate by noting that human security is determined in part by human-inhabited structures. He extends this to relate indirect violence to direct violence that influences more traditional
notions of international security. He argues that “the problems of human security are often context- and structurally-dependent... they are rooted in political and social structures and ecological conditions.” Whilst human security itself, he argues, is related directly to changeable social and political structures, there is a larger relationship, wherein “human security is critical to international security and that international order cannot rest solely on the sovereignty and viability of states...” Thus, while there is still a very significant and organized resistance to reconceptualizing violence and security towards a model made up of human structures, there is also an expanding school of thought that identifies causal relationships between human structures and human security.

MAKING A GOOD IDEA WORK? RETHINKING ASPECTS OF HUMAN SECURITY—A PROPOSAL

Based on this seemingly unshifting dichotomy of views caused by methodological inadequacies and potential incoherency, I propose another approach. In a sense, we appear to have come full circle: there are significant similarities between the idea of human security as expressed from the development studies/UN angle, on the one hand, and on the other, Galtung’s theory of structural violence and human psychosomatic potential. Indeed, Sabine Alkire defines the objective of human security as “being to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that advance human freedoms and human fulfillment,” a definition that reflects Galtungian dimensions of human development. But despite the probability of ambiguity and vagueness inherent in such a belief, there is little doubt that the direction of inquiry is drawing us towards social structures of violence. As Newman maintains, “exploring the relationship between human agency and structure in solutions to human security challenges is a pressing next step in the human security discourse.”

But Newman’s “pressing next step” seems to have been halted by methodological constraints and conceptual disagreements. Taylor Owen proposes a “threshold-based definition” that addresses the “paradox: the closer the concept [of human security] gets to its original conceptualization, focusing on all threats to the individual, the more difficult both human security theory and policy become.” Owen argues that we can
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use a threshold-based conceptualization, “one that limits threats by their severity rather than their cause, allows all possible harms to be considered, but selectively limits those that at any time are prioritized with the ‘security’ label.” He notes that the early UNDP philosophy was “not to securitize everything, but to shift attention away from Cold War threats to what was actually killing people… If human security could cover the most basic threats, development would then address societal well-being” (emphasis added).28

Further to this, rather than falling into the trap of arbitrarily selecting a particular category of vulnerable people (e.g., economically threatened), all seven categories would be included, but would be measured by the severity with which threat was experienced. Owen determines that the key to the definitional and conceptual problem lies in the following classification: “human security is the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive, economic, food, health, personal and political threats.”29 This may be seen as the start of a viable approach and direction, but it is incomplete in terms of threats (for example, cultural/religious belief is not considered but causes thousands of clearly preventable deaths yearly around the world by sanctioning honor killings or outlawing legally-institutionalized and sanctioned abortion). Furthermore, “the vital core of all human lives,” whilst passionate and moral, also lacks clarity and unambiguous definition.

Liotta challenged Owen’s “threshold” concept and identified the issue of “creeping vulnerability” in human security.30 Liotta is concerned to again widen the debate to issues such as unsustainable urbanization in part of the developing world. But once more, no reference is made to the roles of human agency in increasing that vulnerability/insecurity. Liotta, rather than challenging institutionalized human influences on the creation of human vulnerability or insecurity, seeks greater input of already extant forces. These include “sustainable development” and “long-term investment strategies”—no suggestion is made that the very forces of contemporary, extant strategic thinking and emphasis on the present development approach may aggravate, rather than offset and reduce, human insecurity. Liotta is far from wrong to be concerned with his sectoral classifications of vulnerability, but his proposals differ significantly from the argument I shall make that involves identifying the extent of human causation in the creation of insecurity and vulnerability.
In the continuing search for a conceptualization of human security, King and Murray articulated in 2001 what they believed would be a “simple, rigorous, and measurable definition of human security.” This was to be “the number of years of future life spent outside a state of ‘generalized poverty’ [which] occurs when an individual falls below the threshold of any key domain of human well-being.”

The problem with this begins with the assumption of “simplicity.” If a “simple” solution existed, it would presumably have been identified already. It was almost certainly these authors’ honest intentions to provide answers for the millions of humans Franz Fanon movingly described as “the wretched of the Earth.”

However, this approach is too narrow, and identifies only poverty as a determinant of human security; nor does it invite debate on the human forces that lay behind the creation of poverty. Further, it does not seem to consider lethality, as the definition was developed to consider numbers of years of life before natural death. This neglects the terrible physical violence attendant in much human insecurity. Finally, the methodology is firmly quantitative in assessing numbers of years of life outside poverty, resulting in complex mathematical formulae that cannot consider the qualitative influence of social structures of violence. Thus, in line with other approaches, King and Murray have only identified one sector of human security, and there is no attempt to isolate and identify human agency to explain poverty creation or wealth destruction.

The longer this debate meanders around methodological inexactitudes and definitional barriers, the longer humans globally will be insecure and vulnerable to violent global forces that, whilst not intending to administer harm, do so globally on a daily basis. The debate is in trouble and so are the humans that it represents. To this end, I propose the following. First, because there is no firm agreement on what constitutes human security, I suggest that the subject is approached from the other side—that is, what constitutes human insecurity. This I shall analytically delimit and reconsider.
to represent avoidable civilian deaths, global in reach, which are caused by changeable human built social, political, economic, cultural or belief structures, created, inhabited and operated by other civilians whose work or conduct, indirectly and directly, unintentionally, unnecessarily and avoidably causes needless mortality around the globe. The approach delimits around deaths: a necessarily—for the moment—narrowing definition of an extensive concept that may lead to broader conceptualizations but expands considerably into the role of human causation in these processes. Identifying the scale of the preventable severity involved will have obvious policy ramifications, and it also reflects the early philosophy of the UN Development Report that drove the human security debate from 1994 (see note above). And death, of course, is the ultimate condition of human insecurity and therefore a reasonable position from which to start. But perhaps the most important contribution this approach can make is that it permit identifying unintentional human action as causes of global civilian deaths on a colossal, unacceptable and preventable scale; the clear implication is that if human insecurity is a consequence of human behavior, that behavior can be re-evaluated and influenced to enhance policy making regarding improvements for human security. Thus, whilst narrowing the definition to revolve around deaths, the understanding of human security is simultaneously expanded to include human agency and indirect violence. As a consequence, policy approaches can be invoked from such a reconceptualization, marking a shift from the relative inertia of the recent debate.

This approach identifies socio-civil, human-originated and -populated institutions, processes, beliefs and cultures that reflect Galtung’s conceptualization of violence as the main determinants of human insecurity and the

The most important contribution this approach can make is allowing identification of unintentional human actions as causes of death on an unacceptable and preventable scale. The implication is that if human insecurity is a consequence of human behavior, then that behavior can be evaluated for policy making that improves human security.
main cause of avoidable civilian death in the majority world. However, unlike Galtung’s approach, it is not overextended into the realization of full human psychosomatic potential. Furthermore, it overcomes Paris’s legitimate concerns regarding the value-laden orientation of writers such as Bajpai, and King and Murray. All three authors identify particular areas of concern that Paris criticizes on the grounds that the authors “favor certain values as representative of human security without offering a clear justification for doing so.”

This approach identifies mortality as a determinant of human security; perhaps not entirely value free but few would disagree that such mass avoidable deaths are better challenged than ignored and perpetuated. Thus, whilst the approach may be criticized for narrowness in defining human insecurity as avoidable death, it offers breadth by examining civil human agency as the cause of such unnecessary lethality. The referent is human mortality, but the causation, rather than issues such as environmental degradation or poverty, is identified in human participation in contributing to deaths as a consequence of, for example, ecocide or debt. This reflects in part Paris’s proposal that human security can:

serve as a label for a broad category of research in the field of security studies that is primarily concerned with non-military threats to the safety of societies, groups and individuals, in contrast to more traditional approaches to security studies that focus on protecting states form external threats.

This approach, then, accepts that there is justification for a more maximalist perspective of human security, but also seeks to energize the debate with a positivist and empirical approach to defining limits. This marks a meaningful departure in the debate on definitions, and a positive and valid response to the problem of coherence in breadth. Furthermore, the reversal of approach—towards identifying human insecurity as opposed to human security—opens up new methodologies and categories for consideration.
Furthermore, once initial research and argument is made on the basis of non-military avoidable mortality, the next stage of this agenda proposes drawing on sources such as the World Health Organization Annual Reports to identify another element of human-influenced and avoidable vulnerability—human insecurity—in the form of such markers as, amongst others, those children not immunized against preventable diseases when domestic and international public policy choices could otherwise facilitate such provision. It might also consider the same report’s identification of “probability of dying” based on factors and indicators of human omission or activity in increasing mortality likelihood. And it might also then measure and identify the extent of physical damage to women globally from non-outlawed and outlawed domestic violence.

If the human security debate remains static over definitions, then the world will continue to face “death, disease, poverty and oppression of millions.” This security debate is not merely an academic one; it is very real in terms of what can be changed by accepting human agency and direction in human insecurity.

Notes


4. Thomas, op. cit., 2004, p.353. Rothschild has made the argument that traditional Liberal thought placed the human as the central security referent; but this applies more in the “Liberal” world that has been sufficiently well developed.


8. Ibid., p.13.


14. Ibid.


21. Ibid., p.347.

22. Ibid., p.348.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., p.383.


32. I use this term here because Fanon was questioning the most basic assumptions of colonialism, in the same way as this approach hopes to question some of the most basic assumptions made about the causes of so many unnecessary deaths. See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 1990, first published 1961. See also Franz Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, London: Earthscan, 1989.


34. Buzan et al, op. cit., reject the view that social constitution permits change.


36. Ibid., p.96.


References


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