

# Is everything a security issue?

## Abstract:

The title of this essay suggests a growing dissatisfaction with the inclusion of more and more issues into contemporary security studies. We have entered an era of political science where traditional security studies have been challenged by a much broader concept, which has come to be known as Human Security, examining the role of non-traditional threats on the security of individuals.

In this essay, I will firstly look at the traditional concept of security and examine its criticisms. I will then introduce the notion of Human security and consider the, in my view, most important non-traditional additions to security, namely environmental degradation, poverty and health care. I will lastly consider the criticisms of a broader notion of security before arguing that extending security to include the aforementioned threats is necessary to address adequately the root causes of global insecurity, which should be the basis of any security studies.

Following the end of the Cold War and the end of certainty that came with it, many academics saw security as essentially under-conceptualised (Hough, 2004). Many criticised the orthodox security concept for its realist view, which states that the nation-state acts as referent object of security and that their motivation is the appropriation of military and economic power, rather than the pursuit of ideals or ethics. Thus, policies within this state centric view are intended to meet the requirements of nation states, as well as its institutions and values, rather than the interests of individuals or mankind as a whole.

Even today, some commentators still argue that military threats are bigger than ever in the post Cold War era, exempt from the military balance of power, which, for decades, had ensured state and individual security (Hough, 2004). However, even if these threats were bigger nowadays, they certainly are not the only menace to the lives of people all around the world. Environmental destruction, poverty, famines and diseases are huge threats to the lives of millions of people all around the world. Thus, a new concept of security had to be developed.

This however proved to be quite difficult, because although few today actually defend the traditional, narrow, state-centric definition of security, there is no real consensus on what a more broadly constructed conception should look like (Buzan, 1991).

Today, most consider security from a global perspective rather than only from the perspective of individual nations and the idea of common security. More recently, analysts, following the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 Human Development Report and their notion of security as "freedom from fear and want" (Hough, 2004), have settled on the phrase "human security" to emphasise the people-centred aspect of these efforts.

Thus, human security takes the individual as primary referent and concentrates on how to best protect them. Emphasis is put on bringing about the well-being of individuals and responding to the people's needs in dealing with sources of threats. Furthermore, human security studies aims to not only find means to protect the nation from external aggression, but also to safeguard it from a range of menaces, such as environmental pollution, infectious diseases and economic deprivation.

Having looked at the need to introduce a new concept of security, I will now examine the, in my view, most important challenges to the individual's security today, namely the environment, poverty and health-care.

The threat caused by environmental degradation seems less clear-cut and direct than most other dangers to human life. Thus, the potential threat of global warming and ozone depletion appears far-off,

when compared to more imminent threats, such as natural disasters and military or terrorist attacks (Hough, 2004). However, the negative modifications in environmental conditions heighten peoples' vulnerability to other threats, such as disease, and are thus largely an indirect threat to human security. Hence, some studies have revealed that close to a third of deaths related to diseases world-wide have some environmental causes, such as air or water pollution (Hough, 2004). Furthermore, human induced environmental degradation, and the resulting scarcity of resources, can be the cause of political instability and conflict (Terriff, 1999).

In major developed countries, one of the major threats is air pollution, caused by vehicles, factories and power plants, which can seriously damage people's health. Developing countries, on the other hand, mostly face the threat of scarce water resources, as well as water pollution. Thus, for example, a recent study has revealed that close to 2 million children each year die from diarrhoea, largely because of the contamination of their drinking water and the lack of sanitation in developing countries (*The Economist*, November 11, 2006). Water scarcity is also increasingly becoming a factor in ethnic conflicts and political friction.

The dilemma for most less developed countries, however, is that they often cannot compromise their economic development and security by improving environmental standards. What is needed instead is a "sustainable development" (Hough, 2004) to solve the "economic-environmental paradox" (Hough, 2004), whereby the richer countries of the global North take the initiative in implementing expensive anti-pollution processes, while at the same time recognising that the global South is in need of more time. Thus, environmental issues are aggravated by poverty and underdevelopment, which are both serious threats to the individual's security as well.

Poverty is often regarded as most significant threat to life, both directly, through famine and hunger, and indirectly, because it heightens vulnerability to other threats by creating unfavourable structural conditions. Thus poverty can kill directly in huge numbers when people are unable to secure sufficient food, through lack of economic means, and it is the underlying cause of human death by other security threats as it renders people more defenceless through lack of food, shelter, education and health care. Poverty then, as I understand it, is not simply a lack of material possessions, but, more general, the deprivation of any basic capabilities (see for example King & Murray, 2001).

The perhaps most acute and immediate economic threat is famine. Famines are mostly a result of a combination of both natural and political factors. Some even argue that starvations are ultimately man-made phenomena since they are sometimes politically motivated and almost always politically avoidable

and some even allege wilful exploitation by the 'North' (Hough, 2004). inadequate political responses of governments

Food security, then, would require that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food. It seems though that the overall accessibility of food is not the problem, but rather poor distribution and a lack of the economic means to purchase food. The key to solving the issue is to tackle the problems relating to access to resources, employment and secure revenue.

Furthermore, a malnourished population is generally more susceptible to diseases, making concerns about health care closely related to the issue of poverty, especially in third world countries.

The notion of health security, then, seeks to ensure protection from major diseases and unhealthy lifestyles. Certainly one of the most pressing issues in this context is that of AIDS and its seemingly unstoppable spread around the world. With an estimated 40 million people now living with AIDS worldwide, the disease claims around 3 million lives each year (UNAIDS, 2006), a third of which are occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, retarding economic growth and destroying human capital. Today, AIDS represents a greater threat to life than armed conflict for most sub-Saharan Africans (Hough, 2004). Given a combination of bad nutrition, health care and lack of medicine in these developing countries, a large number of people is, and will be, falling victim to AIDS. They will not only be incapable of working, but will also require significant medical care, making a collapse of economies and societies in the region increasingly likely.

However, major epidemics and pandemics of diseases are only dramatic periodic escalations of underlying and persistent threats (Hough, 2004). Organisations like the WHO are desperately needed to intervene, by providing advice and setting technical standards for countries too poor to have suitable medical regulators. Furthermore, pandemic diseases such as the avian flu or the HI virus, do not limit themselves to certain countries. Thus, only concerted global action can manage these effectively ("the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security *and is dependent upon the fullest co-operation of individuals and States*" (WHO report, as cited in Hough, 2004, emphasis added)).

Besides the abovementioned non-traditional threats to security, some proponents of human security also include various other issues, such as natural disasters, road accidents or organized crime. Critics of the concept of Human Security however argue that, if all the components of well-being are included, the term will become essentially meaningless, as it permits the inclusion of practically everything that affects any larger group of individuals adversely (Terriff, 1999). Human Security has also been criticised for being

little more than a way for activists to promote certain causes, and that the term is impractical, as it does not further the understanding of the meaning of security or help decision makers to formulate good policies.

Furthermore, human security could be regarded as mere polemics, intended to provoke greater discussions, both on a political and public level, and more policy initiatives in these areas. One of the major reasons for including non-traditional challenges into security considerations is the hunt by analysts for new issues and threats to fill the void left by the end of the Cold War (Terriff, 1999). Equally, contributions to global campaigns against AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis are being criticised for having as only aim the political stabilisation of certain strategically important African countries, while the enhancement of human security is only a welcomed side-effect. Thus, securitisation of infectious diseases, as well as that of environmental and economic issues, can be seen as merely considering the implications of these problems for state security rather than the general security of individuals, which implies that some human security studies ultimately follow the logic of traditional security studies.

While I partly agree that widening the definition of security could render the concept redundant by making it too all-encompassing and diluting the important task of analysing military threats and interstate conflicts (Walt as cited in Hough, 2004), I would not go as far as saying that threats are only what the traditional security studies say they are (Krause & Williams, 1997). I am convinced that the aforementioned issues need to be put onto the security agenda for them to be given any attention and especially some priority over other concerns. Often, traditional security policies effectively concealed some of the most fundamental human needs when merely focusing on security in terms of aspirations to achieve national interests, and thus failed to protect the individuals that make up the state.

To conclude, I am clearly disagreeing with both the theses that security is whatever we make it (Booth, as cited in Krause & Williams, 1997) and that security should have as only referent the nation state. Contrary to most critics, I think, it is in fact the narrow, not the broad, notion of national interests and security that limit the ability to deal with security threats, which, nowadays, transcend particular states and peoples. On the other hand, the concept of security should not try to explain every harmful aspect of human reality.

I have argued that human security studies represent a necessary extension of the traditional security concept, seeing that issues such as the environmental destruction, poverty and health care are a major threat to the lives of many people. Some commentators have, perhaps even rightly, argued that military threats are bigger than ever in the post Cold War era, exempt from the military balance of power, which, for decades,

had ensured state and individual security. However, even if these threats were bigger nowadays, they certainly are not the only menace to the lives of people all around the world, especially since terrorism has killed fewer than 1000 people per year so far, seems almost harmless, when compared to the aforementioned death toll of AIDS. Still, I do believe that traditional studies of threat and the use of military force should retain an essential place in critical security studies.

However, I think, it should be obvious that poverty, inequalities, diseases and environmental degradation are inextricably linked concepts when examining the roots of human (in-) security.

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