Reflections on the Concept of Human Security and its Increasing Relevance to International Relations Today

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For the greater part of the last four centuries since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, international relations has concerned itself with the protection of states from external threats. That the focus has been the security of nation-states rather than the security of the individual is evident in the opening words of the United Nations Charter signed in 1945, which pledges “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. With the increasing interdependence of nation-states in a post-cold war world and the impact of globalization, among other factors, the traditional model of security has come under closer scrutiny and re-examination. This has been particularly so since 1994 when the first clear definition of human security by the Bangladeshi economist Mahbub ul Haq was made in his UN Human Development Report.

Part of the reason for the renewed discussion of human security has undoubtedly been the terrorist attacks of 9/11. There have also been the terrorist bombings in Indonesia in 2002, 2003 and 2005, SARS in 2003, the tsunami in 2004 and the earlier Asian financial crisis between 1997 and 1998. Each of these events is relevant to the discussion on the state of human security, or rather insecurity, it would seem, because
they all constitute threats toward human security. In addition, they are all globalised threats, unpredictable (although the financial crisis may have been predicted somewhat), contagious in that they each affected social, political, financial etc spheres, and all have had to be managed with the cooperation of international partners. These phenomena lead us to believe that our world is becoming less secure, although we must remember that with these added threats come also added opportunities for dealing with them in ways hitherto untied. As Amartya Sen said (2000), “there is an enhanced possibility in the contemporary world to put our efforts and understanding together to achieve a better coordinated resistance to the forces that make human survival so insecure.”

But are these real or perceived threats? Interestingly enough, there exists data suggesting that the latter may be the case. According to the Human Security Report 2005 (which analyses data on the incidence and intensity of violence around the world), most forms of political violence have declined significantly since the end of the Cold War due to the huge upsurge of conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding activities that were spearheaded by the United Nations in its aftermath. The Report found that since the end of the Cold War, armed conflicts have increasingly taken place within, and not between states.

We could ask ourselves the question of whether it matters where violence occurs, or if indeed a threat is merely perceived and not real. However, this would miss the whole point of the human security perspective, since proponents of the human security framework address, quite rightly, all threats affecting human beings, which is to say that they must address these threats whether they are real or perceived. It is about freedom from the fear of violence, which means it may be just a perceived threat, as well as freedom from actual violence. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's declaration in 2000 that the twin goals of the UN Millennium Summit were the “freedom from want and freedom from fear” already encompasses both the incidence and perception of threats and violence.

We now find ourselves thrust into a world of extreme fears, contrasts, countless opportunities and formidable challenges. This is a world quite different from the one in which the Millennium Summit Goals were declared, let alone compared to the world before the UN was born. Yet the question is, how equipped are we to handle these challenges of today when we are still grappling with trying to solve the problems of

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yesterday? Amid the cry of desperate voices calling out for peace and ceasefire in the many areas of conflict around the world, must we finally announce, in capitulation, that international relations, that diplomacy, are well and truly dead? For the failure to truly solve our problems, among other things, to stop the senseless killings more often than not of women and children, is indeed a failure of diplomacy. We must ask ourselves the question, why is this so?

Part of the answer lies in the saying that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The fact is that modern international relations remains stubbornly resistant to change. The so-called 'custodians of peace' in 1945 have stayed at the helm, and thus France and the United Kingdom still retain the veto even though their share of economic and political contribution has dwindled enormously. It is interesting that, at the systemic level, international political life and the science of physics seem to share the same law of inertia, so that without any outside impetus, it trucks along at its own pace, of its own accord, as it were, unless another force is impressed upon it from outside. The correction of Aristotle by later philosophers, culminating in Einstein, is in a way correct of international relations as well—a thing in motion tends to stay in motion, and not come to rest, as the older philosopher had argued. And why should things change? Great powers have no interest in changing a system with which their superiority is assured.

Yet things are slowly changing. Traditional security policy emphasizes military means for reducing the risks of war and for prevailing if deterrence fails. With the increasingly loud voice of human security proponents, we now hear that, while not eschewing the use of force, there is more often now greater focus upon non-coercive approaches ranging from preventive diplomacy, conflict management and post-conflict peacebuilding. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in 2005: “Human security privileges people over states, reconciliation over revenge, diplomacy over deterrence, and multilateral engagement over coercive unilateralism. Over the past 30 years the collapse of some 60 dictatorships has freed countless millions of people from repressive rule. The number of democracies has soared, interstate wars have become increasingly rare, and all wars have become less deadly”.3

As the 2005 Report shows, cooperative multilateral security strategies are far more effective than the UN’s critics would allow. However, consider what co-chairperson of the Commission on Human Security (CHS), Sadako Ogata had to say earlier in the

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3 Ibid., Foreword.
final report of the CHS (2003); “Internal conflicts have overtaken interstate wars as the major threats to international peace and security. The globalization process has deeply transformed relationships between and within states. Although more people than ever have access to information and essential social goods, the gaps between rich and poor countries—and between wealthy and destitute people—have never been greater than today. The exclusion and deprivation of whole communities of people from the benefits of development naturally contribute to the tensions, violence and conflict within countries.”

It turns out that although people are more the current focus of international relations rather than states, there is much or even more to fear now than ever before. And this fear is more often than not generated from happenings within states rather than outside of them— it seems a paradox that while most attention in the West focuses on international terrorism, domestic terrorism may truly be far more deadly. Many more people die from domestic than international terrorism. Of course, there is still no consensus, least of all from the UN on how terrorism should be defined. Still, it may be more useful to reflect on what is happening domestically rather than internationally; to notice perhaps, the proverbial elephant under one’s own nose rather than the mosquito yonder.

Human security proponents thus force us to look closer to home, to what is happening to a state’s own people and to ourselves. A nation’s state of security or insecurity then emanates outwards but starts always from the individual, moving on to the group, the nation and finally the international arena. This is in contrast to the previous practice which moved in the opposite direction, namely, from a focus on the security of nations to the security of groups and only then of individuals; security was extended downwards from nations to individuals. It has now begun to diffuse upwards from the human being to the nation, etc, so that the security of nations can now enjoy a symbiotic relationship with that of the security of the international system in which both depend on one another.

This, in a sense, is a landmark, for with the relevance of the issue of human security, international relations has slowly evolved into the study of problems which relate not only to sovereign states but, equally, to problems which plague the equally sovereign individual. I say ‘sovereign’ individual because, like a nation-state, the individual is also the repository of certain rights. In fact, one may say that the individual is more deserving in a sense to the claim of sovereignty, since his rights are inalienable whereas those of

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a nation-state depend on the government by which it is governed or, literally, on its sovereign, who can 'give' or 'take away' the nation's rights.

It is thus necessary to carefully work out the exact relationship between human security and state security. The only way to do this is to rethink existing organizational mandates and mechanisms, both of national as well as international organizations, which are still locked in old patterns of action and draw heavily from worn-out state security assumptions.

We must therefore recognize at the outset that the international relations of today is, in a very fundamental sense, grappling with a hierarchy of security concerns, where there is constant, albeit often latent, tension between the needs of the state on the one hand and those of the individual on the other. The logical corollary to this fact is the fear that the security of states and thus their very sovereignty may be undermined by an emphasis on the security of the individual, with the resulting fear for international peace and security. This fear is in fact largely responsible for preventing the human security discussion over the past decade from reaching levels significant enough to warrant real action on the part of the world's key players. It has been expressed that there exists almost a "competition" between state and individual security. I think this is inaccurate because a competition presupposes a priori that there are three things: a judge, a winner and a loser. When Sadako Ogata declared that states should practice "responsible sovereignty" the statement becomes merely an idealistic utterance, presupposing some gentle benevolence on the part of the power-wielding state, for who will adjudicate? Who will decide who wins and who loses? Indeed, why should there be a winner-take-all when there could be two winners sharing everything? In fact, the latter is the main reward and pull of multilateralism, with its offer of win-win solutions to problems. Yet still— who will adjudicate?

Unfortunately, it is the reality of the world of international relations, changed as it is, that the success of the human security, human rights and human development frameworks still depends heavily on the compliance and cooperation of governments. There is at present no institutional body or mechanism that can force governments to abide by existing frameworks. In a sense, the only thing constituting a push to governments is the current international climate that is in favour of multilateralism and which consequently challenges the return by some governments to unilateralism.

5 Ibid.
In recent years there has been more and more discussion on human security and consequently on how states can encourage the security and development of those individuals residing in them, and on ways of doing so which do not impinge upon state sovereignty. Canada, Japan and Norway are leaders in the discussion, having even incorporated human security into their foreign policy frameworks. Japan's universities have also recently enjoyed a healthy debate on the topic, even offering higher degrees in human security studies. Of course, this may in part have to do with Japan's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, but still, the trend is encouraging. What we are seeing is a shift back to placing the human being at the centre of discussions on development rather than taking him purely as a means to another goal, namely, that of economic development. If anything, it is state security which should be viewed as being a means for providing security for people. We in ASEAN also have seen a shift from complete non-interference toward a softer approach, toward a 'caring, sharing society', as the future ASEAN Charter intends. So the international relations of today has become increasingly people-centred rather than purely state-centred.

The fact that international relations today has become people-centric holds certain implications. For one thing, in order to make human security an effective agenda, what is truly needed first is a serious and systemic institutional reform. The manner in which this may be carried out must allow for a much higher role for civil society groups and NGOs as well as governments themselves. How these interact with one another and how much power or 'sovereignty' is shared must be worked out by respective governments in such a way that these non-governmental actors are not relegated to becoming extended arms of the government and thus to promoting human security only in marginal ways. Without some sort of charter to guide such organizations or actors, the link between human security, governance and development becomes lost. In order for there to be progress in the human security agenda there needs first to be parallel progress on institutional and procedural reforms.

The UN is one of the best places to start this. Here, instead of tackling the hardened and wisened phalanx of the old frontline members, the best strategy is to target new UN members—once new members are voted into the UN Security Council, they should also begin to embrace human security as an ethically explicit policy. Otherwise, international relations and the diplomacy of today would seem to be, literally, nothing more than 'lying in state'. The humour of this statement does nevertheless point to the utter truth that it admits, especially in the world of today. As I said earlier, the stubbornness of the system of international relations toward change, especially of itself, is a stumbling block that must be recognized and overcome.
Here I would like to focus a moment on the very word ‘international relations’. In light of our previous discussion, the word itself seems to be a bit of an anomaly, for what we are dealing with today is not so much just relations between nations and governments but, more and more, relations between supranational entities and vast international business conglomerates. The EU, maybe even ASEAN, is in the first category, while big transnational corporations and NGO’s fall into the second. And make no mistake of it—the latter category of ‘powers’ have come to be, in our modern world, the more formidable. Witness, for example, the power of a handful of transnational corporations and NGO’s to own and thus control the entire world of the media. The power of the media in shaping not just public opinion but also public and even foreign policy can only be but acknowledged. This power can and has easily been manipulated and misused, so much so that we can agree with one American philosopher at the turn of the 20th century, who wrote that, “those in possession of absolute power can not only prophesy and make their prophesies come true, but they can also lie and make their lies come true”.

Therefore, the diplomat of today has received a new portfolio of handling not just relations between states but also between companies and supra-state bodies, as well as negotiating the minefield that is the modern media. All this is, to say the least, a daunting task. But it also means that the task of diplomacy now falls not only on the shoulders of the diplomat and statesman but on all of us. It is in recognition of this fact that America is one nation at the forefront of the new diplomacy called ‘public diplomacy’ to distinguish it from the ‘private’ diplomacy done only by practitioners in the past.

But it also means that we are all, in some way or another guilty when diplomacy fails. What we do, how we behave, at home, at work, in business, in politics, will all reflect itself to others far and wide in this transparent globalised world we now live in, so that, in a sense, there is nowhere left to hide. It is America, again, which, sensing the repercussions of this fact, has devised a method to harness this phenomena and use it to its own advantage—hence the ‘transformational diplomacy’ of its Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In her view, change begins at the very grassroots so that, by going from one formerly hostile country to the next, one can push one’s own agenda by seeping into the very mindset of the locals through the guise of building schools, offering development aid, and other such ostensibly benign tactics. In Rice’s words, this diplomacy seeks to “move from paternity to partnership”. Hence, the interest of the West in the East, the recent shift of focus to countries of the Southeast Asian region, in an effort to forge partnerships with us on all fronts. There is nothing wrong with this, in forging partnerships. But only if it suits us, and let us not allow ourselves to become partners in crime.
The world of politics and international relations lives by some very harsh rules. Napoleon is said to have declared, “never retreat, never retract…never admit a mistake”. This mode of thinking is clearly evident in the way countries of the world relate to one another today—it is most often a scenario of sheer arrogance. It comes as no surprise that the words “for diplomacy to be effective, words must be credible—and no one can now doubt the word of America” were spoken by George W. Bush, self-appointed ‘leader of the free world’. That nation has allowed one other nation to turn the Holocaust in upon itself, so that it is now Zionism that truly means a superiority of that race over all others, so that their blood and flesh, ounce for ounce and pound for pound, is more valuable than any other, so that their people may choose to live a life of security, while others, even the lives of innocent children, are destined to be frozen in the ground or in the morgue. Such is the problem of the recalcitrance of modern international relations to change.

We have said that the current focus of international relations has been the individual, in particular, the protection of the individual. But the question arises: protection from what? The fact that this question has not received a clear answer has been in part responsible for the concept of human security having a limited utility all this while for policy analysis. It has not helped that neither the oft-cited Human Development Report of 1994 nor Kofi Annan’s call at the 2000 Millennium Summit to establish “freedom from want and freedom from fear” has been particularly specific in terms of delineating the precise nature of the threats that wreak havoc upon individuals. Again, neither the first report of the Commission on Human Security (CHS), established in 2001 in response to the Millennium Summit goals, nor its final report of 2003 mentioned earlier outlined a detailed yet comprehensive response to the call of the Secretary General although the CHS’s concept does make the vital link between human security, human rights and human development. It is links such as this that can guide policy formulation and form a useful basis for working towards peace and social justice. The affirmation by mainstream organizations such as the UN can certainly help point other organizations and governments in the right direction.

It is important to emphasize here that the conceptual integration of human rights, human security and human development should not devalue the intrinsic importance of human rights and economic justice, otherwise a repressive regime like Myanmar, for example, would then be able to claim that it champions human security simply because it has built a certain number of bridges or because its people have had their basic needs met. This would have the unwanted opposite effect of sidelining human rights altogether as we have seen in the case of Myanmar which holds the dubious distinction
of being the most conflict-prone country in the world, according to data analysed between the years 1946 and 2003, with over 200 years of conflict to its credit. National and international actors must not use the human security concept as a means for avoiding the human rights system. The aim is for something deeper, for a secure society that is also a just society.

The emphasis on protection implies recognition of the need for respect for the individual, which in turn does justice to the human being and thus society at large. In this way human beings are ends in themselves and not just means to another purely instrumental objective like economic growth or state rights. It is with this in mind that proposals have arisen to have a human security index, much like the human development index, measuring “years lived outside a state of generalized poverty” in an effort to shift the focus to those other factors that bear upon an individual’s security, like political freedom and democracy. These are good efforts to operationalise human security and move it away from the domain of the purely conceptual to that of the actual.

We can reflect upon our altered security environments in today’s world and conclude that constructive advances in the discussion of human security must be made in three domains: the empirical, by recognizing the nature of security threats as they actually occur today; institutional, at both national and supra-national and international levels; and finally, the analytical, most importantly, arriving at a useful understanding or at least agreement on an acceptable hierarchy of securities. As Amartya Sen says, “The basically normative nature of the concept of human rights leaves open the question of which particular freedoms are crucial enough to count as human rights that society should acknowledge, safeguard and promote. This is where human security can make a significant contribution by identifying the importance of freedom from basic insecurities—new and old.”

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REFERENCES


