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Human Security:  
A Shotgun Approach to  
Alleviating Human Misery?



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Lloyd Axworthy penned an eloquent and thought-provoking essay in these pages about the necessity and utility of extending the concept of security “beyond the level of the state and toward individual human beings.”<sup>1</sup> Axworthy is not alone in making this plea: scholars have been pushing the conceptual frontiers of the term ever since the Brandt Commission’s report *Common Security* was published in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s, foundations have poured millions into supporting works that broaden the notion of security. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been appropriating the security discourse to advance their humanitarian activities. However, when such a plea comes from an activist former minister of foreign affairs, who presumably acted on these premises while in office, it deserves special attention and reflection.

Before the 1980s, the notion of national security was thought to be the preserve of states. It referred to the ability of states to defend themselves against encroachments on their territorial integrity and political sovereignty. Issues of military power, strategy, and deterrence therefore loomed large. Since then, the notion of security has been progressively broadened to incorporate such areas as economic privation, environmental degradation, and gender discrimination. In other words, scholars and policymakers have anointed such issues as “security” issues. In the parlance of the new security studies, when issue areas are so anointed they become “securitized.” The purpose of securitizing certain issues, while leaving others alone, is obvious. Once an issue like drug trafficking is securitized, its status in the policy hierarchy changes. It becomes an urgent issue, worthy of special attention, resources, and fast-track or immediate amelioration or resolution, perhaps even by military means.

By the 1990s, the “broadeners” had won: analysts who wanted to limit the notion of security studies to military security issues basically surrendered and retreated to strategic studies as the branch of international relations devoted to the analysis of military security. Having securitized all the likely nonmilitary candidates, the next step seemed almost natural and inevitable: Why not securitize the individual human being? After all, the reason for labeling the environment as a security issue is based on the threat its destruction poses to human beings. In the final analysis, it is the safety and well-being of individuals—their security—that is the object of our concern. It is natural to carry the extension of the notion of security to its logical conclusion: human beings are indeed the ultimate referent of security. The good intentions behind this move to securitize human beings cannot be gainsaid, and the potential benefits have been mentioned above.

However, it is also necessary to point out the potential pitfalls of this methodological and conceptual reorientation. International relations theorists are concerned about theoretical incoherence and the impossibility of generating rigorous hypotheses about the security world when the referents are individuals instead of states. Security studies theorizing was difficult enough with 200 states—what of 6 billion people, and counting? The objective here is not to address this objection, which is about the misfit between the human security approach and theory building in mainstream security studies. Instead, I try to sketch out the three major pitfalls of well-intentioned attempts to “securitize” the individual human being: generating false priorities, generating false hopes, and proceeding on false causal assumptions.

### **False Priorities and Hopes**

The policy rationale for securitizing any given issue—the environment and individuals, for example—is to inform relevant audiences (one’s own bureaucrats and citizens, the so-called international community, as well as the victims of environmental degradation) that an issue has priority and that it is high on the policymakers’ agenda. When business-class passengers’ bags get tagged “priority” by airline companies, they expect their luggage to be among the first to emerge on the carousel. A priority issue is thus one that gets special attention, better resources, and a higher chance of satisfactory resolution. The question is whether we get these positive payoffs when we securitize the individual or end up prioritizing everything and therefore nothing?

When we securitize the individual, we are making the security of each and every individual on the planet the object of our concern. The teenager in California who trembles at the slightest crackling sound, women in Africa subjected to genital mutilation, flood victims in China, earthquake victims in India, and Kosovo Albanians are but a few examples of human beings whose physical survival or integrity are being threatened by natural as well as unnatural forces. If, as Axworthy argues, human beings have become the fundamental referents of security, it follows that we need to give priority to them by diverting resources from other nonsecurity areas in the hope of ameliorating or resolving these human security predicaments.

The result of such an approach is (total) paralysis of our ability to prioritize. In other words, which of the above deserve priority attention and on what grounds? Is it not the case that, from the human security perspective, every threat to the well-being of every individual in every state is a security issue? Ironically, in making all individuals a priority, none actually benefits. It is like the airline company giving a priority tag to everyone's luggage, with the result that the bags come out in a completely random order at the destination. At a minimum, proponents of human security need to specify criteria for distinguishing between the kind of security fears experienced by the California teenager and those felt by the Albanian in Kosovo. A related, but equally important, point is that the human security approach must also lead to intervention fatigue and overstretch. No state, NGO, or combination thereof has the stamina and resources to attend to even a tiny fraction of such human security demands.

The basic issue related to the false sense of hope that is created by efforts to securitize individuals is whether doing so actually increases the probability that their plight will be lightened. The assumption of proponents of human security is that securitization increases that probability, compared to a situation where it has been left unsecuritized. To be sure, this assumption remains unproven. For every Bosnia or Kosovo, where external actors came to the aid of peoples suffering from ethnic cleansing, there are many more Chechnyas, Rwandas, and Myanmars. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo in the name of humanitarian intervention, but, as many analysts have pointed out, what really was at stake was NATO's own credibility. In areas outside of NATO's sphere of influence, no amount of securitization of individual well-being is likely to alleviate the plight of the repressed. Thus, securitization might lead to improvement only in the most special of cases; in the vast majority

of cases, securitization will not lead to any significant improvement. Speaking loudly about human security but carrying a Band-Aid only gives false hopes to both the victims of oppression and the international community.

### **False Causal Assumptions**

A strong case for taking human security seriously is its assumed impact on international peace and security. As Axworthy puts it, "Human security puts people first and recognizes that their safety is integral to the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security." However, how valid is this generalization? One problem with this causal generalization is its reluctance to make distinctions between people. Are there certain people who forfeit their right to protection because of their direct or indirect actions? Would it not be foolhardy to put the safety of Slobodan Milosevic and his supporters on par with that of the Bosnian Muslims? The former threatened not only the security of the latter but the peace and stability of the entire Balkans. NATO's bombing of Serbia suggests that states seldom do what the human security agenda recommends. NATO put itself and its organizational credibility first and the plight of the Kosovars second. By bombing Serbia, NATO sought to undermine the safety of the Serbs and to force Serbian leaders to cease their policy of ethnic cleansing. This example suggests that the human security approach is far too universalistic. Like the earlier criticism of its inability to prioritize threats, it is also unable to discriminate among people. Thus, the approach's universalism robs it of much of its productive policy content.

The assumption that "putting people and their safety first brings peace" can also be questioned from a second, related perspective. Is not the real issue how much of our safety we are willing to trade off for how much peace? Consider the case of nuclear deterrence and its contribution to general peace and security during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans and Russians lived under the constant fear of nuclear war while their leaders continued to build weapons with more powerful and versatile warheads. U.S. schools held drills where students ducked under their desks in anticipation of a nuclear explosion nearby. From the human security perspective, this psychological terror should be addressed by eliminating nuclear weapons. Would the elimination of nuclear weapons contribute to greater peace among nations? Nuclear deterrence, however insecure it made individuals and states, has been critical in maintaining general peace. The alleviation of human

insecurity does not necessarily mean greater peace and security. As the nuclear deterrence example shows, some measure of human psychological insecurity may be necessary for maintaining peace.

### Conclusion

Some years ago, an Oxford student wrote a fascinating thesis about the change in Canada's identity after World War II. While the older leaders viewed Canada as "a fireproof house," the younger generation, led by Lester B. Pearson, viewed its country as "a middle power." As Pearson and his cohorts rose to high office, they gave Canada's middle-power identity a particular stamp: Canada would be a responsible world citizen, a team player, and an active participant in international peacekeeping. Axworthy's invocation of human security provides a powerful justification for continuing and expanding this "middle-powerness" in Canadian foreign policy, allowing Canada to play to its strengths and to acquire an even stronger (and well-deserved) voice in international forums.

The more pertinent point resides in the metaphor of the fireproof house. Even in the 1940s—the period when the metaphor was used—it was already an apt description of Canada, with its structurally sound homes, internal resilience, and an ability to avoid entanglements with the outside world. In a world consisting primarily of Canadas, human security might command a consensus; and the kind of intrusiveness associated with implementing such an agenda might be acceptable. If nothing came out of that securitization, it might not matter.

However, too many individuals in the twenty-first century reside in makeshift shelters and thatched homes. What difference will it make to their lives for us to insist that they have become the referents of security? Not very much. It would be more advisable for them to cast their lot with their government—and their state—if they want a way out of their privation, which need not be seen in security terms. In the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping regained control of the reins of state power, he freed the Chinese peasant from the dictates of central economic planning and set in motion the virtuous cycle of economic growth that continues to this day. No amount of securitizing of the Chinese peasant could have secured for them what Deng, who saw the issue in terms of improving their livelihoods and making China strong, did. It has to be acknowledged that states in turmoil and those controlled by bad leaders are capable of despicable acts against their own citizens. However, to label the misery of citizens as a security problem that deserves

international attention and response is not the wisest way to go, lest it gives citizens false hopes premised on false priorities and causal assumptions.

Therefore, without the capacity and willingness to prioritize the countless human security dilemmas and devote the requisite human, economic, and military resources to make a dent in ameliorating these problems, it is probably not remiss to caution against the uncritical extension of the concept of security to the individual.

As one of my students engaged in constructive criticism of human security put it, "Why not just call it safety studies?" ④

### Notes

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1. Lloyd Axworthy, "Human Security and Global Governance: Putting People First," *Global Governance* 7, no. 1 (January–March 2000): 19–23.

2. Independent Commission on International Development Issues, *Common Crisis: North-South Cooperation for World Recovery* (Geneva: Independent Bureau for International Development Issues, 1981).