# HUMAN SECURITY: GENESIS, DEBATES, TRENDS

The concept of human security expanded the notion of security. The shift in focus from the state to the individual as the core object of security acknowledged the fact that intra-state conflicts such as civil wars, political violence, diseases, or poverty were greater threats to humans than inter-state wars. The concept has not brought about a paradigm shift in international security policy. But human security will most likely remain politically relevant even after recent changes in the strategic framework.



*Human security concentrates on protecting the individual: Children in a refugee camp in Kibati, Democratic Republic of the Congo.* Image: UNHCR / Christian Als

Two decades after it was introduced in political debate, the concept of human security still remains a controversial matter. On the one hand, it has met with great resonance in many countries and in international organisations such as the UN. New issues were introduced to the security policy agenda, such as the ban on anti-personnel mines, efforts to curb the misuse of small arms and light weapons, or security sector reform (SSR). On the other hand, numerous questions remain unanswered. The definitory arguments between the proponents of a broad approach ('freedom from want') and the advocates of a narrow interpretation ('freedom from fear') remain unresolved. There is no general agreement on the role of the state, which can both ensure and threaten the safety of its citizens. It is in this context that one must view the occasional

charge that the concept of human security is founded on an interventionist logic and attempts to undermine state sovereignty based on a 'responsibility to protect'.

A paradigm shift in security policy from the concept of state security to that of human security, which the advocates of the latter concept had hoped for and critics had feared at the start of the debate, has failed to materialise. On the contrary: State (national) security seems to have regained ascendancy in the aftermath of the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. Furthermore, growing geoeconomic and geopolitical competition, triggered by global realignments of power, and increased international fragmentation have added to the authority of the state security concept. However, the notion of human security appears to

be sufficiently flexible to assert its place in the security policy debate even under these changed strategic conditions.

## The genesis of the concept

From the mid-1990s onwards, the conception of human security shifted the focus of security discourse to the individual. The traditional concept of national security, which had dominated the Cold War era, was mainly geared towards the security of states and aimed at protecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity from military threats. The advocates of human security demanded that this traditional notion of security be deepened and widened. Individuals were also to be regarded as being imbued with security, and more attention was to be devoted to their protection. Furthermore, non-military risk factors such as poverty, disease, and political violence were to be taken into greater account.
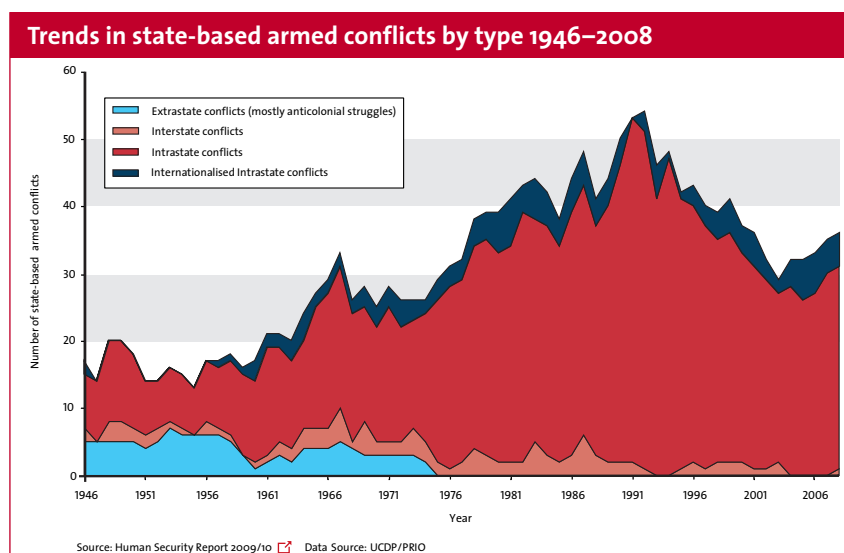
Several factors helped to boost the concept. It soon became clear that while the end of the Cold War had brought a decrease in inter-state violence, this did not necessarily imply an increase of security for the people in question. The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of political, ethnic, religious, and economic tensions and an increasing prevalence of fragile or failed states. As a result, violent conflicts tended to be displaced to the intra-state sphere, where they were particularly threatening for the lives and quality of life of the civilian population. In addition to intra-state conflicts, the policy-makers and academia now also focused on underdevelopment, poverty, and disease as sources of human insecurity. In order to al-

leviate these problems, it was suggested that the defence resources freed up by the end of the Cold War be reallocated as a peace dividend towards combating poverty and fostering development. The underlying conviction was that poverty, lack of economic prospects, and underdevelopment were drivers of conflict. Therefore, it was argued, new prevention and peace support measures were required to prevent and resolve intra-state conflicts. Thus, human security offered an ideal hinge linking the security and development agendas.

At the political level, the concept of human security was launched in a report published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1994. According to this report, human security was to encompass seven dimensions: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. The UNDP adopted a very broad definition that included both the security dimension (freedom from fear) and the development aspect (freedom from want). The concept rapidly gained political salience. It was accepted by the UN and incorporated into the foreign policy of states such as Norway, Canada, Japan, or Switzerland – not least as a means of enhancing their influence. Numerous studies were published on this issue. However, despite the attractiveness of the new approach, the attendant debates remain highly controversial to this day.

## Criticism and debates

One fundamental criticism is that the concept of human security is too comprehensive and too diffuse. Some argue that it cannot serve as an academic analytical tool because of its insufficient precision, and that it is unsuitable as a guideline for formulating policy due to its broad topical range and because it fails to establish a hierarchy of goals, which diminishes its usefulness for setting priorities. Not least because of this criticism, there are ongoing debates over how comprehensive the definition of human security should be and whether the focus should be on the broad development dimension or on the narrow aspect of violence. While the broad approach favoured by the UN and Japan, among others, is focused mainly on combating non-military threats such as poverty, underdevelopment, diseases, or environmental degradation, the narrow approach that is favoured mainly by Western governments concentrates on protecting the individual from war and violence. The emphasis here is mainly on com-



**Trends in state-based armed conflicts by type 1946–2008**

Legend:
- Extrastate conflicts (mostly anticolonial struggles)
- Interstate conflicts
- Intrastate conflicts
- Internationalised Intrastate conflicts

Number of state-based armed conflicts (y-axis) vs Year (x-axis)

Source: Human Security Report 2009/10    Data Source: UCDP/PRIO

bating the misuse of small arms and light weapons or deployment of child soldiers, for instance. Advocates of the 'freedom from fear' approach argue that a narrow definition can be better applied and operationalised, and warn against the tendency to denote every conceivable threat to human well-being as a security risk ('securitisation'). This, they argue, causes the concept of security to lose its analytical substance.

Also controversial are the relationship between human and state security and the role of the government in general in the context of human security. In its purest form, by emphasising the individual, human security challenged the sovereignty of the state. It was argued that actors who violated the norms of human security and basic human rights in egregious ways could not hide behind the notion of state sovereignty. This served as the basis for legitimising intervention in areas hitherto considered internal matters of states in the interests of protecting individuals, up to and including humanitarian intervention using military means under the heading of the 'responsibility to protect'. Among the sceptics, particularly in non-Western states, this gave rise to fears that human security might be misused as a pretext for undermining the concept of state sovereignty.

Human security and state security are not necessarily mutually incompatible. Indeed, many advocates point out that human security complements the security of the state rather than replacing it. It is apparent that the state has a central role to play in either case. It depends on the concrete regime whether the state as an actor can protect its citizens and thus provide hu-

man security or whether the state itself jeopardises the security of its citizens.

The increasing 'appropriation' of the concept of human security by governments, political elites, and international organisations has lately prompted acerbic comments from the camp of critical security studies. The critics charge that the concept has been instrumentalised by traditional security actors and has therefore lost its radical transformative potential. They argue that today, instead of challenging the global political and economic power structures that are responsible for most of the causes of human insecurity, the label of 'human security' only serves to combat the symptoms of human insecurity such as poverty, underdevelopment, or violent conflicts in a makeshift approach. Ultimately, they say, this only serves to stabilise the existing distribution of power within the framework of entrenched neoliberal structures.

## Prospects

Even more than this criticism, the recent return to the classic conception of state security constitutes a challenge to the notion of human security. For instance, it has been pointed out that a state-centric perspective on security has reasserted itself since the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, as seen, e.g., in the limitation of individual rights and liberties vis-à-vis the state in the context of counterterrorism measures. The increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between the various countries and regions in the context of global power shifts is also leading to a renewed prioritisation of the role of the state in security matters, according to this view.

Against this background, a number of voices have predicted a diminished importance of human security. Among other factors, they pointed to the decreasing usage of the concept at the UN and the reticence of former advocates such as Canada. However, there are also developments to the contrary. In 2010, UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon published a report to the UN General Assembly underlining the importance of human security. The EU took up the concept as part of its security strategy of 2003 as well as in several subsequent reports (Barcelona Report 2004; Madrid Report 2007). At the academic level, too, the topic continues to be highly relevant.

It is mainly in the area of political measures, however, that human security is firmly embedded in hundreds of projects undertaken by states, international organisations, and NGOs. One strong and certainly lasting motivation for the actors involved is the fact that fostering human security in volatile regions and fragile states is a crucial instrument for preventing potential threats (terrorism, armed conflicts, organised crime, piracy, etc.) in those areas. This preventive aspect of promoting human security has become accentuated after 2001.

Therefore, the pronouncements of doomsayers seem to be unfounded when it comes to human security. The concept has managed to gain a foothold on the security policy agenda. It is rightly emphasised that the absorption of human security by states and international organisations does not diminish the political effectiveness of the concept. Rather, it assists political decision-makers in setting issues and priorities that benefit the individual. However, the one desideratum that remains even after nearly two decades of academic and political debate over human security is that of conceptual clarification, which would make it considerably easier for the concept to take hold further.

## Frequency of armed conflict: A trend reversal?

Since the 1990s, there have been repeated attempts to identify a metric for human security. That would contribute to an academic analysis of the phenomenon and constitute an important decisionmaking basis for formulating policy. In view of the broad and occasionally diffuse definition of human security, it comes as no surprise that these efforts are confronted with great difficulties. The Human Security Report Project is one of the furthest advanced projects. It analyses trends in the context of armed conflicts and explores their causes and effects.

The first major report was published in 2005 ⬀. It documented the drastic decline in the total number of armed conflicts involving states by around 40 per cent between 1992 and 2003 and the increased importance of intra-state conflicts compared to conventional inter-state wars over the past decades (cf. graphic). The report attributed this decline in the total number of armed conflicts not only to the end of the Cold War, growing economic interdependence, and the growing number of democratic states, but also to a considerable degree to improved international peace support efforts.

The results of the follow-up report, published at the end of 2010, somewhat tarnish this positive picture. The Human Security Report 2009/10 ⬀ documents several developments of concern. In particular, the number of state-based armed conflicts increased again by about 25 per cent between 2004 and 2008 (cf. graphic). The number of victims of armed conflicts has also increased somewhat since 2003. But to some extent, the report qualifies these results. For instance, it states that the increase in the number of conflicts is due primarily to the growing number of minor conflicts with low casualty figures. It points out that the number of high-intensity wars (with more than 1,000 victims per year) decreased by 78 per cent between 1988 and 2008. The report attributes the greater number of states involved in armed conflicts mainly to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where many countries contribute only token forces that have no combat role, however. As far as the greater number of casualty figures are concerned, the report notes that this increase took place at a relatively low level. In addition, the Human Security Report 2009/10 also indicates some positive developments, such as the tendency towards increasing stability of peace agreements since 1998.

Overall, the report does not assume a trend reversal concerning the frequency of armed conflicts. However, it avoids euphoric prognoses. It postulates that the factors that have reduced the number of conflicts and casualties since the end of the Cold War retain their validity. Therefore, it concludes, there is room for cautious optimism.

## Human security: A core area of Swiss foreign policy

Promoting security and peace is an important pillar of Swiss foreign policy. Therefore, Switzerland has been engaged in fostering human security since the mid-1990s. The fact that studies such as the Human Security Report have confirmed the effectiveness of peace support activities also helps to secure the necessary domestic legitimacy for Switzerland's engagement.

Just as on the international level, the necessary conceptual clarity is also lacking in Switzerland. There is no *unité de doctrine* of whether the narrower or the broader approach should be pursued. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has noted that in practice, both approaches are taken into account. As far as the violence aspect is concerned, the focus is on peace and human rights support and humanitarian policies; concerning the development perspective, the central topics are combating poverty and promoting health and good governance.

According to the Foreign Policy Report for 2010, one of Switzerland's focal areas in human security promotion will be the prevention of conflicts and severe human rights violations. In 2010, the FDFA's Political Affairs Division IV had around CHF 63 million at its disposal for civilian peace support and strengthening human rights. In its activities, Switzerland strongly emphasises the aspect of coordination. Internally, the efforts have been based on a comprehensive security policy approach that includes defence, development, and diplomacy; externally, the country has cooperated with partners including the UN, the OSCE, the EU, the Council of Europe, and like-minded states as well as NGOs. The goals of Switzerland's foreign and peace support policies are highly congruent with the topical agenda of human security. Therefore, it will be advantageous for Switzerland if human security can assert its place in international security policy.

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