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## NATO and human security

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The August 2021 Afghan debacle offers NATO a moment for serious reflection about its role in the world. Some are drawing the conclusion that NATO should not engage in out-of-area operations in the future and should instead focus on its core function of defending Euro-Atlantic territory from attack by foreign states, while dealing with the terrorist threat through long distance strikes using drones. But NATO members should draw a different conclusion, namely that in this globalised interconnected world, no one is safe from the complex combination of dangers that include war and violence, climate disasters, forced migration, pandemics or extreme poverty. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to insulate one part of the world from what happens elsewhere. What is needed is not retrenchment but rethinking and redirecting of NATO's role.

In this *Policy Brief*, I put forward the idea of a global strategy based on human security. Human security is understood as the security of individuals and the communities in which they live, in the context of multiple economic, environmental, health and physical threats, as opposed to the security of states and borders from the threat of foreign attack. Human security offers an alternative way to address “forever wars” whether we are talking about conflicts in different parts of the world, the so-called war on terror, or the geo-political competition with Russia and China. Human security implies that the security of Afghans or Chinese is just as important as the security of Americans or Europeans.

### The concept of human security within NATO

A Human Security Unit was established within the

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office of the NATO Secretary General in 2019. Human Security was understood as an umbrella term that encompass Building Integrity (anti-corruption), Protection of Civilians, Cultural Property Protection, Children and Armed Conflict, Conflict-related Sexual and Gender-based Violence, Human Trafficking, and Women, Peace and Security. Several NATO members have also applied the concept of human security along similar lines. These include Canada, Belgium, Portugal, Italy (in relation to cultural heritage), the UK, Germany and France. Although the term human security had been widely used in the UN system<sup>1</sup> to emphasise the importance of both material and physical threats to human well-being, the concept as it relates to military operations had a different trajectory. The term can be traced back to two developments, which derive from the changing nature of conflict and the growing importance of crisis management for militaries around the world but especially within NATO.

One development is the evolution of the European Security and Defence policy of the European Union in the early 2000s. A series of reports on European security capabilities were presented to Javier Solana, then High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, by the Study Group on European Security Capabilities, later renamed the Human Security Study Group.<sup>2</sup> The Study Group proposed a human security doctrine for the EU as a distinctive way of doing secu-

### Keywords

**Human security**  
**Protection of civilians**  
**Crisis management**  
**Military interventions**

1 See UNDP, Human Development Report, New York, 1994.

2 “A human security doctrine for Europe: the Barcelona report of the study group on European capabilities”, Barcelona, 2004; “The European way of security: the Madrid report of the human security study group”, Madrid, 2007.

riety. According to this version, human security is what individuals enjoy in rights-based, law-governed societies. It is assumed that the state will protect individuals from existential threats and that emergency services – including ambulances, firefighters, and police – are part of state provision. In a global context, human security is about extending individual rights beyond domestic borders and about developing a capacity at a regional or global level to provide emergency services that can be deployed in situations where states either lack capacity or are themselves the source of existential threats.

The Study Group also proposed a human security force composed of both civilians and military, and based on a set of principles, which are very different from the principles that apply to the military in a classic war-fighting role. These proposals were echoed in the state of the Union address by Ursula von der Leyen in 2021:

*“the European Union is a unique security provider. There will be missions where NATO or the UN will not be present, but where the EU should be. On the ground, our soldiers work side-by-side with police officers, lawyers and doctors, with humanitarian workers and human rights defenders, with teachers and engineers. We can combine military and civilian, along with diplomacy and development – and we have a long history in building and protecting peace”.*<sup>3</sup>

The second development, which was slightly different from human security although it contributed to the concept, was the growing emphasis on protection of civilians in military interventions. This gained traction both because of the experience of out-of-area operations, especially in Afghanistan, and because of pressure from civil society and human rights groups. A comprehensive protection of civilians policy was adopted by NATO in July 2016.<sup>4</sup> At the time, “Not only was NATO receiving significant international backlash over highly publicised incidents of civilian harm [in Afghanistan] but commanders began to identify civilian harm as fuelling the growing insurgency”.<sup>5</sup>

3 U. von der Leyen, “State of the union address”, 15 September 2021, Brussels.

4 “NATO policy for the protection of civilians”, endorsed by the Heads of State and Government, North Atlantic Council, Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016.

5 V. K. Holt, “Origins, progress, and unfinished business: NATO’s protection of civilians policy”, Stimson Centre, Washington, DC, 18 March 2021.

These two concepts – one individual-centred and the other more focused on the protection of civilians in conflicts – are open to different interpretations. Both concepts originated in the experience of contemporary conflicts, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where civilians were deliberately targeted. They were initially developed in order to counter the tactics of warring parties in contemporary conflicts. Yet within NATO, a traditional military organisation, both concepts came to be understood in a different way as a type of activity or a set of concerns that go alongside conventional NATO military operations. Thus, the NATO definition of protection of civilians includes both the “efforts taken to minimise and mitigate the negative effects on civilians from NATO and NATO-led military operations” as well as the need “to protect civilians from conflict-related threats of violence”.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I argue that the two interpretations are contradictory. If NATO were to adopt a human security approach, the protection of civilians would take priority over traditional military operations. Human security is not something that goes alongside traditional military operations, it would mean a change in the very nature of military operations. It would mean giving priority to saving lives over the goal of defeating an enemy. The security of all human beings should be the overall goal rather than just the security of the Euro-Atlantic region. Or, to put it another way, the security of the Euro-Atlantic region cannot be achieved without global (human) security. In other words, a military role in support of human security is more like global policing than war-fighting.

## Human security and crisis management

Crisis management situations in which NATO is likely to be engaged are those involving armed conflict. Contemporary conflicts are very different from classic Clausewitzian notions of war. Clausewitzian war is about a deep-seated political contest between two sides. Such wars, as Clausewitz explained, tend to extreme as both sides try to win: the politicians try to achieve their objectives; the generals try to disarm their opponents; and passion and hatred are aroused among the population. The central encounter is battle.

In contrast, in contemporary conflicts, multiple armed groups including both state and non-state actors are more interested in the gains from violence than winning. These gains can be economic (setting up checkpoints, hostage taking, smuggling, “taxing” humanitarian aid) or political (killing or forcibly expelling those who resist political control). In these wars, battle

6 “NATO policy for the protection of civilians”, endorsed by the Heads of State and Government, North Atlantic Council, Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016.

is rare, and most violence is directed against civilians. Such wars tend to persistence rather than to the extreme – they are “forever wars”. Such wars also directly violate both International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Human Rights Law.

A human security approach to this type of war necessitates a complex, often long-term, economic, political and military programme. The aim is to end the war by dampening down conflict and reducing the incentives for violence rather than through victory or a single top-down peace agreement. Central to this goal is the establishment of legitimate and inclusive political authority and a rule of law. Human security interventions are always civilian-led and involve a combination of civilian and military actors.

The tasks of the (external) military in these circumstances include:

- protecting civilians from attack and creating a safe environment in which a legitimate political authority can be established;
- monitoring and upholding local peace agreements and ceasefires as part of multi-level peace building involving civil society, especially women;
- establishing humanitarian space through corridors and safe havens that allow for the delivery of humanitarian assistance;
- arresting war criminals.

There is some similarity with population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN), in which the aim is to gain the support (winning hearts and minds) of the local population. In Baghdad, in 2007-8, US General Petraeus was able to reduce the violence dramatically by negotiating literally hundreds of local agreements and, together with Iraqi security forces, upholding those agreements. But whereas for COIN, the security of the population is a means for defeating the enemy, for human security, the security of the population is an end in itself. It is a defensive strategy. It may sometimes be necessary to attack or better still arrest an enemy, but only if it involves no collateral damage and does not provoke counterattacks. This was the British approach in Northern Ireland after 1974, where the military acted in support of the civil authority. Because people living in Northern Ireland were British citizens, it was not possible to bomb the IRA. Unlike COIN, human security is civilian-led. It has also been the approach of the EU-led anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden (EUNAVFOR Atalanta), which combined the arrest of pirates with non-military measures such as the introduction of fishing licenses on the coast of Somalia.

What went wrong in Afghanistan was that the goal was counter terror and not human security. President Biden has concluded from the Afghan experience that

the US should abandon nation-building and focus on counter-terror.<sup>7</sup> I would argue exactly the opposite. In Afghanistan the counter-terror effort undermined the nation-building effort for three reasons. First, continuing attacks on the Taliban and Al Qaeda provoked and legitimised the insurgency. The insurgency did not develop until after 2006; this was because instead of making peace with and accepting the surrender of the remaining Taliban, they were chased and attacked. Civilians also suffered from intrusive night raids and collateral damage from air attacks. In recent years, and before the August 2021 withdrawal, NATO had made strenuous and effective efforts to minimise civilian casualties. Nevertheless, attacks on the Taliban produced counterattacks in which civilians were killed. This is why many Afghans refuse to distinguish between attacks by NATO and attacks by the Taliban.

Second, in order to attack the Taliban, Al Qaeda and later ISIS Khorasan, the United States relied on corrupt commanders as private security contractors and involved them in Government, thereby greatly weakening the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Many of these co-called commanders had been supported by the CIA in the fight against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. US support for these commanders made it impossible to introduce an effective justice system and end their impunity.

Third, the US dominance of military operations weakened the civilian leadership, namely the United Nations Special Representative.

A human security approach in Afghanistan would have focussed on the security of Afghans. It would have involved a combination of top-down and bottom-up peace-building combined with development and governance programmes. It would have been a sort of civilianised nation-building. The McChrystal plan for Afghanistan in 2009, a population-centric COIN strategy, had some similarities with this approach. But it was too militarised and, in the end, it was defeated by the counter-terror lobby, including then Vice-President Joe Biden.

## Human security and collective defence

Both Russia and China have dangerous regimes. Both are engaged in widespread repression against political opposition or, in the case of China, against ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs. Both act provocatively abroad – the annexation of Crimea, the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, the intervention in Syria in the case of Russia and, an aggressive policy in the South China Sea, on the Indian border or against Taiwan in

<sup>7</sup> See “Biden says the era of US nation building is over as he marks the end of the Afghanistan war”, CNBC, 31 August 2021.

the case of China.

But the answer to these regimes is not military competition or an arms race. Military competition feeds a paranoid mentality and provides a rationale for repressive and aggressive behaviour and for competitive military build-ups. Putin, for example, justified the annexation of Crimea in terms of NATO expansion. There are frightening possibilities of mistakes and miscalculations, especially given the automaticity of modern weaponry that we are much less aware of than during the Cold War period.

A human security approach would involve a differentiated policy towards authoritarian states. First, in the context of common planetary dangers like climate change or pandemics, there is an urgent need to co-operate and to establish a shared stake in overcoming the crises engendered. Second, there is a need to call these states to account on human rights grounds, to draw public attention to human rights violations, to raise issues of legality and to impose targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations. Third, and this is where NATO's role is important, there is a need to prevent war.

This third strand of war prevention could combine confidence-building measures, arms control negotiations, with a defensive posture. During the 1980s, there was much concern about the offensive posture of NATO and the dangers of weapons of mass destruction. It might be worth revisiting proposals for what was known as defensive deterrence,<sup>8</sup> i.e. deterring foreign attacks through a credible defensive posture rather than through the threat of retaliation. It was the idea behind Gorbachev's notion of "reasonable sufficiency". Proposals for area defence or in-depth defence were put forward that would have meant drawing down nuclear weapons as well as conventional offensive capabilities, such as bombers or massed tanks. A defensive posture would be more convincing now than in the last years of the Cold War, given the emergence of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe and the large reductions in military manpower on all sides. This argument also applies to new capabilities such as cyber. It is important to develop cyber capabilities that are defensive and human rights-based rather than of-

<sup>8</sup> A. Boserup and R. Neild, *The foundations of defensive defence*, Palgrave, Macmillan, London, 1990.



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fensive<sup>9</sup>.

This approach has parallels with the Helsinki Agreement of 1975 and its three baskets of economic and social co-operation, human rights and security. Essentially that combination comprised what we now call human security.

## For a human rights approach to security

We are living through turbulent times – a transition period that requires the kind of transformative change that historically took place in or following major wars. Europe and America cannot remain immune to tragedies happening in places like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, or Yemen. Escalating military competition with Russia or China or continuing air attacks against terrorist groups will only make things worse. Indeed, continuing along the same path may lead to a merging of the different forms of "forever wars" engulfing us in a set of violent globalised relations that are already very difficult to reverse.

What President Biden calls the "cascading crises" of climate change, pandemics, poverty and inequality as well as criminal and political violence are all interconnected. Just to take one example, we cannot solve the problem of Covid without tackling contemporary conflicts. Places like Syria or Afghanistan are transmission belts for Covid because of inadequate healthcare, crowded places such as displacement or detention camps, as well as inter-generational living. Polio was supposed to be eradicated in 2005 but it has reappeared in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. There is always a risk of a new vaccine resistant variant as long as such conflicts continue.

NATO needs to reorient its efforts so as to dampen down conflict of all types and contribute to a broad multilateralist human rights approach to security. The European allies, together with Canada, are moving in this direction but they lack cohesion or the capacity (or will) to act autonomously as became clear in recent months in relation to Afghanistan. NATO could initiate a far-reaching discussion about the potential for reform.

<sup>9</sup> G. Schmeder and E. Darmois, "Cybersecurity: the case for a European approach" in M. Kaldor, I. Rangelov and S. Selchow (eds.), *EU Global strategy and human security: rethinking approaches to conflict*, Routledge, London, 2018.

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