

History of Human Security



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Abstract

Dieser Artikel zeichnet die historische Entwicklung und konzeptuelle Entfaltung des Begriffs der menschlichen Sicherheit nach und kontextualisiert dessen Entstehung und Wandel vor dem Hintergrund bedeutender globaler Ereignisse, darunter der Kalte Krieg und seine Nachwirkungen, die Terroranschläge vom 11. September 2001 und der darauf folgende «Krieg gegen den Terror», die globale Finanz- und Migrationskrise sowie das jüngste Wiederaufflammen geopolitischer Spannungen und bewaffneter Konflikte in Europa, dem Nahen Osten und Afrika. Er ordnet diese Entwicklungen in den Kontext breiterer internationaler Friedens- und Sicherheitstrends ein, beginnend mit der Ausweitung der Sicherheitsparadigmen während des Kalten Krieges und mit besonderem Schwerpunkt auf der formellen Einführung der menschlichen Sicherheit in den internationalen politischen Diskurs

durch den Bericht über die menschliche Entwicklung 1994 des Entwicklungsprogramms der Vereinten Nationen.

Dieser Artikel untersucht die konzeptuelle Entwicklung der menschlichen Sicherheit von ihren normativen Grundlagen innerhalb des UNDP bis zu ihrer praktischen Umsetzung durch eine Reihe internationaler und regionaler Organisationen und analysiert die Bemühungen, das Konzept an unterschiedliche Kontexte anzupassen, darunter militärische Operationen, Entwicklungsprogramme und humanitäre Massnahmen. Abschliessend reflektiert der Artikel über die kritischen Elemente, die zeitgenössische Sicherheitsexperten verstehen müssen, um Perspektiven der menschlichen Sicherheit sinnvoll in ihre jeweiligen operativen und strategischen Rahmenbedingungen zu integrieren.

DOI: 10.48593/q994-yc03

Schlüsselbegriffe Migration; Rechtsstaatlichkeit; gesellschaftliche Stabilität; Staatssicherheit; menschliche Sicherheit

Keywords Migration; rule of law; social stability; state security; human security

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This article traces the historical evolution and conceptual development of human security, contextualizing its emergence and transformation against major global events, including the Cold War and its aftermath, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent “war on terror,” the global financial and migration crises, and the recent resurgence of geopolitical tensions and armed conflicts across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. It situates these developments within broader international peace and security trends, beginning with the expansion of security paradigms during the Cold War and focusing on the formal introduction of human security into international policy discourse through the United Nations Development Programme’s 1994 Human Development Report.

This article examines the conceptual trajectory of human security from its normative foundations within the UNDP to its practical operationalization by a range of international and regional organizations, analysing efforts to adapt the concept to varying contexts, including military operations, development programming, and humanitarian responses. In conclusion, the article reflects on the critical elements that contemporary security practitioners must grasp to meaningfully integrate human security perspectives into their respective operational and strategic frameworks.

Introduction: Framing Human Security

At a mere 31 years old, human security is a young adult in the security world – keen, relevant, and a bit rebellious – bringing fresh, context-specific ideas to the table. It has already been through several tests of history and still proves its worth, albeit not without fail, to those working on peace and security, from UN Member States to international and regional organisations and civil society.

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Human security emerged as a deliberate critique of traditional, state-centric security. Where classical paradigms focused on military defence and territorial sovereignty, human security redirects attention to people: protection, empowerment, dignity, and – more recently – solidarity at the core. This shift is not anti-state; instead, it argues for mutually reinforcing state and human security.

The landmark 1994 UNDP Human Development Report framed human security as both “freedom from chronic threats” – hunger, disease, repression – and “protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life” (UNDP, 1994, p. 23). This broadened the security lens – helpfully, but not without controversy – since, in principle, almost any disruption to daily life could be labelled a human security issue (Paris, 2001; Owen, 2004).

Strategic foresight is a helpful way to test ideas against real or imagined future shocks. In this article, we put the human security concept through a wind tunnel of peace-and-security shifts over the past 30 years – the very period in which human security has been available to decision-makers and policy practitioners. What follows is a test of its conceptual resilience and practical applicability in some significant moments of the post-Cold War history.

Historical Evolution

Cold War Period

While late Cold War security studies had already begun to broaden the agenda, scholars such as Barry Buzan (1991) highlighted the interplay among military, political, societal, economic, and environmental dimensions – the state remained the principal referent of security. A growing recognition that threats were increasingly interdependent, reaching beyond state-centred military concerns and directly affecting individuals, opened the door to a new paradigm. The end of the Cold War and the accompanying hope for stronger international cooperation, driven by a peace dividend, created space for such frameworks to develop.

Although the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report is typically credited with bringing “human security” into mainstream international discourse, its antecedents can be traced back even further (Lucinescu, 2021). In 1950, Nobel laureate Niels Bohr, in an open letter to the United Nations, warned of “a perpetual menace to human security”, to the individual human beings, arising from nuclear weapons – while also pointing to the emancipatory potential of democratised access to new technologies. In his 1966 Human Security: Some Reflections, William Blatz laid the necessary groundwork for elements that later became central to human security approaches: he conceptualised security as a dynamic psychological state rooted in trust and resilience rather than mere safety, and he held together both protection (through supportive environments) and empowerment (by fostering independent decision-making and responsibility). Though psychologically in focus, his framing remains strikingly relevant to what we mean by human security today.

From the very start, the United Nations placed people at the centre – “We the peoples” – and throughout Secretary-General Sithu U Thant’s tenure (1961–1971), we see a deep concern for human well-being, rights and justice, all of which resonate with the empowerment dimension of human security. Economist Mahbub ul Haq, architect of the Human Development Index, then forged the critical bridge between development and security, helping to propel the human security agenda.

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Taken together, the emergence of human security represents both continuity with the widening of security studies and a normative shift: it brings the protection, empowerment, and dignity of individuals to the centre of security priorities.



Illustration 1: Swiss military observer interacting with the local population in Kashmir in 2016. (Source: VBS / DDPS / SWISSINT)

Post-Cold Era

As stated above, the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report marks the starting point for bringing human security into the security vocabulary, arguing that security had been interpreted too narrowly and placing ordinary people – their freedoms and daily lives – at the centre. It framed human security in terms of four characteristics – universal, people-centred, interdependent, and prevention-focused – and set out seven interconnected domains: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. Because there is no single authorised definition, debates often contrast a “narrow” focus (protection from violent threats and mass atrocities) with a “broad” view (encompassing economic, health, environmental, and political insecurities). In this article, our working definition follows UNDP’s “vital core” framing – protecting and expanding people’s capabilities – paired with Owen’s threshold-based clarity for practical application; this combined lens keeps the concept tangible for analysis while retaining its people-centred ambition. The 1994 report remains the normative bedrock of human security: its seven dimensions continue to serve as reference points (UNDP, 1994). Within the UN system, the Human Security Unit and the UN Trust Fund for Human Security have institutionalised the concept in practice, supporting projects that cut across development, peacebuilding and humanitarian fields (UNT-FHS, 2021). The UN framing emphasises integration – human security as a lens for holistic problem-solving rather than a discrete doctrine. Critics warn that such expansiveness risks dilution, but advocates argue that it enables flexible adaptation to diverse contexts (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

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What followed were reports and decisions by UN Member States that added nuance and interpretation rather than legal codification: human security was never part of international law, but a policy lens available to each state to apply in its own context. Diplomatic traction came quickly. In 1998, the Human Security Network – an informal coalition initiated by Canada and Norway – was launched at the UN General Assembly to encourage responses to immediate threats to people’s safety and dignity, signalling that human security was not only an analytical lens but a political project. The field matured in 2003 with the Commission on Human Security’s Human Security Now, which defined the goal as protecting the “vital core” of all human lives while enhancing freedoms and fulfilment, pairing protection with empowerment as twin strategies. In 2005, the Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s In Larger Freedom embedded this logic more firmly in the UN’s normative architecture, affirming that all individuals – particularly the most vulnerable – are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want and to an equal opportunity to realise their potential. Also in 2005, states endorsed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – a

distinct, narrower political commitment focused on preventing and responding to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, with a graduated toolbox that can include coercive measures authorised by the Security Council. By contrast, human security is a continuous, people-centred policy lens spanning multiple insecurities; as clarified in 2012, it is not equivalent to R2P, rejects the threat or use of force as an implementation tool, underscores state primacy, and frames state and human security as mutually reinforcing. While early applications often focused on low- and middle-income settings, conceptually human security has evolved into a universal frame relevant to all Member States, irrespective of income. The arc reaches a new stage with UNDP's 2022 Special Report on Human Security in the Anthropocene, which updates the agenda for an age of planetary risk: it places agency at the core of an expanded framework, adds solidarity alongside protection and empowerment, and maps a new generation of threats – from transformative technologies and renewed violent conflict to widening inequalities and post-pandemic health insecurity. Throughout, the security – development nexus remains central: human security enables integrated thinking and financing that connect dignity, rights, and livelihoods to stability. Taken together, these milestones chart a coherent evolution from a bold 1994 proposition to a contemporary practice: a people-centred, state-informed, and increasingly planetary understanding of security that remains policy-driven rather than treaty-based – available to states as a flexible tool yet anchored in a clear normative commitment to the safety, dignity, and capabilities of individuals.

Academic vs Institutional Trajectories

Academically, human security evolved from the late Cold War widening of security toward a people-centred paradigm refined by UNDP (1994), the Commission on Human Security (2003), and UNDP's Anthropocene update (2022). Across this arc, scholars debated scope – “narrow” (protection from violent threats and mass atrocities) versus “broad” (structural violence, inequality, development, health, environment, and politics) – and wrestled with thresholds and measurability. This adaptability has allowed human security to function both as a normative idea and as an applied analytical lens across disciplines.

Institutionally, its uptake has been uneven yet resilient across communities. Before the term was coined within the UN system, the OSCE's Human Dimension was created in 1989 and operationalised through the Copenhagen and Moscow Documents in 1990 and 1991, followed by the 1992 establishment of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM). Within the UN system, the Human Security Unit and the UN Trust Fund for Human Security seeded cross-pillar projects linking development, humanitarian action, and peacebuilding; Japan mainstreamed human security in its development cooperation, and Switzerland created a Human Security Department in its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the last decade, human security has seen a notable revival in military and security communities, especially around Protection of Civilians (PoC), stability policing, and civilian-harm mitigation – culminating in NATO's explicit human security approach and guiding principles and reflected across many state forces.

Taken together, the academic and institutional paths remain distinct yet mutually reinforcing, demonstrating a durable and versatile framework that flexes from the universalist ambitions of the 1990s to narrower, operationally defined uses in contemporary crisis and defence settings.

The Wind Tunnel of Global Events: Testing the Concept

We use a strategic-foresight “wind-tunnel” metaphor to retrospectively stress-test human security against real-world shocks, judging robustness, adaptability, and utility. The test is run from a cross-community vantage – foreign services, development and humanitarian agencies, and state militaries – attentive to their different purposes and measurability, where human security can operate as philosophy or lens (development/humanitarian), operational guidance (including counterinsurgency (COIN) -era applications) or bridging language at the security-development nexus. Because there is no single definition of human security – and debates often contrast a “narrow” focus on violent threats and mass atrocities with a “broad” view spanning economic, health, environmental, and political insecurities – our working definition follows UNDP's framing (protecting and expanding people's capabilities) including the three core freedoms – from fear,

want, and indignity. This combined lens allows for stress-testing, acknowledges sector-specific interpretations and instrumentalization, distinguishes human security from (while connecting it to) human rights and development concerns will enable us to assess how the concept has held up from its inception through recent crises.

Post–Cold War & early optimism (1990s): Using the broad UNDP (1994) framing – universal, people-centred, interdependent, and prevention-focused – we test human security from three vantage points. For foreign services, the question is whether human security could knit together peacebuilding, development, and rights during the peace-dividend moment; for development and humanitarian agencies, whether it could provide a shared lens across mandates; and for state militaries, whether it could shape expectations around protection of civilians in peace operations. Human security resonated with the decade's normative zeitgeist and linked prevention, justice, and peacebuilding. The horrors of Srebrenica and Rwanda accelerated protection logics without collapsing human security into human rights alone, while empowerment remained on the table. The promise was high, even if the practical metrics were uneven.

9/11 and the “Global War on Terror” (2001–2010): Here, the operative definition in security practice narrowed toward violent threats and terrorism, while the broader human security community argued for structural prevention – grievances, governance, and livelihoods. For foreign services, counter-terrorism realigned budgets and policy away from prevention; for development and humanitarian actors, securitisation pressures and restricted civic space tested whether human security could endure; for state militaries, population-centric COIN, PoC, CERP/PRTs, and the Human Terrain System echoed human-security logics yet often instrumentalised them to achieve operational ends. The test revealed both fragility – human security crowded out by securitisation – and latent value, insofar as a human-security lens could have corrected over-militarised counterterrorism. Prevention, however, remained under-resourced.

Global financial crisis (2008) and European migration crisis (2014–2016): Applying the broad lens – freedom from

want and fear with threshold-based practicality – confirms human security's universality. Non-military shocks generated profound insecurities across income levels, while conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, and Syria exposed the international system's limited capacity to respond to displacement. For foreign services, the question was whether human security could shape cross-border responses on stabilisation and mobility; for development and humanitarian agencies, whether it could drive structural risk-reduction beyond emergency response; and for militaries, how far human security mattered indirectly via border-management externalities and PoC where conflict drove flight. Recognition grew, but sustained political commitment lagged, as seen in the limited traction of the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees in the absence of firm state backing. The concept proved sound; follow-through was weak.

COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022): With the broad definition again in play – health, livelihoods, food security, agency, and solidarity per UNDP 2022 – the pandemic demonstrated that a non-military shock can halt the world, and non-military solutions restart it. For foreign services, human security was a test of equitable vaccine diplomacy and cooperative risk management; for development and humanitarian agencies, a test of joined-up public-health, social-protection, and livelihood measures; and for militaries, a test of support roles under civilian lead, with PoC-type logic in domestic emergencies. International cooperation proved indispensable, but uneven; solidarity faltered early, then partially recovered. Human security remained the right compass; implementation gaps at national and multilateral levels were exposed.

Renewed geopolitics and wars (2014–present): In the return of great-power rivalry and wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, human security must be read through a dual lens: narrow, for immediate protection in high-intensity war, and broad, for societal resilience, energy and food security, displacement, and information integrity. For foreign services, the question is whether human security can endure re-militarised budgets and still guide sanctions, aid, and refugee policy; for development and humanitarian agencies, whether it can sustain principled access, civilian-protection advocacy, and recovery planning

amid protracted war; and for militaries, whether PoC, civilian-harm mitigation, and cultural-property protection – now codified in many doctrines, including NATO’s human-security approach – can be realised under combat pressures. Ukraine, the State of Palestine, Sudan, and the DRC illustrate stark human insecurity. Military spending rises, SDG progress stalls, and although calls for human security are loud, the appetite to anchor it as a guiding principle remains limited.

Provisional verdict: The wind-tunnel results are not an unqualified success. Conceptually, human security is robust and versatile across communities; politically, it is under-incentivised when crises nudge leaders toward short-term, hard-power optics. It has gained doctrinal ground in parts of the military sphere – Protection of Civilians, civilian-harm mitigation, and NATO’s human-security approach – even as it has lost salience in some diplomatic and development arenas. The task ahead is translation: embed a clear, threshold-aware human-security lens in budgeting, planning, and cooperation so that people’s safety, dignity, and capabilities are not merely affirmed but tangibly protected and expanded. Crucially, sustained investment in human security complements rather than competes with hard security; neglecting it tends to generate the very instabilities that later demand costlier military responses.

Operationalization in Practice

Despite an unfavourable showing in the wind-tunnel test of history, there are reasons for cautious optimism about the operationalisation of human security. Across military operations, development programming and humanitarian response, the concept has begun to inform practice – unevenly, yes, but measurably – at strategic, doctrinal and programmatic levels. Importantly, the degree and mode of operationalisation vary by purpose and community: where human security functions as a philosophy or lens, measurability is often indirect and anchored in adjacent frameworks; where it serves as guidance or a tool, it is translated into concrete lines of effort and indicators. Read this progress not as an alternative to hard security, but as the preventive foundation that reduces the need for it.

Military operations. In the military domain, human security has helped to reframe strategic narratives. Mary Kaldor (2018) argues for a European strategic narrative rooted in human security, emphasizing the protection of civilians and the legitimacy of the use of force. Within NATO, debates around stability policing and the Protection of Civilians have pushed translation from principle to doctrine; human security features in Alliance strategy, and both doctrinal and operational workstreams continue to refine PoC approaches (see *Human Security: Approach and Guiding Principles*, NATO, Madrid Summit, 2022). A further example is Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR): a comprehensive U.S. Department of Defense approach to prevent, mitigate, and respond to harm to civilians and civilian objects in military operations, now driving changes in planning, training, targeting, and after-action learning. Here, operationalization is relatively tangible (and narrower): human security is expressed through cross-cutting topics – PoC, CHMR, cultural property protection, combating trafficking – each with specific tasks, data requirements and metrics that enable monitoring and evaluation. These developments illustrate how human security strengthens operational effectiveness while reducing downstream risks.

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Development programming. In development policy, human security has guided assistance notably in Japan’s aid portfolio, where it frames responses to complex, intersecting vulnerabilities (Christie & Dubey, 2016). UNDP continues to champion the approach, linking it to global risks such as climate change and pandemics (UNDP, 2020). In practice, however, human security often operates as a *guiding idea* rather than a stand-alone, directly measurable programme objective; its practical content is underpinned and made tractable by clear frameworks – most prominently the SDGs and their indicator architecture – along with sectoral logframes and country strategies. One can reasonably argue that human security underpins the Sustainable Development Goals: the seventeen goals mirror the focus areas articulated in both

the 1994 and the 2022 UNDP reports. The challenge is persistence – maintaining focus on these priorities at a time when many donors are reducing development assistance – because underinvestment here often translates into future hard-security pressures.

Humanitarian responses. Humanitarian organisations have likewise adopted human security as a bridge between immediate relief and longer-term resilience. The UN Human Security Unit (2016) underscores the value of integrated responses that address urgent needs while tackling structural drivers of vulnerability – guiding humanitarian action in protracted crises and shaping regional approaches to resilience. As in development, human security frequently provides the overarching rationale, with measurability delivered through humanitarian standards and outcome frameworks (e.g., protection outcomes, food security and health indicators), thereby translating the idea into operational outputs without diluting core principles. This is precisely the kind of work that has the potential to prevent today's emergencies from becoming tomorrow's conflicts.

Taken together, these strands suggest that, even if human security has struggled to shape grand strategy consistently, it is still present where policy meets practice – informing how militaries plan and learn, how development actors prioritise, and how humanitarians connect relief to recovery and resilience. Recognising the varied roles human security plays – as philosophy, lens, guidance, or tool – clarifies why measurability looks different across communities (indicator-rich in military cross-cutting areas; framework-anchored in development and humanitarian work). One future effort could be to bridge the gap between operational and strategic levels in human security implementation, so that preventive gains are reflected in top-level decisions on security spending and posture.

Conclusion: Human Security Beyond the Wind Tunnel

Three decades on, human security has been stress-tested by real-world shocks – from 9/11 and the financial crisis to the pandemic and renewed geopolitical rivalry. The verdict is consistent: the concept remains valuable, but a gap persists between discourse and delivery. Human se-

curity features prominently in speeches and strategies, yet its proper integration and sustained practice remain uneven. Where it does show up, it is most visible in military doctrine and practice (PoC, civilian-harm mitigation, climate-security planning), programming in development and peacebuilding (conflict sensitivity, do-no-harm, anticipatory action), and humanitarian efforts (protection and access) – promising, but too often partial or ad hoc.

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Human security is still the right compass – people-centred, state-informed, and attentive to planetary risks. Its durability now depends on doing it well: integrate it into doctrine, budgets and law; adapt through foresight and learning; prevent with anticipatory, rights-based action; and collaborate across military, development and humanitarian communities. And since we first met it as a keen, slightly rebellious “young adult,” perhaps by its forties it will be less a slogan and more a habit – recognised, integrated, and routinely practised across peace and security. ♦

Endnotes

1 The “wind tunnel” metaphor derives from strategic foresight, where ideas, policies, or strategies are tested against simulated shocks. Applied retrospectively, it provides a useful heuristic for assessing the durability of human security across historical crises.

2 Some early uses of “human security” predate the 1994 UNDP report, though these lacked systematic elaboration or institutional uptake (Lucinescu, 2021).

3 For critiques of the expansive nature of human security, see Paris (2001) and Owen (2004).

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