



Human Security: Virtuous, Practical, Urgent, and Necessary

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Abstract

Change is urgently needed. Ideas that can generate change are critical at this time and age where humanity is facing complex, multidimensional crises. Human security is that idea that can help us address the crises in their entirety because it's comprehensive, integrative, people-centered and goes beyond conventional disciplines and borders. We urgently need an approach to security which focuses on the well being of the people and the planet, not one at the expense of the other; and, never puts the security of people second to the concept of the security of the state. Continuing without the compelling and the much-needed paradigm change that Human Security is, will only lead to disaster.

Humanity is making itself an endangered species. Change is needed. Human security is the direct, accurate and needed framework to generate that change. Continuing without a paradigm change will surely lead to disaster.

This essay is not framed by the daily news cycle perspective but rather seeks to help set a clear north star for international coordination and focus necessary for human survival. We know that the statement, "All men are created equal", was not nor is an empirical description. When Thomas Jefferson penned it, men without property, women, indigenous people, and people who had been shipped to North America in slavery were not included. But its implicit guiding principle has become the guide for governance and its significance of immeasurable value. Human security is similarly valuable and needed. Although not noticed yet by the public, in the most sober diplomatic and international forums and institutions this need for change is recognized.

Human security does not propose eliminating nations and militaries. For example, military force in defense of the territorial integrity and safety of the people of Ukraine is clearly necessary. However, a disproportionate emphasis on nationalism expressed through military power is not adequate to solve the growing list of global threats that impact everyone's daily lives.

The purpose of all our nations is to meet the needs of how people actually live their daily lives and to achieve that requires organizational arrangements arising from guiding principles

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that are grounded in today's science and the values inherent in universal human rights. The ideas that worked fine in the 17th century when the creation of the modern nation emerged to end Europe's violent social upheavals have produced horse and buggy road inadequate for today. That road does not necessarily include human rights and the insights of science.

No matter how much is spent on weaponry or how much the economy of a nation grows, if its people are unhealthy, insecure in their livelihoods, persons, or property, security and well-being will evade them.

Today, as never before in human history, the regenerative processes of the natural world are at severe risk. Humanity's impact on the natural world is increasing and accelerating. It is a fact not understood well by the public; we are living in the Anthropocene.

Nations are spending obscene amounts of intellectual, social, and economic capital on expanding arsenals, building new and more destructive weapons of mass destruction, and thereby institutionalizing adversity based on an inadequate approach to achieving security. We need a new direction.

Human security is the necessary framework for preventing pandemics, protecting the climate, rainforests, the health of the oceans, water, and topsoil, stopping the destruction of species and impairing the web of life we call biodiversity. Focusing security primarily on people is the needed focus for eliminating the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons as well as achieving an equitable secure global financial system that does not destroy the regenerative miraculous processes of nature. These challenges require nations to cooperate and minimize adversity. They require a change in thinking and policies grounded in human security.

This change requires enlivened vision.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in his Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech on 10 December 1964: "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear annihilation... I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits." Even today, his profound words resonate and call us to pursue policies that provide human security.

But whose words are guiding the policies of the most powerful nations in their aspiration to fulfill the first duty of every state and make their citizens safe and secure? Perhaps the 4th century admonition of the Roman general Vegetius Renuatus, in his landmark treatise *Epitoma Rei Militaris*: "If you want peace, prepare for war." This ancient text guides budgets, strategies, and distorts geopolitics into institutionalized adversity, a view that has led us to the profligacy of military expenditures that hover around \$2 trillion yearly.

Since the nations of the world committed to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, in excess of \$32 Trillion* has been spent in the pursuit of security by military means

* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264434/trend-of-global-military-spending/>

and exceeded \$2 Trillion in 2021.* A small portion of these expenditures could serve many of humanity's needs.†

Chapter V Article 26 of the United Nations Charter directs the Security Council to address this distortion of values:

“In order to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources, the Security Council shall be responsible for formulating, with the assistance of the Military Staff Committee referred to in Article 47, plans to be submitted to the Members of the United Nations for the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments.”

The Security Council has not fulfilled this directive, military expenditures keep increasing, profoundly disturbing new technologies of killing are being invented, and war itself is being pursued. All the while the threat of nuclear annihilation continues to be the preferred expression of maintaining global security by the five permanent members of the Security Council. Ironically, they simultaneously and collectively express publicly that a nuclear war cannot be won and thus must never be fought. This incoherence is both morally indefensible and dangerous.

These expenditures, based on cycles of fear and adversity in derogation of trust and cooperation, are reinforced by values that place national identity before our common humanity.

There are certainly appropriate defensive roles for militaries and proportionate budgets would evidence them, but today's conduct demonstrates a profound distortion of values. As President Joe Biden once said, “Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value.”

The most dangerous and illogical expenditures are for nuclear weapons. Nine nations possess over 13,000 nuclear weapons. If 1% of these devices were to explode millions of tons of soot would be released into the stratosphere, causing such climate disruption that modern civilization, or possibly any civilization, would terminate from lack of agricultural capacity. In other words, starvation on an unprecedented massive scale would impact every person and every nation, including the one that launched the weapons first.

All nations with the weapons are currently either modernizing or expanding their arsenals, or both, at enormous expense. The hypocrisy of the states with nuclear weapons asserting that they are pursuing strategic stability to keep the planet safe is contradicted by their actual expenditures designed to obtain military advantage. This nuclear weapons venture is represented in the words of Dr. King: “So much of our modern life can be summarized in that arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau: ‘Improved means to an unimproved end.’”

* <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time>

† <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-small-cut-in-world-military-spending-could-help-fund-climate-health-and-poverty-solutions>

Let us look at the situation through another lens. Suppose the Biological Weapons Convention said that no nation can use smallpox or polio as a weapon but that nine nations could use the plague as a weapon to ensure planetary peace and stability. The absurdity of this proposition underscores the daily life of all of us living beneath a sword held over all our heads by a handful of men committed to pursuing national security by placing the future of humanity in a state of perpetual risk. As of this moment, they refuse to even pledge not to use nuclear weapons first. Such a condition in the words of Senator Alan Cranston is unworthy of civilization.

This unworthy pursuit represents a paradox. The more the weapons are perfected, the less security is obtained. Worse, they institutionalize adversity, making the behavior of nations unable to sufficiently cooperate to meet the needs of their citizens.

We are living in a precarious peace based on illusions of power and unsustainable practices. Our manner of pursuing security is unrealistic. Today, as never before in human history, the regenerative processes of the natural world are at severe risk. The capacity of humanity's impact on the natural world is increasing and accelerating.

Here is some sobering realism.

The rate of the extinction of species today is estimated by experts to be between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural evolutionary extinction rate.*

Humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles since 1970.†

Deforestation has wiped out 8% of the Amazon rainforest since 2000. That's 513,016 square kilometers—the same size as France.‡

The last decade was the hottest decade since record-keeping began 140 years ago.§

Earth has lost 28 trillion tons of ice since the mid-1990s. In 2017 a single piece of ice the size of Delaware broke off from Antarctica's Larsen Ice Shelf.¶

Since 2000, the global CO₂ average has increased by 12 percent. The atmospheric burden of CO₂ is now comparable to where it was during the Mid-Pliocene Warm Period around 3.6 million years ago.**

We are polluting the ocean with around 12.7 million tons of plastic a year. There are now 5.25 trillion macro and micro pieces of plastic in our ocean and 46,000 pieces in every square mile of ocean.††

* https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/biodiversity/biodiversity/

† <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/living-planet-report-2018> and <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>

‡ <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/blog/data-and-research/world-lost-8-percent-of-its-remaining-pristine-forests-since-2000/>

§ <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/global-temperature/>

¶ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earth-has-lost-28-trillion-tons-of-ice-since-the-mid-1990s/>

** <https://research.noaa.gov/article/ArtMID/587/ArticleID/2742/Despite-pandemic-shutdowns-carbon-dioxide-and-methane-surged-in-2020>

†† <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/ocean-trash-525-trillion-pieces-and-counting-big-questions-remain>

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is around 1.6 million square kilometers—bigger than Texas. Plastic in the North Atlantic has tripled since the 1960s.*

Research published in May 2022 found the presence of microplastics in human blood.†

6.4 million people have died from the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 2 years.‡

Let us look at this one dynamic a bit closer as an example of how the relationship between modern humanity and the natural world must change and how states' definition and pursuit of security will have to change.

Ocean phytoplankton produces approximately two-thirds of the planet's atmospheric oxygen through photosynthesis. It is fair to say that it is like a third lung for the human family and without it we would die. In other words, each of us could lose a lung and likely live, but if the phytoplankton dies humanity ends.

Also, phytoplankton provides food for several ocean creatures, such as whales, snails, and jellyfish. This makes this species the base of several ocean food webs. It floats in the top part of the ocean where sunlight shines through the water.

The health of the phytoplankton depends on a balance of acid and alkaline in the oceans and in oceanic health in general. For example, a substantial increase in ocean temperatures could disrupt the phytoplankton's photosynthesis process, which could impair its oxygen production. This would likely result in mass mortality in humans and animals. Some scientists predict this could happen within the next century.

Warmer water temperatures (as a result of global warming) slow down phytoplankton's growth, because there is less mixing of warm surface water and cold water below, so there are fewer nutrients in the surface level warm water for the phytoplankton.

There are several credible scientific studies showing that as the climate warms, phytoplankton growth rates go down and along with them the amount of carbon dioxide these ocean plants consume. That allows carbon dioxide to accumulate more rapidly in the atmosphere, which produces more warming.

This simple creature not only helps us breathe. It is also a huge carbon absorber. Additionally, since plankton are significant in so many food webs, fewer plankton will lead to fewer fish, which is a major food source for humans and other animals.

It helps us breathe, it absorbs carbon, and it is essential for the oceanic food chain.

There is presently no international regime designed or capable of protecting this essential living system. No nation or even a group of nations is capable of protecting the health of the oceans, nor from pandemics. Like the air we breathe, the oxygen we need, small viruses do not recognize borders. Nature is not conforming to our ideas of how we should make ourselves secure.

* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/this-new-installation-just-pulled-20000-pounds-of-plastic-from-the-great-pacific-garbage-patch-180978895/>

† <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/24/microplastics-found-in-human-blood-for-first-time>

‡ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>

How did we get here? The creation of the modern state system arose to stop the carnage in Europe during the Thirty Years War where Protestants and Catholics were slaughtering each other while debating who had the preferred definition of salvation as taught by Jesus.

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The ingenious invention of the modern state based on the concept of state sovereignty and political control within borders worked well enough to bring humanity into the modern age. The legal instruments that created the Peace of Westphalia (1648) changed the political architecture of the world. The new system ended the massive slaughters of European Catholics and Protestants fighting over definitions of Christianity and formed the basis of our modern sovereign state system.

That system must now function far more cooperatively to fulfill the vision of the United Nations’ multilateral system. But, because its frame of reference is essentially a horse and buggy road from the 17th Century which is not sufficient to enable the rapid change to stop the rapid downward dangerous spiral arising from the modern technologies of war, commerce and our daily lives. One can lead to a fast burn, nuclear annihilation, the other to a slow ecological burn. We need realism in our thinking and acting.

Is there a way to fulfill the United Nations’ aspiration to ensure freedom from the “scourge of war” based on cooperation amongst nations, commonly expressed as multilateralism? Are there examples of rapid change for the better? What principles allow that to happen? I propose two examples.

When President Reagan and Gorbachev met in the historic summit at the height of the Cold War in Geneva in 1985, they confirmed that no one could win a nuclear war and, of similar import, pledged that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would seek military advantage over the other. This pledge of common security, the principle of multilateralism that can bring realistic human security exemplified virtue in action.

When WWI ended crushing reparations were leveled on Germany and brought the whirlwind of Nazism. When WWII ended the Marshall Plan brought trading partners, security, democracy, and greater stability.

In one instance the losers were further vanquished. In the second the losers were helped to social, political and economic wellbeing. Again, an example of virtue in action.

Realistic policies arise when virtue and practicality coincide. When selfishness and fear guide and virtue is neglected, illusions become policies. Disaster ensues. When virtue and realism combine, society flourishes. There can be policies which are morally coherent but impractical. They cannot work. Nothing is more dangerous than the consistent pursuit of

policies that are morally incoherent but alleged to be practical. Stability and security are obtained when moral coherence, virtue in action, and what is practical combine. That is what our moment in time compels us to realize. Cynical clinging to dysfunctional systems and ideas will not serve us well.

“Change is needed quickly. Ideas that can generate that change are critically important. Human security is such an idea.”

The ancient Upanishads states: The world is one family. Today as never before in human history the admonition of the wise to see the human family as one and the practical necessity of new levels of cooperation coincide. No nation can fulfill its first duty to meet the well-being and security needs of its citizens without helping to build a global cooperative system to protect the regenerative processes of nature and relinquish the pursuit of security with a disproportionate emphasis on force and violence. Working together to obtain security goals through multilateral cooperation does not diminish sovereignty but is the very tool needed for sovereign states to fulfill their duties to keep their citizens safe and secure.

This change in perspective puts people first. Its expression amongst nations is common security. Its larger expression that includes states and individuals is human security.

Human security focuses on how people live and seeks first to meet their achievable real needs. These include ensuring a clean sustainable environment, useful education, secure jobs, fulfilling culture, stable communities, good health, nourishing food, and the flourishing that comes from freedom of worship, conscience, human rights and the rule of law. These needs require safety in neighborhoods and a culture of peace. Meeting these needs enhances the dignity of each individual. In other words, human security refocuses the pursuit of security from military nationalism and increased threats, violence, and fear to cooperation in meeting present actual real human needs. Today so many of the needs of people and the needs of their governing institutions, states and businesses require global cooperation because the threats before us cannot be adequately addressed at a national level. There is no regime in place to adequately stop pollution of the oceans or the destruction of forests. Our very definition of security cannot ignore these facts any longer.

The myths of infinite growth on a finite planet and the myth that security can be found by increased militarism must be met with the realism of science in understanding our relationship with the natural world and an ever-increasing sense of gratitude for its bounty.

Change is needed quickly. Ideas that can generate that change are critically important. Human security is such an idea.

In 1994, Dr. Mahbub Ul Haq, head of the United Nations Development Programme addressed the question, “What happened to the peace dividend?” in a public forum held at the United Nations. Dr. Ul Haq spoke eloquently of the need for a fundamental transformation in the concept of security, which he described as, “the security of people, not just of territory;

the security of individuals, not just of nations; security through development, not through arms; security of all the people everywhere—in their homes, in their jobs, in their streets, in their communities and in their environment”. This new interpretation, he explained, requires us to regard human security as “universal, global and indivisible.”

Human security starts with the premise that the reality of the natural world must be the foundation of our pursuit, rather than just focusing on human-created institutions. The institution of the state has become an idol, an end in itself, such that we protect it with weapons which if used will kill us all. The state is a tool to address real human needs rather than an end in itself. It is a human creation which means it can be molded to meet our needs.

The myths of infinite growth in a finite planet and the myth that security can be found by increased militarism must be met with the realism of science in understanding our relationship with the natural world and guiding our efforts to fulfill our needs. Human security is the paradigm shift needed now.

To disconnect the regenerative processes of the natural world from our economic system is not realistic. To focus security on the state rather than people is illogical. To fragment the approach to obtain security from sustainable development is dysfunctional. Security is a multifaceted, many leveled right of all people and it involves all aspects of human activity. Just as our personal health involves how we sleep, eat, and interact with one another, just as our bodies are integrated systems, so is our security. Human Security is the integral principle called for today.

Presently the geo-political landscape is framed by notions of sovereignty. The planet and many present threats do not recognize national borders. Humans create these borders. We create nations to serve human needs—both physical and psychological. We create cities, counties, and regions to identify and meet our needs and we create institutions to address those needs. The basis, the legitimacy and stability of sovereign states, do not come from the bureaucracies or family heritage of leaders of states, but from the mandate of those who are governed. States express the moral and practical agency of people.

Today the requirements of that agency can only be met at a cooperative and global level in addressing the most pressing existential threats. Thus, global cooperation to meet the first requirement of every state to ensure the safety and wellbeing of its citizens is required. The state is an expression of an idea. It is a legal entity that we create, distinguishable from natural entities and systems. We do not create trees and forests, ants and ant colonies, or fish in schools. We do create states which are based on ideas expressed by words.

The planet can be understood as one integrated living system. Humanity can be understood as one species in a web of life. We require a new set of ideas in accord with this understanding.

Human Security is rooted in our best science and recognizes that human beings are social entities that require meaning and values in their endeavors. Humans need enabling

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environments to grow in our most ennobling values and thus policies to fulfill human security needs appropriately must be both practical and morally coherent. Moral coherence requires peaceful approaches amongst peoples and nations and a proper recognition of the requirement of harmony of many cultures as well as many species.

Given how many endeavors have recently gone global, especially finance and commerce, bringing security into coherence with human needs is not only within reach it is both morally compelling and practically necessary.

The fact that today there are severe tears in the fabric of the global community, that a regional war could escalate and that leaders are demonizing each other does not alter one fact stated above nor should it detract the good, wise and practical from pursuing what is needed. It just means we must be more diligent, faithful, and committed.

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