

# Human Security: a paradigm contradicting the national interest?

Robert Schütte

Talita Yamashiro Fordelone

**H**uman Security has sparked remarkable turmoil throughout the epistemic community of international relations during the last years<sup>1</sup>. Being on the one hand popularized by international organizations like the United Nations<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand proclaimed as a practical foreign policy posture by states like Japan, Norway and Canada, this apparently innovative concept of security imposes itself to the scientific discussion. Human security refers to the human being and its individual security as a pattern of international relations, widening thereby the scientific perspective to threats beyond military security taking into account interrelated problems of under-development and human rights<sup>3</sup>. This orientation represents in fact a crucial contestation to the current hegemonic paradigms of realism and neo-realism with their concentration on interstate security competition. However, there is not only dispute about questions of analysis and explication, but also divergence concerning the normative character of this new paradigm. Human Security claims to deliver an analytical framework for research and explanation of

---

*Robert Schütte is a student at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and at the University of Cologne, completing his Master in Political Sciences, History and Philosophy. He is particularly focusing on International Relations theory, European Union, and the German welfare state.*

*Talita Yamashiro Fordelone graduated in International Relations at the University of São Paulo (USP). In the Autumn of 2005, she attended the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, during an exchange semester in the International Affairs major, Development Studies concentration.*

security problems, but moreover, as a normative concept, it also demands to be a practical signpost fully applicable to foreign policy. Such a political predisposition renders the emerging paradigm of Human Security especially sensitive to reproaches put forward by competing schools of thought in international relations theory: Is the concept nothing but idealistic hot air<sup>4</sup>, inapt to confront the rough reality of an anarchic international system which forces all states to care but for their own national interest? Doubting the applicability of the Human Security paradigm to real politics means neglecting an essential component and motif of Human Security as a whole, committing thereby a deadly blow to its legitimacy. Putting it simply: Who needs a signpost signing nothing but abstract theory?

The first part of this paper will show that it is misleading to assert an incongruence between Human Security and the promotion of the national interest of the state. It will be shown that the assumption of a somehow determined national interest, above all defended by (neo-) realist theory, defects on grounds of a profound misunderstanding of the formation of interest. In the second part, the paper will present an alternative ideational concept of interest-formation, describing it as a composite reflection of narrow intersubjective needs as well as profound normative predispositions, being however neither rational nor irrational in character. Once established this argument, the conjured up tension between the national interest and an application of Human Security in the realm of foreign policy is solved, and the political character of an adoption or

---

*Special thanks to Jan Schmitz, Pawel Radchenko, Tatjana Radchenko, and Nina Hall for their helpful contributions.*

non-adoption is reconstituted.

### **Interest as an objectively deductible pattern in liberal and realist theory**

Realist critics of Human Security object that States are principally interested in their own security and do not in general care about the “fear” or “need” of other people as long as primary national interests are not at stake. The consideration of human rights plays at best a marginal role in the great gamble of power-politics in the context of an international struggle for security, power and position. Hence, insofar as human security is not promoting the national interest of the state, it can be discarded as an irrational and even risky adventure originating from a sometimes idealistic human mind<sup>5</sup>. The mounting criticism of “realist” conservatives inside the Republican Party towards

### **Human Security refers to the human being and its individual security as a pattern of international relations, widening thereby the scientific perspective to threats beyond military security and taking into account problems of underdevelopment and human rights.**

the neo-conservative politics of the Bush administration, setting the promotion of liberal democracy worldwide as a strategic goal<sup>6</sup>, portrays a such refusal of a normatively loaded foreign policy aiming at the spreading of liberal democracy all over the world: “As we wage war today to keep the world safe from terror, we must also work to make the world a better place for all its citizens.”<sup>7</sup> Against such an understanding of American internationalism, the two prominent realist scientists Stephen Walt and John J. Mearsheimer haven taken a clear stance, especially against the intervention in Iraq: “Although the United States would almost certainly win such a war, armed conflict with Iraq would divert resources and attention from the more important task of eliminating the terrorist threat. (...). In short, an invasion of Iraq is the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time.”<sup>8</sup> Underlying a such view of international relations, most clearly explained in Waltz Theory of International Politics, is the theoretical presupposition that states do have a rationally deductible and objectively identifiable national interest. Thus, the realist discourse in international security concerns primarily the question of how to promote the national interest or, to put in an economical term: how to maximise the utility of the state. For the case of Iraq, it is apparent that many realists are at odds with their “missionary” neo-conservative counterparts, reproaching them the pursuit of ideological politics detrimental to the promotion of the national interest. Of course, such a blame refers to all forms of “ideology”, including naturally the paradigm of Human Security, which are

not supposed to maximise the national interest. In order to come to grips with this reproach we have to answer the question: What is the national interest and how is it constituted? To understand the notion of the term national interest, it is essential to understand its philosophical origin and conception.

Following the classical thoughts of utilitarianism formulated by Bentham and Mill, every human being is driven by the desire to achieve as much happiness as possible and to avoid pain. The objective of ethical politics, based on this endeavour to achieve “happiness”, should thus be to promote the quantitative maximization of good consequences for a population. Liberal economics grasped this thought applying it in a particular fashion to their thinking by equating “happiness” with the materially measurable maximization of the consumption of goods; because

everybody is striving for happiness, that is nothing else but the maximization of utility, everybody tries to achieve the maximization of consumption. This is an essential point because it enables the liberal theory to define utility regardless of the actors socialisation, culture and normative predis-

position. The theoretical clue of this perspective is the possibility to objectify the utility of agents by establishing that everybody is an egoistic and rational maximizer of its own consumption, a so called homo oeconomicus. People can maximize their utility, or putting it in the political term “interest”, in optimal or suboptimal ways, but they do not define their utility in a fashion of striving or not striving for happiness/consumption. Being for example born into a wealthy family, it would be rational to demand lower taxes, to engage against systems of redistribution and adhering to a liberal party, this way maximising efficiently the individual opportunity to consume goods now and in the future. The other way around, being born into a poor working class environment should spark the motivation to fight for higher taxes, a more equal distribution of wealth and to engage in a labour party. It is noteworthy to state that this scheme works only as long as the poor are not becoming rich, because from that moment on the nouveau riche will change their preferences according to their new social position by joining a liberal party. Given such a reconfiguration of circumstances, it would simply not be rational for an egoistic maximizer of utility to fight for higher taxes. The key point here is that liberal thought determines utility and interest principally as an intersubjective and rationally deductible pattern, which can be more or less efficiently maximized. Changes of outcome are rather explained by external factors than by intrinsic phenomena. The formerly poor and now nouveau riche do not change their preferences because of a change caused by an insight that liberal

values are morally superior to socialist values. The change of political preferences was rather caused by the change in social position, rendering now the defence of liberal values congruent with their own interest in the maximization of consumption. This change of preference is therefore constituted exogenously by a change in the environment, and not by an endogenous change in values held by the agent. Hence, interest is a function of exogenous circumstances. There is no variation in liberal theory between different people, different cultures or different histories, because all human beings can be regarded as black boxes driven by the same motivation in striving for the maximization of consumption. The consequence is an exclusion of endogenous ideational predispositions held by the agent as an explanation for interest. Interest has been externalized with reference to the maximization of consumption, it is therefore constituted exogenously by the environment. Wendt is right to state that “neo-classical economists (...) try to avoid making substantial assumptions about actors psychology by explaining varying outcomes through reference to changing prices in the environment rather than changing preferences.”<sup>9</sup> With the assumption of the homo oeconomicus as a unitary and egoistic utility-maximizer, liberal thought conceptualises agents as black boxes.

The above explained consideration of egoistic self-regarding black-box agents found its way directly into the neo-realist paradigm. This is a barely astonishing fact regarding the strong impetus liberal economics had on the conception of Waltz Theory of International Politics. In fact, Waltz is very clear about the analogy between market and international system: “(...) the parallel with market

## **The orientation proposed by Human Security represents a crucial contestation to the current hegemonic paradigms of realism and neo-realism.**

theory is exact. Both states and firms are like units. Though all of their variations in form, firms share certain qualities: They are self-regarding units that (...) decide for themselves how to cope with their environment and just how to work for their ends. Variation in structure is introduced, not through differences in the character and function of the units, but only through distinctions made among them according to their capabilities.”<sup>10</sup> Neo-realism as a structural theory claims to abstract from unit-level attributes, this way excluding variations in normative or psychological predispositions. The only behavioural assumption established is that states are egoistic and above all concerned about their own security. Different “national interests” derive therefore not from endemic varying attributes of agents but from exogenous variations of structure. For the explanation of national interest in neo-realism it does not matter whether a given state X is a democracy or dictator-

ship, but whether it is placed on the upper or lower end of the power hierarchy. By ruling out endemic attributes and in ascribing to external factors the status of an independent variable to explain interest, neo-realism reflects a liberal ontology of rational interest. In consequence, neo-realists argue that a foreign policy not promoting the security and power of the state suffers from a deficient maximization of the national interest. Making whole-hearted efforts to provide for human security might seem morally decent. However, decency may mostly be an unaffordable luxury under a merciless international anarchy and the fight for power and position. Distracting valuable resources from the realization of primary, that is egoistic, needs to altruistic ends means in this perspective always an imposition of opportunity costs, thus a suboptimal way to maximize the rational “national interest”. Given this argument, a practical application of human security as a doctrine of foreign policy would always be in tension, or even contradiction, to the realization of the national interest.

### **Security is what states make of it**

Human Security, nothing but a devout wish of starry-eyed idealists out of touch with reality? In fact, there is no theoretical evidence to believe so. On the contrary, there is rather good reason to doubt the theoretical foundation of neo-realist assumptions about the formation of “national interest” and therefore the criticism posed to Human Security by it. Neglecting the endogenous dimension of agency, neo-realism rules out ideational factors like norms, socialisation and identity in order to conceptualise exogenous factors as independent variables having causal

influence on interest. In stating self-regardness as well as power- or security-seeking as constant motivational attributions of states, the explanatory role falls to the changing factor of the external environ-

ment in which the state tries to maximize its interest in a rational-choice manner. Hence, given a particularly specified external environment and the assumption of the above mentioned constant motivational attributes of agency, it is possible to state an objective and rational national interest which can be more or less efficiently maximized by the state. It is this conclusion which can be doubted.

Interests are only limitedly objective in character and essentially subjectively constituted by ideational factors. Even if neo-realism is right to label “security” a basic motivation for states, the question remains unanswered how security is defined. State behaviour can hardly be explained by an underspecified strive for security by self-regarding actors. Integrating norms, identities and socialisation as endogenous factors to a model of interest-formation can help a great deal to understand state-behaviour as well as the dynamic “political” character of interest. I argue that

the formation of “national interest” is a function of fundamental exogenous factors as well as endogenous ideational variables. The exogenous factors set effective borderlines for the pursuit of interest, binding thereby every actor in the system. The endogenous ideational components define the national interest through norms, identity and socialisation. It may be though consensual that all states are bound by the necessity to save survival and security. However, the national interest itself is defined by identity and norms of the agent itself and can not be regarded as the function of environmental patterns. Ideas give in this sense for example content to security by defining a concept of security: Security of the narrow nation state? The members of an Alliance? A particular group of, for example democratic, states? Or even all human beings like in the concept of human security? Interest can not be stated objectively because it is subjective by its nature; furthermore, it can be rationally strived for but not being itself rational.

Ideas and socialisation define the fashion, in which environment and behaviour of other agents is interpreted, categorized and evaluated. These cognitive processes can lead to extremely different interpretations of reality and its meaning to the agent, depending on its normal predispositions and, noteworthy, independent of changes in environment. History and socialisation play a crucial role in forming interest: At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the German military build-up was regarded by its European neighbours as a dangerous challenge to their national securities. In contrast, Germany has proved to be a reliable, calculable and above all friendly partner in Europe during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the practise of institutionalised cooperation of normatively “coherent” states in the Euro-Atlantic community, above all in NATO and the European Community, functioned over the last 60 years

**Interests are only limitedly objective in character and essentially subjectively constituted by ideational factors. The national interest is neither objectively definable nor rationally deductible.**

as successful means to build up confidence and friendship between the states of the Western hemisphere. Hence, comparable politics in the year 2006 are not anymore regarded as a threat to the national security of France, Britain or Luxembourg, but rather welcomed as a step forward to empower European or NATO capabilities. Neglecting the importance of socialisation and changing identities of states would thus be a profound misunderstanding of the dynamics of international relations. Applying these factors to the definition of security, the German Empire for example defined its national interest, identity and role in the international system 100 years ago in dissociation to France and Britain, whereas the Federal Republic nowadays iden-

tifies its own security as inseparably attached to that of its European neighbours. Wendt and other scientists have extensively worked on the question of norm-constitution, socialisation and culture<sup>11</sup>, the present paper will therefore concentrate in the subsequent section on the influence of ideational factors on state behaviour.

It was argued that interest can not necessarily be an objective product of exogenous factors but has to be understood as the function of endogenous and exogenous attributes of agents. An illustration of the subjective character of the national interest and its dependency on ideational concepts is the Spanish governmental change in 2004: After the terrorist attack in Madrid on march 11, the conservative government under Aznar lost the national elections and had to handover power to the socialist party under Zapatero. While the former was a steadfast champion of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was supposedly not to change this course, the later announced and carried out immediately the retreat of all Spanish troops after his victory. Furthermore, he aligned his country ostentatiously with the intervention-critics Chirac and Schröder and ceased the blocking of the European Constitution, thereby taking detrimental positions in foreign policy with regard to his predecessor. How is this explainable? What changed was neither the relative position of Spain in the international system nor in the European Union: It has to be stated that although the terrorist attack caused enormous suffer and meant a shock to the Spanish as well as European publics, it did not change the Spanish power position in the international arena. There was neither a causal influence on aggregate national military capabilities nor a lasting economical impact. What changed was the conception of the national interest based on differing normative predispositions and different self-images, roles and identities

of Spain in Europe and the international system, induced by the change of government from Aznar to Zapatero. Obviously, the two party leaders stood for significantly different position regarding the international role of Spain, thus resulting in different definitions of

the national interest. The turn in the “national interest” of Spain can hardly be called ir/rational or objectively more or less advantageous regarding utility, because both attributes can not be attached to the category of “interest”. Neo-realists have serious trouble to explain the turn in Spain’s foreign policy, because there are only two possibilities to explain its results following their presuppositions: Either there was a deep shift in relative power-positions in the international system, or one of the two governments acted irrational in disrespecting the maximization of the national interest. The first possibility can be ruled out easily because of the short time-span between the shift in foreign policy orientations as well as of the assumption that a conserva-

tive government would have continued the already chosen way. The second possibility is more tricky to resolve: The Aznar and Zapatero governments implemented totally contradictory foreign policies in questions of highest importance for Spain. The assumption that one of the two governments ceased caring about the national interest would thus imply that it actually acted detrimentally to the national interest. How is it possible to choose the “bad guy”? Obviously both governments had comprehensible reasons for their policies with respect to their different conceptions of interest, and it is impossible to state that one of the two acted doubtlessly crazy or irrational. A closing answer to this question can not be found, thus undermining the neo-

## **There is no evidence to believe the claim that Human Security is nothing but a devout wish of starry-eyed idealists out of touch with reality. On the contrary, there is rather good reason to doubt the theoretical foundation of realism and neo-realism.**

realist argument that one of the two governments acted irrational and deficiently with regard to the national interest. There is simply no objectively determinable national interest that could show politicians the best path to maximise the nations utility in a precise case like the discussed one.

What can be stated is that the formation of interest is a function of subjective ideational predispositions, and that this formation is of endogenously dynamic character. The national interest is what states make of it<sup>12</sup>, being neither objectively definable nor rationally deductible. Like all normative decisions, the definition of interest is a political choice being only to a small part materially constrained. Hence, a change in government can lead to profound shifts in conceptions of interests, even if there are particular bandwidths intraversable at least for western-style democracies with a core of domestically shared consensual identities. The notion of rationality, although not applicable to interests itself, can however be understood in an instrumental fashion: Ideational endogenous variables constitute within a framework of exogenous factors the interest of an agent, which can then be rationally strived for. Contrary to everyday language, rationality is disconnected from the constitution of interest but a means to attain the objectives set by the interest. Taking up once again the example of a nouveau riche worker: In contrast to the liberal/realist model of interest constitution, it is probable that he will still stick to his socialised values of solidarity and social justice although his circumstances of life have changed. His interest can thus be interpreted as the function of ideational factors including normative predispositions, identity and socialisation to a certain environment with certain problems. Given a such interest, the nouveau riche will however use its rationality to strive for his aims, that is to achieve his goals in the most efficient way possible. Rationality is

therefore an instrument to achieve certain aims determined by the individual interest, being itself the function of mainly ideational attributes endogenous to the agent. Another hard illustration for this phenomenon would be an individual with an interest in killing himself and others in a suicide-bombing. Although incomprehensible, this constitutes for whatever reasons an interest, which can be rationally strived for. A such killer has thus for given reasons an interest in committing suicide while killing as many people as possible. He will though not chose to detonate on an abandoned field but search to accomplish his mission in a crowd of people; a rationally chosen behaviour.

The above mentioned explications and examples show that the liberal and neo-realist ontological assumption of an objective and rational interest given exogenously to agents ideational predispositions is in fact a profound misunderstanding

and a failure of category of the term interest. This signifies in consequence that the promotion of the national interest has not to be viewed as a contradiction to the application of a Human Security agenda. A such conception of foreign policy is as much justified as other conceptions, and it rests therefore a merely political question to define the national interest in a correspondent fashion. The instauration of Human Security as a policy guideline by the governments of Canada, Japan and Sweden marks a powerful point in favour of this emerging paradigm. A refusal of adoption can, therefore, no longer be founded in an alleged tension between Human Security and the national interest, but has to be clarified as a political decision supported by an explicit definition of the states interest. A such re-politicization can in the long term support the cause of Human Security by disclosing the normative and political foundations of national foreign policies, withdrawing them from the realm of untouchable technocratic experts specialised in the art of determining the best way to maximise optimally the national interest.

### **Paradigmatic shift and Human Security in international relations theory**

Since the end of the cold war, the hegemonic paradigm of (neo-)realism has faced mounting criticism by schools like constructivism, neo-intuitionism as well as Human Security. Are the questions, tools and answers of the “realist” tradition still capable to explain international relations? It is noteworthy that contemporary economists are increasingly willing to introduce sociological and psychological suppositions to their theories in order to square “anomalies”: for his work on psychological factors in economics, Daniel Kahnemann even received the Nobel Price in 2002. Will international political theory also undergo a similar

paradigmatic shift during the coming years, abandoning well established and comfortable patterns of thinking in order to revise overcome theoretical axioms? Following Thomas Kuhns work on the structure of scientific revolutions<sup>13</sup>, an emerging paradigms must not only explain reality, but have to perform better than its scientific competitors. The present work was aimed to support this endeavour in favour of Human Security: the first part of the paper showed that there is a certain ontological deficiency in realism committing a categorical failure discerning the notion of interest. The second part of the present work explained that the application of Human Security as a posture of foreign policy is not contradictory to the pursuit of the national interest, but depends on different normative predispositions as well as the political definition of what the national interest is about. With regard to the European Union for example, one can argue that Human Security, irrespective of the nation state, has already become a tacit stance amongst European states. The refutation of the alleged contradiction between a Human Security agenda and the promotion of the national interest is therefore of importance. Defending the ideational and political character of the formation of interest against liberal and realistic advocates of exogenously given material constraints is an essential basis for the scientific and practical legitimacy of Human Security as an emerging paradigm in international relations theory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Roland (2001). Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?, *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 87-102.; Foong Khong, Yuen (2001). Human Security: A Shotgun Approach to Alleviating Human Misery? *Global Governance* 7, 231-236.; Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner; Moller, Bjorn (2000). *The Concept of Security: The Pros and Cons of Expansion and Contraction*, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute.

<sup>2</sup> High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004). *A more secure world: our shared responsibility* and Kofi Annan's response; United Nations Development Programme (1994). *Human Development Report 1994 – New Dimensions of Human Security*. NewYork: Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Human Security as a paradigm in International Relations Theory, see: Amouyel, Alexandra (2006). What is Human Security? *Human Security Journal*, 1/06, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris

<sup>4</sup> Paris, Roland (2001)

<sup>5</sup> For classical arguments against idealistic policies compare for example: Carr, E. H. (1939). *The Twenty Years Crisis*; Palgrave; Morgenthau, Hans (1948). *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York

<sup>6</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002

<sup>7</sup> President Bush, Washington, D.C. (Inter-American Development Bank), March 14, 2002

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/2002/iraq\\_che\\_111502.htm](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/2002/iraq_che_111502.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Wendt, Alexander (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, p. 99

<sup>10</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. (1978). *Theory of International Politics*, 98

<sup>11</sup> Wendt, Alexander (1999)

<sup>12</sup> This is an allusion to a path-breaking paper of A. Wendt, making a point for neo-constructivism in international relations theory: Wendt, Alexander (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics; *International Organizations*, 46/2.

<sup>13</sup> Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press

## References

- Amouyel, Alexandra (2006). "What is Human Security?". Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, *Human Security Journal*, 1/06.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner; Moller, Bjorn (2000). *The Concept of Security: The Pros and Cons of Expansion and Contraction*, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute.
- Carr, E. H. (1939). *The Twenty Years Crisis*. Palgrave.
- Foong Khong, Yuen (2001). "Human Security: A Shotgun Approach to Alleviating Human Misery?" *Global Governance* 7
- High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004). *A more secure world: our shared responsibility* and Kofi Annan's response; United Nations Development Programme (1994). *Human Development Report 1994 – New Dimensions of Human Security*, NewYork: Oxford University Press
- Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press
- Morgenthau, Hans (1948). *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York.
- Paris, Roland (2001). "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?", *International Security*, Vol. 26 (2)
- President Bush, Washington, D.C. (Inter-American Development Bank), March 14, 2002
- The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1978). *Theory of International Politics*.
- Wendt, Alexander (1992). "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics". *International Organization*, 46/2.
- Wendt, Alexander (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge.