The role of human security in shaping Australian foreign policy

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(Report by Rory McKibbin)

Morning session

Prof. Dennis Altman (Director, Institute for Human Security, La Trobe University) welcomed participants and expressed the intention of the workshop to explore possible future directions for Australian foreign policy and how human security might, or should, impact on these policy-making choices and processes. To this end, he briefly contextualized the discussion with mention of the conceptual dilemmas posed by human security, and the need to rethink the concept so that it would have operational relevance for foreign policy makers, a theme that would be revisited by a number of workshop participants during the afternoon.

Prof. Joseph Camilleri (Professor of International Relations and Director, Centre for dialogue, La Trobe University) began the discussion and explored Australia's security policy through the perspective of human security in his overview of a draft paper, *Human Security and National Security: The Australian Context.* The degree of favourable discourse that human security has generated, difficulty in defining the concept, and a demonstrable failure to operationalize the concept, he argued, represented key interrelated areas of debate where academic perspectives and those of foreign policy practitioners were often at odds.

Revisiting a number of conceptual issues and debates in his paper, Prof. Camilleri outlined the difficulty in identifying a coherent referent for human security that avoids an overly individualistic interpretation of the concept. Finding imprecision with 'the people' as a referent, he suggested that communal attachments were an important source of human identity, however, the reality that that individuals belong to more than one community at any point in time posed a challenge to policy makers seeking, for example, to mediate conflict in a given society. Also noted was the paucity of discussion identifying who it was that was responsible for providing security; the state? What should be the division of responsibility for these duties?

Some international context for the discussion was supplied with an overview of international efforts to instil the concept of human security in national and regional security policies. Noting the European emphasis on 'freedom from fear', the Japanese emphasis on 'freedom from want' and the thematic presence of human security in regional organizations such as the EU, the African Union's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and ASEAN, Prof. Camilleri argued that perhaps the Canadian experience provided an apposite example for what might be achieved in Australia. He identified a number of issues from the Canadian experience that were instructive for the Australian context; the need to clarify the definitional scope of the concept between the broad and narrow; an awareness of the impact of domestic political shifts and electoral fortunes on the presence of human security in foreign policy agendas, and finally, the possibility of continuity (in the form of bureaucratic inertia) despite political change.

In an overview of security discourse in Australian foreign policy over the Keating, Howard and Rudd periods, Prof. Camilleri argued that there has never been an attempt to spell out a comprehensive human security policy. Prompted by a perception of transnational threats to Australian security in the late 1980s, official usage of the term gradually appeared in foreign policy discourse and this accompanied a commitment to cooperative security, engagement with Asia and global multilateralism. It was noted that former Foreign Minister Downer by and large maintained this cognisance of transnational security, albeit that by the late 1990s this innovation in foreign policy was closely linked, via terrorism and boat arrivals, to the electoral fortunes of the Howard government. Interestingly, it was noted, perhaps the most demonstrable manifestation of transnational threat, climate change, largely eluded discourse at this time. The potential for this issue to galvanise a place for human security in Australia's foreign policy at the present time was posed by a number of workshop participants in subsequent discussion.

Given the limited success of operationalizing human security in Australia's foreign policy, Prof. Camilleri finally proposed that humanitarian interventions might provide a useful guide for future directions in policy making, arguing that they expose the links between human security and foreign policy practice. To this end, he suggested a number of possible conceptual and practical innovations. These included (a) instilling a greater awareness and sensitivity to cultural knowledge among key institutions (b) generating a greater awareness of links between old and new security threats (c) exploring the notion of common security in a more sustained way (d) developing a more coherent approach to 'whole of government' policy making (e) fostering bureaucratic innovation and building on proposals for a Cabinet Security Committee and National Security Advisors.

Respondents

Dr. Matt McDonald (Senior Lecturer in International Relations, The University of Queensland) began by noting the huge expectation for (and wide grammatical application of) the concept of human security, and posed the question; what institutional reforms would be necessary to incorporate human security into the practice of foreign policy? From a normative perspective he further queried whether human security as a guide for intervention might trap governments into blanket policy responses and he referred to an example in the UK where this appeared to have been the case. From a practical perspective, he wondered whether security definitions, as a reflection of domestic culture, would mean that these policies would be too hard to sell; that they would not resonate with the domestic electorate. One implication flowing from this, he argued, might be that Australia would be a norm follower rather than a norm entrepreneur. Dr. McDonald also cast doubt on the theoretical underpinnings of human security, arguing that there was a danger that securitizing human rights norms might actually compromise the application of these regimes in their own right.

Prof. Nick Bisley (Professor of International Relations, La Trobe University) continued to question the normative and practical utility of human security, warning that the concept was unsettled in all respects and potentially something of an 'empty vessel'. From a conceptual perspective he seconded concerns for identifying the referent object for human security, and further, questioned the analytic assumption that all security problems were actually resolvable—a position that would exclude the possibility that some conflicts might only be resolved with zero-sum outcomes. From a political perspective, he agreed that the concept raises the profile of important issues and the resources necessary to address them, however, he warned that casting everything as a

security threat might dilute or decrease the return on the concept. Moreover, he argued, the greater the complexity of the 'recipe' and the degree of politicization of reforms, the less likely it would be that policy ends would be achieved. From an operational standpoint, Prof. Bisley argued that the habits of institution were difficult to change, even in liberal Australia, noting with some irony that perhaps democratic processes might slow foreign policy reforms of this nature. In conclusion, it was postulated that the last ten to fifteen years might represent the highpoint for the concept of human security, at least as presented in these terms, and that the recent Australian Defence White Paper showed a return to more traditional geo-political and state focussed security concerns.

Discussion

Given the normative and conceptual issues outlined by all three speakers, the morning discussion was first concerned with the normative question of whether human security should be embraced by policy makers, and second, the question of how the concept has been incorporated into foreign policy in Australia and abroad. For some, human security was not a choice for policy makers, and as demonstrated in Afghanistan, the threats were tangible and states had no option but to respond in innovative ways. It was noted that discourse emanating from Australian defence quarters demonstrated a willingness to adapt to a more interconnected world—or 'quietly subverting' and innovating policy change—albeit that this interconnectedness was identified at a national level rather than a communal or personal level. Another reading of these changes, and the declarations of donor governments, was that human security had been manipulated by policy elites and that the objectives of the policy had little to do with the normative content of the concept. Similarly, it was argued that the normative attraction of the concept glossed over quite disparate views of how recipient societies should be (re)constructed. This cleavage, it was argued further, was manifest as government departments practicing the 'politics of agenda' experienced difficulty creating coherent 'whole of government' policy. The problem of complex and imprecise language was also identified as a distraction from the greater cause, to 'get in there' and deal with problems promptly. Specific to Australia, others argued that by comparison with other donor governments, where defence budgets were decreasing as funding for development was increasing, Australian policy demonstrated a traditional 'old school' geo-political emphasis. Others thought that there was some evidence that the current Gillard government was actually retreating from the international environment, and in this vein, participants wondered how an Australian seat on the UN Security Council might impact the prominence of human security principles in Australian foreign policy.

Prof. Camilleri's response

In response to a broad range of comments linking the acceptance of human security principles to the activities of the state, Prof. Camilleri argued that human security wouldn't stand or fall on the activity of the state. The policies of states clearly exercise a huge influence on the practice or otherwise of this concept, however, he argued that there must be many small steps between articulating an idea and putting it into practice. The criticism that states had hijacked the concept to suit their own ends was inevitable, however, this in itself did not justify dismissing the concept entirely. Prof Camilleri emphasized the 'virtue of a good idea' especially if lip service to the idea ultimately obligated states to practice these principles. In relation to the tension between human

rights norms and human security, Prof. Camilleri acknowledged the common ground, however, he felt that human security had the capacity to link human rights with peace and the environment. This would necessarily be a long process of activism and perhaps subversion, he argued, perhaps ten to twenty years, and he cast suspicion on the argument that crises were sudden, requiring sudden responses, thus rendering debates over definition futile. Rather, the situation was one in which conflict brewed over time and could be addressed more proactively and in accordance with the principles of human security.

Afternoon session

Prof. Andrew Mack (Director, The Human Security Report Project, Simon Fraser University) led off the afternoon session with a presentation of empirical evidence tracing the nature of conflict over the period 1946-2007. In a preliminary comment, Prof. Mack acknowledged the intellectual and practical difficulties posed by debates that sought to clarify the scope and referent of security; however, he argued that in some respects the debates were unhelpful. From his perspective human security was not a theory, but rather, a field of study or an understanding that the military dimension was just one aspect of security. In terms of broad and narrow definitions of human security he favoured making a distinction between development and 'threats to the vital core of human existence', citing the research of development economist, Dr. Sabina Alkire. His interest in human security was bound by the causes and consequences of organized violence, and this was the focus of empirical research conducted by the Human Security Report Project (HSRP).

Recent research conducted by the HSRP has unearthed two key findings. First, the Project found that the number of international state based conflicts and the number of war deaths, direct and indirect, had decreased since 1946. Second, that the number of intrastate conflicts, or civil wars, had decreased over the period 1992-2003. These numbers have risen more recently, however, the long-term trend is downward and the intensity of these recent conflicts has lessened. Prof. Mack acknowledged the difficulty in finding reliable data for this research (and government funding) and the difficulty in ascertaining the indirect fallout of conflict such as human rights violations.

The single most important influences on these long-term trends, it was argued, were the end of the Cold War and the end of colonialism. The drying up of resources for 'proxy' wars and an increase in UN and international activism were significant factors, despite the limited success of UN operations. He argued that peace agreements were more common and stable during the 1990s and that a number of normative changes in regard to war averseness, the prevalence of democratic civil peace, a decline in political discrimination against minorities and a greater adherence to human rights norms had influenced these trends. Moreover, Prof. Mack predicted that these trends were likely to persist because it was unlikely that conflict of the scale and intensity experienced during the Cold War would return, an increase in peacemaking operations, increased economic interdependence globally and increasing evidence of 'people power' mitigating potential conflict.

Respondents

Bob McMullen (former Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance) responded to the discussion with a policy maker's axiom: 'and therefore what?' What action follows from discussion? He acknowledged that there was increased discussion of development issues within the Australian military, for example, however, he also noted that at the present time there was no evidence that the human security debate had impacted Australian public policy at all. While many government departments now have international components, the flow of inter-department communication was low and this raised questions in regard to whole of government coordination. To this end, Mr. McMullen advocated regular reviews of aid and development policies, seconding Prof Camilleri's advocacy of conducting forums for discussion, such as Parliamentary Committees, to promote discussion and bridge the gap between public policy and theory in the future.

Prof. Hilary Charlesworth (Professor of International Law and Human Rights, and Director for the Centre of International Governance and Justice, Australian national University) expressed concern that the notion of human security, as it evolved in the 1990s, had been 'charred' by the security discourse since 9/11. She argued that there was potential for the security agenda to compromise human rights protection and that this had been demonstrated when former Attorney-General of Australia, Philip Ruddock, invoked human security as a justification of anti-terror legislation that was adopted in Australia in the absence of any real public debate.

Prof. Tim Dunne (Professor of International Relations, The University of Queensland) asked what it was that human security sought to address: a more secure world? If so, he argued, what did human security bring to the table that the Copenhagen School or other conceptions of security had not? Conceptions of individual security had been developed for a long time and the question of how individual security related to communal security was not entirely clear. These analytic questions needed answering, he argued, to bridge the gap between activist and scholar. On Prof. Mack's paper, Prof. Dunne noted that the empirical research suggested that the principles of human security were in evidence, although more so in the European context than elsewhere. He was also concerned that perhaps the data belittled the trauma of recent wars such as Iraq where the indirect consequences of the conflict were potentially more far-reaching than currently acknowledged.

Dr. Anthony Burke (Associate Prof. Politics Program, Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales) returned to questions of how to operationalize human security in Australian foreign policy. From a normative perspective, he referred to Ken Booth's security analysis to argue that making humans secure had enormous flow on benefits, and he wondered whether events in Bougainville, for example, could have been predicted if more attention was paid to localized issues. Similarly, he postulated that there must be other mechanisms to prevent conflict in East Asia besides traditional deterrents and argued the need for a different kind of ADF to serve these ends.

Discussion

In response to Prof. Mack's presentation there was some question of how well the data captured the indirect deaths and broader impact of recent intrastate conflict. Acknowledging the brutal conduct in these conflicts, he agreed that this was a difficulty. Indicators such as declining under-five mortality rates in conflict zones were consistent with a general decline in deaths of this age group because of factors such as immunization rates. Others questioned whether there had in fact been a small arms flood that had fuelled recent conflict. Prof. Mack agreed that this was the case, however, he argued that the weaponry was far less lethal than that utilized during Cold War conflicts thus resulting in less fatalities.

The problem of making links between the conceptual and operational was again prominent in discussion. In particular, it was noted that both AusAID and academia had failed to consult and share knowledge. Others qualified this observation, arguing that in the area of health, AusAID and universities had actually fostered very close relations. In a related theme, it was argued that national security discourse in Australia was dominated by realist conceptions of power and power conflict—as distinct from recent discourse outside of Australia. In response to this characterization of Australia's foreign policy discourse it was argued that in fact there was evidence that key institutions were cognisant of new threats to security and the demands that would be made of the ADF and other departments in the future. However, the problem for some was one of presentation. From this perspective the principles of human security would be more likely to be accepted if they were presented to policy makers in different terms; that is, not as 'human security'. The notion that human security be 'sold' to policy makers was contested in the final stages of the discussion by those advocating a longer-term and perhaps more subversive approach, and on this note the workshop drew to a close.