Human Security refers to the security of individuals and communities, expressed as both ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom from want’. Intolerable threats to Human Security range from genocide and slavery through natural disasters, such as hurricanes or floods, to massive violations of the rights to food, health and housing.

The adoption of a Human Security concept, first proposed by the Barcelona Report of the Study Group on European Security Capabilities, would represent a qualitative change in the conduct of European Union foreign and security policy. It would be particularly apposite as the EU seeks to improve its effectiveness and visibility as a collective global actor, and to articulate a distinctive European Way of Security. Terms do matter and Human Security is not simply a ‘leitmotif’ for EU security policies, or an analytical label that categorises the EU’s international role in the way that concepts such as normative power or civilian power have done. Rather it provides an ongoing and dynamic organising frame for security action, something which is currently absent from European foreign-policy texts and practices. For this reason, Human Security can be seen in terms of a pro-active strategic narrative which has the potential to further EU foreign-policy integration.

The language of Human Security is important because it deals with the concept as a cognitive framework for how policy-makers and the European public view and articulate issues of external security. This is necessary in order to help us to know what we mean when we talk about the ideas, values, interests and goals of EU external relations. Recent debates about the semantics of the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ or whether what is going on in Sudan should be called genocide, reveal an acute political sensitivity towards policy terms and labels. In a Europe of 27 member states, concepts can help us to reach common understandings and expressions of issues. Besides, the practice of Human Security deals with how this doctrinal concept translates into action, and whether it is useful in guiding the actions of policy-makers, planners and experts in the field.

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Human Security: A European Strategic Narrative

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1. The lexicon of Human Security

Developments in European foreign and security policy have helped catalyse an emerging European discourse, but the lexicon of terms used – ranging from crisis management to conflict prevention and civil–military cooperation – is a muddled affair that obscures rather than clarifies the nature of European foreign policy.

Human Security, as a term, can be understood to encompass the concepts of conflict prevention, crisis management and civil–military coordination, but it takes them further. It draws on the debates generated by these concepts, as well as other terms used more broadly in current global discourse, such as ‘respon- sibility to protect’, ‘effective multilateralism’ and ‘human de- velopment’.

Insecurity is closely related to crisis. Human Security can be treated as the crisis end of terms such as human rights and hu- man development. It has to do with human need at moments of extreme vulnerability, not only in wars but in the face of nat- ural and technological disasters as well. Security is often viewed as the absence of physical violence, while development is viewed as material development, improved living standards. These dis- tinctions pervade much of the literature about Human Security as a policy concept, but they are misleading. Many conceptual boundaries, such as those between political, civil, economic or military, have to be redrawn in an era of globalisation because they are defined largely in terms of a nation-state frame. Human insecurity, even in conflict, is not just about the impact of military violence; it is also about the consequences of human rights viola- tions and violent crime, and also the material consequences of conflict.

Human Security is part of human development and human rights, but it is at the sharp end of both. It is also about feeling safe on the streets or being able to influence political decision- making. Human Security policies are concerned with crisis man- agement, but they go beyond crisis management since they offer a perspective on crises. Human Security is about how we respond to an urgent physical or material threat to individuals and communities. From a Human Security perspective, the aim is not just political stability; it also encompasses notions of justice and sustainability. Stability tends to entail the absence of overt conflict or, in economic terms, halting a downward spiral of GDP or the value of a currency. In recent years, the international community seems to have learned how to stabilise conflicts; how to reach and sustain peace agreements and how to stabilise econom- ies. But it has not yet learned how to address the security of individuals and communities and deal with crime, human rights violations and joblessness. The parlance of crisis management, especially on the civil side, within the European Union does, of course, emphasise some of these ‘vulnerabilities’ – for example,
the conditions for a political process through which such an authority can be built and it must assist the promotion of law and justice, as well as the authority’s ability to guarantee material well-being. And it must itself be viewed as legitimate, both locally and within the international community.

iii) A bottom-up approach
Intensive consultation with local people is required, not just to ‘win hearts and minds’ and to gain better understanding – although both are important – but also to enable vulnerable communities themselves to create the conditions for peace and stability. This means involving civil society, women and young people, and not just political leaders or those who wield guns. Outsiders cannot deliver human security; they can only help.

iv) Effective multilateralism
This is related to legitimacy and means a commitment to work within the framework of international law, alongside other international and regional agencies, individual states and non-state actors. This is what distinguishes a Human Security approach from neo-imperialism. It also means a better division of tasks and greater coherence, solving problems through rules and cooperation and creating common rules and norms.

v) Integrated regional approach
There is a tendency to focus on particular countries when dealing with a crisis. Yet insecurity spills over borders through refugees, transnational criminal networks, and so on. Regional dialogues and action in neighbouring countries need to be systematically integrated into policies for crisis.

vi) Clear and transparent strategic direction
When the European Union intervenes externally, it must do so with clear legal authorisation, transparent mandates and a coherent overall strategy. Where European security units are deployed there needs to be a close linkage between policy-makers and those on the ground, with the former having ultimate control over operations. All EU external engagements should be led by civilians.

3. Human Security is value added
What would Human Security principles add to what is being done already? Essentially they amount to a shared strategic narrative with several consequences:

a) Coherence. It is very difficult to achieve coherence through institutional measures. Turf-fighting and bureaucratic competition are inevitable in any large organisation; additional coordination mechanisms can often just add to the layers of competition. What is really needed is conceptual coherence – to be clear about shared goals and principles – to encourage notions of public service and commitment.

b) Effectiveness. The principles of Human Security provide a focus for external mandates. They offer a framework for standardising doctrines and rules of engagement. Essentially, the principles, adapted to each situation, could be expressed on a card carried by personnel deployed to crisis regions. They could also be used as a checklist for those involved in planning and evaluating operations and provide a reference point for the EU’s intervention.

c) Visibility. At present, public awareness of the EU’s role is very limited. An understandable policy concept could help to increase the public impact of EU missions. A Human Security approach would address both the internal and the external legitimacy of intervention, underpinning it with a set of norms and values, and offering both EU citizens and those in target countries with clear principles and justifications for security policy.

Why should the European Union adopt a Human Security approach and lexicon? Concern about wars, human rights, the environment or poverty are part of the identity of Europeans. Human Security is about upholding these norms in crisis situations. It could serve as a ‘symbolic signpost’ in the development of the EU’s strategic culture, reconciling the Union’s normative and value-driven tradition with a quest for effectiveness. Finally, a Human Security approach might be the only way to close what can be described as the security gap. Conventional military approaches do not seem to be working in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan or Lebanon. Millions of people in large parts of the world live in situations of deep insecurity – in Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The challenge of global insecurity calls for a new language and practice of security that is embodied in what we call Human Security.