Right-wing Populism and the Attack on Cooperative International Security

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The contemporary political environment has seen a paradoxical hijacking of key liberal peace and security concepts which helped to secure the post-Cold War era. With key concepts like human security undermined, what will come next? The following is an initial reflection as my colleague, and I embark on a larger study of how the emergence of right-wing populist nationalism has become a significant global phenomenon and what impact it has had for dominant theories of security in the post-World War II liberal international system. From the challenges to the NATO alliance to questioning the link between poverty and violence, the peace, security and development agenda has been radically transformed in a few short years, with trust between former allies eroding and the moderate level of predictability in the liberal international system being shaken.

The story of global right-wing populist propagation begins by taking aim first at the idea of collective security, a pillar of post WW2 liberal order. Cooperation between states is frequently being framed by the current right-wing nationalist populism in opposition to nations and sovereignty, with relations between key partners being shaken by political leaders challenging key precepts of decent international interactions. This spread of populist nationalism has emerged from the seeds of a defence of welfare state entitlements and, more broadly, hijacking the human security narrative that is the outgrowth of securitization of all essentials of human life, which the state can protect or provide. In this new spread of right-wing populist nationalism, we can see its unique character in how pillar concepts of international relations, such as collective security and human security have been eroded and worse co-opted in many ways, undermining their original goals. Policy-makers must be especially cognizant of how ideas can be perverted by the new brand of social media-driven, angry and populist politics. Through an examination of how the ideas of human and collective security have been redeployed in the service of xenophobic defensive nationalism, we can see the early stages of the radical undermining and perversion of the post-Cold War liberal security order.

Donald Trump reiterates that his responsibility is not the world, but the United States. Many of the Americans who had elected him purportedly wanted an end to "corrupt globalism." Trump consistently accuses Democratic candidates of wanting to give influence to "corrupt, power-hungry globalists" in some kind of a massive elite conspiracy. At a campaign rally in Las Vegas, Trump clarified: "The forces opposing us in Washington are the same people who squandered trillions of dollars overseas, who sacrificed our sovereignty, who shipped away our jobs, who oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of the world. Hey, I'm the president of the United States – I'm not the president of the globe". At a campaign rally in West Palm Beach, Trump further elaborated the conspiracy: "For those who control the levers of power in Washington, and for the global special interests, they partner with these people that don't have your good in mind (…) Our campaign represents a true existential threat like they haven't seen before."

This brand of populist nationalism reinforces and further foments the continued (rhetorical) attacks on multilateral security networks, alliances and communities. Trump's aggressive accusations of elite globalist conspiracy garnered many reactions, with many prominent news outlets challenging the assertions and attempting to "set the record straight." He was speaking to the security needs of Americans who were told their entitlements to wealth and global dominance were being squandered. It seems the American conception of itself as a guarantor of global peace and security is waning, giving way to a more narrow American national security. The two, global peace and American

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national security, need not be mutually exclusive. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the other hand, repeatedly called for the fostering of multilateral relations. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has supported calls to redouble multilateralism, supporting Merkel's efforts to stress mutual interdependence that encompasses economic, military, and socio-cultural relationships.

However, the rest of the world also face massive challenges from those who promote withdrawal from efforts to institutionalize notions of security based on cooperation and multilateralism. Trump and the throngs of social media trolls that have contributed to his political machine pointed to socio-economically depressed regions in the US as evidence of this great sell-out. Authoritarian populists and nationalists around the globe have seized this narrative and continue to exploit economic and cultural anxieties: Viktor Orban in Hungary, the *Brexiteers* like Nigel Farage and the UKIP party in the UK, Italy's governing anti-establishment parties, the *Alternative for Germany* party, or Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. The redoubling of commitment to multilateralism by figures like Merkel in Germany and Trudeau in Canada, both stalwart allies of the USA, reflects deep anxiety about the future of a liberal world order.

Hijacking the Logic of Human Security

Indeed, heightened anxiety can be found around nationalist populist discourses and their recipients. Examples abound in areas of the Western hemisphere are marked by socio-economic transformations along the lines of globalization. Former manufacturing areas from the American Midwest to Central Germany have experienced drastic socio-economic upheaval and status-decline (Putnam 2001/2015; Stiglitz 2002; Milanovic 2016; Rodrik 2018; Manow 2018). As national economic outlays re-oriented towards service sector industries, jobs have been shifted away from manufacturing, affecting the quality of jobs and intensifying rural-urban divisions as demographic change altering people's livelihoods (Sassen 1991; Bell 1999; High 2003; Kollmorgen 2005). Now, these genuine social and economic issues are hijacked in a securitized logic that draws on an implicit perversion of human securities through flipping security theory away from the state to the individual. Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan translates directly into "Make Me Great," for those that proscribe to his political cocktail.

The resonances of this socio-economic decline were gradually brought to the fore in elections held throughout the past two decades, as right-wing populist movements increasingly materialized the discourses of anxiety in a political manner. At the same time, the concept of human security ran successfully and was endorsed by many governments and administrations across the political spectrum. This sparks the theory that there is a link between the success of the human security agenda and the re-emerging national populist reactionary politics which feed on basic security dilemma fears.

Security encompasses material and non-material concerns. The former combine military, economic, and geographical aspects. The latter can include society and culture, but also individual notions of identity, work, family, and ways of life. Human security attempted a more inclusive conceptualization of the concerns of people. It is central to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals in order to achieve "inclusive peace, justice and the well-being and dignity of all people." In terms of international peace and security, there are few ideas as deeply connected to the globalist perspective as Human Security. Born out of a critical assessment of international security thinking, the idea was meant to re-orient away from security being about protecting the institution of the state, towards securing "the individual." This thinking was operationalized most effectively by thinkers such as Mary Kaldor (2006), who were looking to find a way to move the effort to provide security beyond inward-looking defense policy and push the development of more cooperative foreign policy and international programming that could contribute to a cosmopolitan peace and security. Through providing for the essential elements of this Human Security, everything from health to food was securitized under the new framework. Human Security became intrinsically enmeshed with ideas such as the responsibility to protect, where the government now possessed responsibilities to their people rather than hiding behind the principle of sovereignty to protect the state, often at the expense of its citizens. These were pillar ideas of the supposed globalist conspiracy.

Countries like Canada, Japan and Norway, have adopted the idea. Taking leadership roles, they re-oriented their foreign policies to reflect human security (Axworthy, 1997). As the work in places such as South Sudan or Haiti became about supporting the human security of people facing the risks of insecurity, the interests were supposed to

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become about the well-being of fellow humans sharing some notion of equality, or at least shared rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It afforded the UN, other IGOs and myriad private development and humanitarian organizations to engage in security, an area where previously national governments had asserted a monopoly.

The idea of human security is destined to fail without reconciling the alternative understandings of its focus on individuals since people at large are defensive, and so it is about whose security is at stake. Human Security, as a result, is acutely susceptible to being instrumentalized for defensive realist agendas, and even more extreme populist reactionary impulses. An example is the use of the idea that welfare state entitlements are being stolen or abused by refugees and immigrants. Despite regular debunking, it is now an all too common refrain that welfare state benefits need to be protected from outsiders.

The Challenge to Collective Security by Defensive Nationalism

Collective security used to highlight the need for arrangements among states which underline that the security of one concerns all – regionally and increasingly at a global level. It accounts for mutual responses to security breaches. Given the recent experiences of political volatility, it becomes clear that collective security needs to be the international policy agenda until such a time that universal human rights and equality of the individual have emerged. Trump and the other nationalists present a world where security gains of those in foreign places result in security losses at home. This is framed in economic terms, with blame for deprivation on the others. "Thugs" coming from Latin America are one of Trump's favorite punching bags. A social media battleground exaggerating the inflow of migrants results in a paradoxical reality where wider connectivity breeds greater division. By individualizing everything, in parallel with the human security discourse, many groups perceive security dilemmas facing their immediate in-groups. Most dangerous examples are white supremacist hate groups, like the ones that marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting "the Jews will not replace us." More recently, German right-wing extremists are suspected to have planned and carried out the assassination of a regional conservative politician that defended the rights of refugees, which further reveals tendencies towards violence.

The conflating of economic fortunes of many individual Americans with global security issues does not stop at blaming racialized gangs or terrorists. Tariffs, Trump's favorite foreign policy tool of late, are set out in national security terms. Otherwise, he would likely be running afoul of WTO rules and contravening key international treaties.

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Accordingly, Canadian steel and aluminum were framed as a threat to US national security. A sweeping logic follows that any negative balance of trade on a commodity results in the loss of American jobs. Loss of jobs is the root of suffering-economic distress, drug abuse and any other of the social problems facing major regions of the USA, more often than not in red states of the Midwest or the South. This is a human security argument, albeit a perverted one. Trump securitized trade with a direct link to individuals' well-being, not just any individuals but those individuals making up the targeted in-groups understood to be Trump's supporters, his so-called "base." Through the seemingly personal platform of Twitter, he made many feel engaged in a personal, individualized effort to secure their economic well-being and by extension, the success of their respective group or community. With this dynamic underlying his narrative of power – authority and legitimacy – Trump (and his emulators around the globe) must question collective efforts at security since the logic being sold is the zero-sum competition for well-being. How then, a Trump supporter might think, "does funding the NATO alliance fit," asking, "what has NATO done for me lately?"

Conclusion

In the United States, the move to a more expansive globalist human security agenda by Obama and others went far enough to trigger the susceptibility of people to perceived human security dilemmas – real or imagined. Those who perceive themselves as losing out due to globalization perceive insecurity heightened in human security terms, as they see their own personal human security threatened. At the same time, the efforts of the Obama administration and states like Norway, Germany or Canada to further human security agendas are correspondingly seen as a further strike at the security of those perceiving globalization as undermining their well-being and that of their immediate community.

When policies can be framed about the security of the other or foreigner at the expense of the local or domestic, populists and right-wing opportunists can take advantage. The risk of co-option by right-wing xenophobic opportunists is always high, no matter if the intent of a policy or discussion uses balanced and tolerant language with interest in finding solutions to economic hardships and real suffering due to global economic imbalances. In the current political climate, many efforts' to address social and economic inequities are held hostage to extremists that take all discourses of grievance or solutions to conclusions well beyond the original intent, leading otherwise reasonable people into echo-chambers of blame, xenophobia, resistance and ultimately hate. Therefore, progressive policy needs to be such that it works not to trigger or exacerbate this discursive dynamic. In the emergent political environment, most issues are susceptible to be framed in stark zero-sum terms. Regardless of logical fallacy or deep paradox, people goaded on by political entrepreneurs, particularly vulnerable on social media, seem set to continue to perceive their own security in opposition to "others" from afar. At the same time, these groups are embracing the individualizing and securitizing human security logic and correspondingly undermining the goal of any inclusive effort to improve the situation for those perceived as "others." After all, the metric of well-being seems all too often a relative one, rather than an essential one derived from the satisfaction of basic human needs. As a result, within the contemporary setting, a bulwark and resistance to further global cooperation and integration is the fact that a part of the human security logic became embraced by many and perverted towards radically alternative agendas and interests. Tragically, for a sufficiently large number of people in states across the globe, human security logics are translated into defending them against the threats of "The Other."

No matter how illogical Trade Wars, Walls, and Foreign Attacks may seem—they all can make sense in one way or another for protecting one's own narrow in-group or personal human security. With the individual as the reference point for global peace and security, the danger looms over the question of how reliable collectives of individual humans are. It comes as no surprise that the battleground for this today is social media. The immediate casualties of the perversion of the human security logic are aid budgets and those whom the human security agenda was meant to benefit, most acutely the victims of repressive regimes or those living where governments lack the capacity or will to provide security for people. The longer-term danger is contributing to the re-setting of the global security order away from cooperation and multilateralism toward narrow and dangerous nationalist conceptions of defensive realism and competitive balance of power.

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