

Why Human Security Matters: Rethinking Australian foreign policy

Edited by Dennis Altman, Joseph A Camilleri, Robyn Eckersley and Gerhard Hoffstaedter, Allen & Unwin 2012, 218 pp, RRP \$39.99.

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In her concluding chapter, Robyn Eckersley claims that the chapters in this book:

Provide the first sustained analysis of how the concept of human security might be adapted and institutionalised in Australia.

Yes, because it is a good attempt to marry the theory with the practice and make some practical suggestions about how policy makers could proceed in the more complex environment that foreign policy now exists. She goes on to conclude:

They also show how the concept of human security has the potential to inaugurate a sea change in Australia's foreign policy away from the traditional notion of the Australian island continent as a fortress to be defended, and towards a deeper acknowledgement of the inextricable interdependencies between the security of Australia, the region and the rest of the world'. p 197

Yes and no. Though there are tensions and constraints in the doing, this shift has been in train for more than thirty years, though the ways in which this has been done has perhaps reflected less of the human security dimension than the contributors to this volume would prefer.

The successful marriage of the theoretical with the real represented by this collection, is one good reason why Australia's new Foreign Minister would do well to read it, especially chapters four and five, and to require her minders to consider their implications for the policy options which come across her desk. In the first of them, Joe Camilleri eloquently portrays the contemporary complexity of international affairs and the very much broader range of issues which could compromise Australia's security which we now have no choice but to consider in determining Australia's national interest and framing appropriate policy responses. His chapter four is a critique of Australia's foreign policy over the last 20 years, the extent to which a broader range than usual of considerations have been taken into account in determining Australia's security interests but the failure to integrate these into the national security debate. That is, Australian policy makers got the point, but could not institutionalise a response. This is the challenge that lies ahead.

Camilleri also, practically, begins to put some meat on the theoretical bones of this analysis by identifying some ways forward for Australian governments including, for example, by inclusion of the Parliament in the debate through a JFADC Inquiry, (a sensible proposal at a time when parliaments around the world are showing a restlessness and a rejection of executive prerogative in decisions to take their countries to war). And so does Anthony Burke in the second of these chapters. He has written his prescription as a policy manifesto which should provide a useful challenge and trigger to reconsideration of policy platforms on both sides of politics.

As the only primary institutional illustration of the shift or acceptance of the need to shift the traditional arrangements of international relations to reflect the human security dimension, the concept of Responsibility To Protect (R2P) features significantly in this book, notably in Alex Bellamy's chapter on 'The prevention of mass atrocities: From principle to Australian foreign policy'. For all the leadership role Australia played in the development and the battle for the acceptance of R2P, however, he argues that the Australian government 'has not embraced the principle more broadly or made a comprehensive commitment to integrate it into foreign policy' (p192). One reason is the bilateral versus multilateral preferences and priorities particularly of Coalition governments. Another is that the approach required is more prophylactic than medicinal, getting into the causes of likely conflicts before they occur, and this is much more difficult to do in a world still essentially characterised by the sovereignty of the nation state.

Or does it simply show how hard it is to move at the top level and much easier at the bottom, e.g. through shifting the focus of aid programmes?

This volume neatly, comprehensively and in a fashion comprehensible to the international relations generalist encompasses the vast changes that have come over international relations replacing the relative certainties of the Cold War era. Essentially, it argues for a shift to a bottom up approach, assessing, analysing and recommending policy from the perspective of human security, the security of the individual, rather than from the more traditional and, to date, dominant top down perspective of the nation state. David Mickler in his chapter on Australia's 'new engagement' with Africa, 'What role for human security?' looks at what this could mean for Africa. Gerhard Hoffstaedter and Chris Roche's looks at what it has meant in Afghanistan where a bottom up style of security developed by default in some tribal areas, though the example is an uncomfortable one given the absence in that case of a respect for the full range of human rights usually included in the human security agenda (p153). This raises another enormous complexity for the acceptance of the human security approach noted by McDonald (p107), namely the extent to which the human security debate is based on western values 'masquerading as universal ones'.

Taken to its logical conclusion the human security agenda suggests that the most central or ambitious or closest to supranational organisation that the world has managed to come, the United Nations, built on the sovereign independence of states and a permanent definition of the big five, is redundant. But don't we, all other things being equal, have to hang onto the few figments of a supranational system that we have managed to create for the occasional good they can do?

The rationale for a reconsideration of how we think about international relations is the fact that an increasing number of threats to security come from sources other than traditional inter-state conflict. To suggest, though, that it is an either/or question, i.e. the traditional realist acceptance of the nation state as paramount actor and the protection of its integrity/security as pre-eminent interest, or the acceptance that it is the absence of human security which is the primary source of conflict and that this must therefore be the focus for action, does not accord with the facts – and dare I say it – the realities of the world in which we (still) live in the 21st century. Perhaps Stephen James has got it right in his chapter ‘In defence of breadth: The broad approach to human security’ where he argues that: ‘When institutionalising and operationalising human security, it is important to think of it as a guiding normative ethos’ (p51).

Foreign policy decision makers need continuing flexibility of mind and approach in the ever changing world in which nation state boundaries no longer frame the certainties of the kinds of sovereignties which once could be exercised. Old stereotypes, frameworks and norms just won’t do. The extraordinary efforts to articulate and achieve recognition for the R2P concept, flawed, patchy sporadic as its application can only ever be in the world in which we still live, speaks volumes about the difficulties of achieving consensus about top down approaches to the pursuit of international peace and security, including human security. To think human security, though, from a bottom up perspective, so that it informs what could and should be the most people focussed approaches such as those for aid, and trade and people movement, in the process ameliorating or resolving some sets of issues which can be the causes of conflict and war, may be the best option available to us to better manage the security issues of our times.

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