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ABSTRACT

NATO adopted its Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles at the Madrid Summit of 2022. Whilst NATO identifies human security as an "essential tool" and seeks to integrate it to a degree sufficient to shape its core tasks, the Guiding Principles lack depth; they are underdeveloped, fail to make clear the distinctive nature of the concept of human security, the evidence base on which it is founded, or the difference it can make to the achievement of the organization's goals. Discussing NATO's emerging shift to a human security approach, this article provides a framework of human security based on six evidence-based principles that provide additional depth and clarity to NATO's approach. The framework can be used by NATO and its personnel, such as Human Security Advisors, Military Police and Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) officers, to develop the military contribution to human security (MC2HS).

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INTRODUCTION

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO adopted its Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles, signalling an important shift towards a human-centred approach for the organization's core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security (NATO, 2022b). In identifying human security as an "essential tool", NATO frames it as a means to provide an improved understanding of conflicts and crises, develop a comprehensive view of the human environment, and enhance the operational effectiveness of its forces.

However, there are two key issues that have undermined the operationalization of human security within the organization. First, NATO's 2022 Human Security Approach lacks depth, with underdeveloped principles that fail to make clear the unique nature of the concept of human security and the difference it can make to the achievement of the organization's goals. NATO claims its approach to human security is "drawn from that of the United Nations", noting that the UN "conceptualised human security as a multi-sectoral approach to security that identifies and addresses widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of the people" (NATO, 2022b). But whilst human security was introduced by the UN Development Programme in 1994, the UN has very little in the way of formal policies on the issue; today the term is notably absent from the Security Council's discussions of international peace and security.

Second, in the absence of detailed principles giving context for operational and tactical implementation, different parts of NATO have interpreted and implemented their own understandings of human security, resulting in confusion and contention (Yilmaz, 2025, p. 296). NATO members may also have pre-existing national interpretations of human security, such as the UK's "whole of government" approach to "Human Security in Defence" (Ministry of Defence, 2024) – or, like Canada, be looking to develop one (Department of National Defence, 2024, p. 14).

How then can NATO further develop its human security approach to preserve human security's novelty, add depth to its principles, and ensure consistency in its implementation? NATO HQ has provided strategic guidance on the meaning of human security across the organization's core tasks in its Human Security Agenda (NATO, 2024a). Across the organization, NATO has begun work to operationalize human security in its operations by beginning workstreams on the military contribution to human security (MC2HS), aimed at generating a new approach to its "cross-cutting topics" (CCTs): protection of civilians; preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV); combating trafficking in human beings; children and armed conflict; and cultural property protection (NATO, 2025, p. 7). But NATO is yet to agree the military contribution to human security, to produce military doctrine on human security that aligns with or replaces existing doctrine on its CCTs, and to outline specific taskings for its Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) Joint Function to operationalize the approach.

First, this article outlines NATO's emerging shift to a human security approach and explains how the organization has sought to encapsulate its CCTs under a human security umbrella. Second, the article argues that due to the lack of a detailed UN approach to operationalizing human security, NATO must develop its own. Third, the article provides a unique principled framework of human security based on six evidence-based principles, seeking to provide additional depth and clarity to NATO's existing Principles, and thus the CCTs. Methodologically, the framework is based on a synthesis of the literature on human security using, primarily, the UN's *Human Security Now* report of 2003 and associated academic literature. By using interpretative analysis, we draw out key aspects of human security found in the literature to modify NATO's seven Principles, accommodating the wider evidence base that exemplifies the novelty of a human security approach. Lastly, the article explains how the framework is vital for NATO operations, under all three NATO core tasks, and improves NATO's legitimacy and credibility.

The framework can be used by NATO and its personnel, such as Human Security Advisors, Military Police and CIMIC staff officers, to develop doctrine on human security and analyse what it means in the NATO context, including consideration of the military contribution to human security. NATO personnel can also use this framework to guide the implementation of NATO's CCTs within operations. Ultimately, NATO can use this principled framework to implement the CCTs within intelligence preparation, assessment for planning, and during mission execution

to deliver an improved picture of the human environment, act preventatively, and support multilateral engagement with a range of actors such as humanitarian agencies, the UN, and regional organizations.

NATO's CROSS-CUTTING TOPICS AND THE SHIFT TO HUMAN SECURITY

This section traces how NATO has developed the CCTs that form the substantive content of the organization's human security approach. Where the CCTs were formerly distinct, individual policy areas, NATO is now working to harmonize their implementation under its human security approach. It is, then, important to set the scene for the need for a deep, principled framework of human security by explaining how the term "human security" has emerged as an umbrella term and how the CCTs are, in effect, NATO's method of operationalizing human security.

In the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, there is no mention of issues such as the protection of civilians, conflict-related sexual violence, trafficking in human beings or cultural property protection, despite the operational effectiveness of NATO forces consistently being impacted by civilian harm (NATO, 2010; Heard & Thue, 2022). However, throughout the 2010s NATO developed its understanding of so-called cross-cutting topics, which it implemented as distinct policy areas to support and integrate United Nations Security Council resolutions into Alliance military doctrine, training and operational planning and conduct, and align NATO's political and operational considerations with international best practices and guidance.

In its Allied Joint Doctrine (NATO, 2022a), NATO defines the CCTs as five policy agendas: (1) protection of civilians; (2) preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence; (3) combatting trafficking in human beings; (4) children and armed conflict; and (5) cultural property protection.

Currently, the five areas of work are the responsibility of the Office of the Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security (SGSR WPS). The Human Security Unit was established in the Office of the SGSR WPS in 2019. The Unit was given its own mandate to allow for the formation of a distinct political-strategic agenda for human security, separate from NATO's long-established Women, Peace and Security agenda, and to cohere the mandate for each of the CCTs.

The first Policy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings was adopted by all heads of state and government at NATO's 2004 Istanbul Summit and then updated in 2023 (NATO, 2023b). The subject of children and armed conflict was first addressed by NATO heads of state and government at the 2012 Chicago Summit (NATO, 2012a, para. 17). Based on UN Security Resolution 1612, NATO adopted its Military Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) in 2012 to integrate CAAC into military doctrine, training and operational planning and conduct (NATO, 2012b). CAAC also received a new Policy in 2023 (NATO, 2023a).

At the Chicago and Wales Summits in 2012 and 2014, respectively, NATO heads of state and government "expressed their commitment to the fight against sexual violence in conflict" and the organization adopted Military Guidelines on the Prevention of, and Response to, Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in 2015 (NATO, 2012a; 2015). Later, in 2021, we saw the introduction of the NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (NATO, 2021b).

NATO adopted its first Policy for the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in 2016 at the Warsaw Summit, citing lessons learnt from operations in its International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and the growing strategic and operational importance of mitigating civilian casualties (NATO, 2016). Later, in 2018, Allied Command Operations published a Handbook on the Protection of Civilians that integrates the 2016 NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians and the Military Committee Concept for the Protection of Civilians in the planning and conduct of Alliance operations (Allied Command Operations, 2018). Whilst cultural property protection (CPP) does not have its own standalone NATO policy, it was encompassed within further guidance on the PoC Policy as a Bi-Strategic Command Directive (NATO, 2019a).

Despite these long-running workstreams on the different CCTs, the NATO Terminology database does not define the cross-cutting topics. However, the 2022 Strategic Concept affirms that certain topics are "cross cutting" being both relevant and applicable to NATO's three core tasks: the defence of Alliance borders, enhancing security through capacity building and partnerships,

or engaging in crisis management through operations, missions or other Council–mandated activities (NATO, 2022d, p. 1).

Through the development of the CCTs, NATO has broadened its understanding of security and "while not explicitly cited, human security has been implicit in foundational documents" (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 97). NATO's CCTs recognize that specific population groups or civilian objects are disproportionately affected by conflict: conflict and war affect men, young people and women differently, for example. The CCTs also represent types of physical violence, harm, coercion or deliberate deprivation to the population, which most states are required to suppress under international law, but which adversaries often exploit and perpetrate to seek military advantage. These concerns have shaped the introduction of the concept of human security into NATO policy.

The term "human security" entered into NATO's strategic-political discourse for the first time at the 2019 London Leaders' Meeting, and was elaborated in further detail in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué (NATO, 2019b, 2021a). The Brussels Summit Communique states "a Human Security approach is a reflection of our values and makes us more operationally effective" and links human security to NATO's existing policies on CRSV, CAAC and cultural property protection (NATO, 2021a).

Human security then became a prominent theme in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, where the protection of civilians and civilian harm mitigation was foregrounded, emphasizing the primacy of NATO's Protection of Civilians policy within the human security approach. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identifies that human security includes the protection of civilians and civilian harm mitigation, and requires the integration of human security and the Women, Peace and Security agenda across all core tasks. At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, the North Atlantic Council approved the NATO Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles, which defined human security as an approach for "embedding considerations for the comprehensive safety and security of populations into all stages and levels of Alliance operations, missions and activities, wherever NATO operates, with the objective of preventing and responding to risks and threats to all people" (NATO, 2022c, 2022b). This policy confirmed that NATO's human security approach focuses on the five cross-cutting topics. The most important features of this policy are the seven guiding principles which are intended to guide implementation and integration.

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, heads of state and government gave their renewed commitment to the integration of the Human Security and the Women, Peace and Security agendas, and endorsed the Policy on Children and Armed Conflict, and an updated Policy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, while indicating future plans to develop policy on cultural property protection (NATO, 2023c).

At the 2024 Washington Summit, the Secretary General issued a report that reflects on NATO's progress in operationalizing Human Security and defined the Human Security concept as:

> the risks and threats to civilian populations which may arise in all that the Alliance does. … NATO's Human Security Approach is people-centred, gender-responsive, prevention- and protection-oriented. Its objective is to avert and respond to risks and threats to all civilians and their objects, especially in situations of conflict or crisis. (NATO, 2024a, p. 6)

Human security is seen as an umbrella term for these risks and threats. It serves as an overarching concept for all the CCTs, while at the same time providing a new approach for the coordination of assessment of civilian harms arising from military operations and activities, with the Protection of Civilians as the presumptive metaconcept (Figure 1). The Protection of Civilians is the operational core of the approach, ensuring that the policy framework for the "military contribution" to human security connects with concrete normative obligations to avoid and minimize incidental loss of civilian life, injury and damage to civilian objects.

While human security does not replace any of the existing CCTs, it is considered a method of coordinating their further implementation, and an intersectional approach to peace and security, which recognizes the diverse experiences, roles and protection concerns of various civilian populations. However, human security is a distinct concept in security studies, and related disciplines, that evolved out of the UNDP's 1994 *Human Development Report.* It is an

intellectually unique method of analysing security threats and comes with the associated academic baggage that is generated by a new theory of (in)security. Whilst it is recognized that political negotiations may limit the Alliance's ability to achieve consensus on human security, NATO choice of the term "human security" is nevertheless problematic where it does not expressly recognize the wider usage of the term in theory and practice by a wide range of international organizations, states and non-governmental organizations.
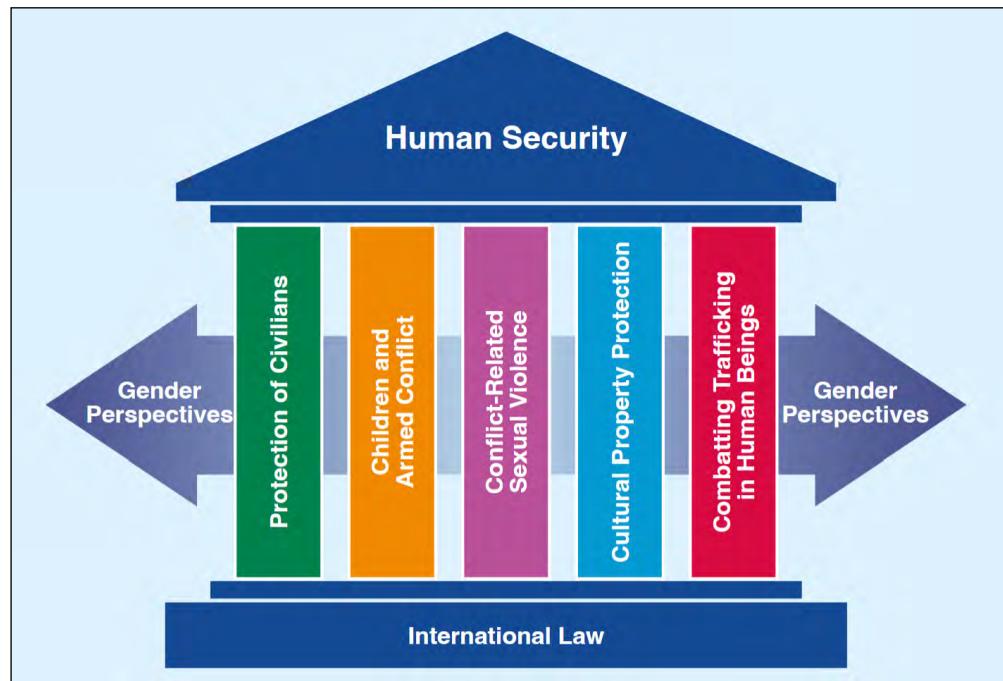
STEPPING OUT FROM UNDER THE UMBRELLA: THE NEED FOR AN EVIDENCE BASE

Currently, NATO's human security approach, which it claims is "drawn from that of the United Nations" (NATO, 2022b), lacks conceptual precision and a clear evidence base. This section charts the history of human security policy at the UN to prove that NATO must adopt its own, detailed, evidence base in the absence of a formal UN approach to human security. By relying on an non-existent UN approach, NATO's Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles (2022b) lacks depth; and, as different bodies within NATO have developed human security for their specific purposes, and implement the principles according to their specific understandings, the result has been confusion and contention (Yilmaz, 2025, p. 296). This can lead to policymakers and military personnel not fully understanding the unique nature of human security. For example, Grimes explains that "for those who equate human security and the WPS agenda with International Humanitarian Law and Rules of Engagement, they may perceive human security as the emperor's new clothes" (Grimes 2023, p. 143). A deep, principled framework is needed to dispel this perception and enable NATO to articulate and operationalize its own human security approach whilst relying on the concept's existing evidence base.

NATO members also have their own national interpretations of human security that may differ from the organization's. For instance the UK's "whole of government" approach to "Human Security in Defence" (Ministry of Defence, 2024), now in its second edition, predates NATO's use of the concept. The UK's approach is founded on the UN Development Programme's seven human security factors but introduces an eighth: information security. The UK also incorporates the Women, Peace and Security agenda into its tri-service human security policy, in contrast to the NATO approach which does not (Ministry of Defence 2024, chap. 2).

In 1994, the UN Development Programme published its annual Human Development Report that outlined a new concept of "human security". The team behind the 1994 Report sought to create an approach that "focuses on building human capabilities to confront and overcome poverty, illiteracy, diseases, discrimination, restrictions on political freedom, and the threat to violent conflict" (Acharya, 2014, p. 449). The UNDP outline seven human security factors:

economic, health, personal, political, food, environmental, and community security (UNDP, 1994, pp. 24–25).

In 2003, the UN's Commission on Human Security published the report *Human Security Now* (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003). The report identified that human security has a distinctive focus on humanitarian crises as opposed to underdevelopment, a phenomenon largely addressed by human development (Farer, 2011, p. 47). The Commission defined human security as protecting "the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4).

Following the *Human Security Now* report, the concept of human security began to be adopted across various UN agencies.[1] The UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS), established in 1999, was tasked with advancing efforts toward freedom from fear and want. In 2003, an Advisory Board on Human Security was created to liaise with the UN Secretary-General and oversee the UNTFHS. A year later, in 2004, the Human Security Unit (HSU) was established to mainstream human security throughout the UN's activities and to review funding applications and manage the UNTFHS.

The 2005 World Summit requested further work on defining human security. In response, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a report in 2010 observing that "threats such as natural disasters, violent conflicts and their impact on civilians, as well as food, health, financial and economic crises, tend to acquire transnational dimensions that move beyond traditional notions of security" (United Nations, 2010, p. 3). Then the General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2012 defining human security as:

> The right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential. (United Nations, 2012, para. 3a)

However, this is where the story of the UN's development of its understanding of human security ends. Following the 2012 Resolution, the UN scarcely mentions "human security" again. While research indicates that the UN does still operationalize the hallmarks of human security in its peace operations and approach to accountability (Gilder, 2022, 2021; Buitelaar, 2024), "human security" is not a term commonly used by the UN Security Council, General Assembly, or Secretariat. Consequently, the institution does not have a tangible, accessible, set of guidelines or principles of human security that NATO can cite as its evidence base, as it has done in its Approach and Guiding Principles (NATO, 2022b). To provide NATO with an alternative evidence base for its development of human security as a useful tool to cohere the CCTs, achieve its strategic goals, and provide consistency in interpretation, the next section lays out an original, evidence-based framework of human security that deepens NATO's approach.

AN EVIDENCE-BASED FRAMEWORK OF HUMAN SECURITY FOR NATO

We have constructed an evidence-based framework by conducting an interpretative analysis of the literature on human security to both find support for NATO's 2022 Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles and to identify areas where key principles of human security have not been reflected in NATO's Approach. Overall, certain key hallmarks of human security are present in both the literature and NATO's Approach, including adherence to international law, recognition of vulnerability, a focus on prevention, respect for humanitarian space, and cooperation with other actors. But NATO's Approach does not include a focus on bottom-up engagement with affected populations, the building of resilience or empowerment of communities. We present six principles that account for these key features of human security in order to create a modified NATO Approach with a deep evidence base. This evidence-based framework will be of use in all three NATO core tasks:

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1   For a more in-depth analysis of how the UN has advanced a human security agenda using both broad and narrow interpretations and focusing on development assistance see, Thérien (2012).

1. Adherence to and application of obligations under international law;

2. A focus on engaging with civilians facing insecurity to identify needs in a bottom-up manner;

3. A concern for vulnerability and building resilience of civilians;

4. The pursuit of preventative protection methods, where possible, and the empowerment of people to act on their own behalf and implement solutions to security threats;

5. Respect and the provision of space for the neutral, independent and impartial work of humanitarian actors;

6. The pursuit of multilateral engagement on human security related issues with relevant actors.

PRINCIPLE 1: ADHERENCE TO AND APPLICATION OF OBLIGATIONS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

The rule of law, respect for international legal norms, including those found in human rights and humanitarian law, accountability, and good governance are all integral to human security (Daft, 2018, p. 5; Hanlon & Christie, 2016, p. 30). International law "must be at the heart of human security," and serves as basic criteria with which to strengthen work on human security's objectives (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017, p. 565; Hanlon & Christie, 2016, p. 55).

The *Human Security Now* report placed strong emphasis on these established legal and normative foundations. In 2001, the Commission published a Declaration on Human Rights as an Essential Component of Human Security emphasizing that human rights should serve as the basis for shaping and applying human security, confirming its status as a rights-based concept (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2001, para. 2).

Oberleitner (2005) has stated that a "rights-based" approach to human security allows for concrete content which already has normative force. However, both Oberleitner and Petrasek (2004) have concerns including that human security risks creating a category of "super human rights" and simply repackages existing legal regimes with a focus on securitization. Similarly, Howard-Hassmann takes the view that human security prioritizes some human rights over others and would create the situation "that there are some human rights that society need not acknowledge, safeguard and promote because they do not address basic insecurities" (Howard-Hassmann, 2012, p. 106). However, these concerns focus on the relationship with human rights law without recognizing human security's usefulness as a tool with which to identify, prevent, and respond to insecurity in cooperation with local actors. This will be the focus of subsequent principles of this framework.

The *Human Security Now* report highlights the need to protect individuals during violent conflict by drawing simultaneously on human rights law and the law of armed conflict, with international criminal law providing mechanisms for accountability after violations occur. It calls for coordinated and reinforcing protection strategies, particularly for groups that face heightened risks (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 134). When the international community carries out activities intended to safeguard rights and strengthen legal order – such as NATO's crisis prevention and management missions – these efforts operate within the boundaries of established legal norms.[2]

This principle of human security aligns well with NATO values, principles and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States. Allied Joint Publication-01 states "NATO forces and NATO-led forces always operate in accordance with international law, which applies as 'lex specialis' across all campaign themes, but also human rights when applicable" (NATO, 2022a). For NATO, human security acts as an integrating bridge or nexus between the CCTs, which implement and integrate different bodies of law, sharing complementary norms and rules, in order to enhance compliance with international law. An overarching human security approach brings together the often isolated sub-disciplines of international law, each of which require attention in an ongoing armed conflict or crisis, and which cumulatively have the potential to enhance layered protection for at risk populations.

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2   See, e.g., United Nations (1999).

PRINCIPLE 2: A FOCUS ON ENGAGING WITH CIVILIANS FACING INSECURITY TO IDENTIFY NEEDS IN A BOTTOM-UP MANNER

Although human security places significant emphasis on the physical dangers posed by violent conflict, its scope extends to a wider range of risks arising from conflict and humanitarian crises. Its primary concern is with individuals who are especially vulnerable – such as victims of armed violence, refugees and displaced populations, those living in extreme poverty, and people facing threats of hunger or illness (Ogata, 2002, p. 4). At the heart of human security is the fact that threats are inter-related and have compound effects, and critical threats which undermine the day-to-day lives of individuals need to be counteracted. Importantly, threats to civilians and the disruption of civilian life can also be exploited by an enemy force to constrain NATO forces' capacity to manoeuvre and act in collective defence with full operational freedom. It is, then, of paramount importance that NATO has clear principles, planning and implementation of its human security approach to ensure its forces can rapidly engage with, identify, respond to civilian security needs, and refer affected population groups and individuals to appropriate civil actors.

The Commission recognized that no international organization could realistically address every human security concern affecting every individual or community; the solution was the creation of a variable "vital core" – something described as what people hold to be the "essence of life" and "crucially important". Because these fundamental elements differ across contexts, the vital core provides a way to prioritize needs for specific groups. The *Human Security Now* report describes human security as "protecting fundamental freedoms – held to be the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, 4). People are, then, not merely the objects of protection; they are active participants in identifying threats to their security.

A vital-core approach considers a spectrum of dangers – short-term, long-term, and unconventional – originating from diverse actors, whether their actions are deliberate or unintentional. This requires NATO to look beyond the conduct of adversaries alone. Critical threats are those which "cut into core activities and functions" related to survival, likelihood and dignity and pervasive threats that escalate into "large-scale, recurrent dangers" (Alkire, 2003, pp. 8, 24).

Alkire (2003, pp. 8, 24) further distinguishes between direct and indirect sources of harm. Direct threats arise when a state or non-state actor intentionally inflicts harm – such as through torture, contributing to a conflict, or adopting policies that generate severe economic instability. Indirect, or structural, threats result from omissions or unintended consequences of actions taken for other purposes. As Owen (2004, p. 383) observes, these may stem from environmental, economic, food, health, personal, or political shocks that undermine the vital core. For example, armed conflict may cause environmental degradation that destroys livelihoods and endangers public health, or a food-security crisis may trigger mass civilian displacement.

What is required of NATO forces if a human security response is to be successfully executed is clear. NATO's approach to human security must be able to identify indicators and warnings and to prevent (or at least mitigate) both deliberate deprivation, coercion and organized violence targeted at individuals or groups; the organization must, further, anticipate indirect threats where it may be a responder or working in cooperation with the sovereign state. Engagement from the bottom-up is necessary if NATO is to understand the human environment, and characterize civilian protection concerns and the needs of those impacted by these threats. Hanlon and Christie have made similar observations, explaining that "insights from grassroots civil society organizations must reach the desks of top-down development planners" since "only through continuous stakeholder dialogue involving a range of both local and international actors can peacebuilding achieve meaningful results" providing positive human security improvements (Hanlon & Christie, 2016, p. 107). Efforts to address the vital core must be carried out in tandem with, and followed by, development initiatives to secure a smooth transition and lasting progress once immediate threats have been mitigated.

The vital core is adaptable, shifting according to the needs, vulnerabilities, and perceived threats of the specific individuals or groups involved. Basic human needs and needs hierarchies

can also both change over time, according to external inputs and environmental circumstances and can be different for different people; indeed, different "conceptions of needs" altogether can be held by different persons and groups (Mitchell, 1990). This is an important theoretical point in operationalizing the human security approach. Security is personalized rather than being rigidly based on what the states forming the international community determine to be the most critical and pervasive threats. Because human security is inherently general, it can adapt to diverse priorities while still guiding a coherent, unified response (Gasper, 2005, p. 237).

By using a framework that prioritizes the needs and perceptions of individuals and groups, NATO can design responses that lead to meaningful interventions and effectively reduce civilian harm. In other words, such an approach increases the likelihood that interventions will deliver tangible improvements valued by the affected populations. NATO can achieve this through meaningful civil-military interaction during all phases of an operation. In particular, threats such as human trafficking, forced displacement, and conflict-related sexual violence are more likely to be detected through engagement with populations. NATO can then achieve a more complete picture of the human environment for its planning processes, and, in turn, design, implement and adapt its activities to prevent or respond to threats and work with partners in the operating environment.

PRINCIPLE 3: A CONCERN FOR VULNERABILITY AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Human security places significant emphasis on vulnerability as a key consideration in decision-making. The 1994 UNDP report highlights women's vulnerability in health security and the risks faced by children in ensuring their personal security (UNDP, 1994, pp. 28, 30). Early in its work, the Commission on Human Security also recognized the importance of addressing vulnerability, particularly for those facing high levels of insecurity (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, 3). The Commission expressly calls for concern for vulnerable groups – which it identifies as women, children, the elderly, the disabled, the indigenous, and the missing – during violent conflict. Due to the attention given to vulnerability by the human security discourse, it necessarily forms one of the principles of the conceptual framework.

"Vulnerability" can be understood in two ways: universal and group-based.[3] For the universal approach, all individuals are recognized as being inherently vulnerable, suggesting that abandoning an assumption of general self-sufficiency could serve the pursuit of equality. The group-based approach, employed by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), focuses on identifying specific groups that are more exposed to risk than others.

Fineman's universal vulnerability thesis posits that all individuals are constantly vulnerable to harm, whether from disease, aging, or natural and human-made disasters. She argues that humans possess "innate dependencies" on others during childhood, illness, disability, and other conditions (Fineman, 2013, p. 310) and that "vulnerability initially should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events" (Fineman 2008, p. 9).

Fineman cautions that singling out specific populations as vulnerable can be stigmatizing, as it may mark them as deviant and outside the traditional social contract, requiring special assistance. That said, she emphasizes that universal vulnerability helps counter discrimination and stigmatization whilst recognising that vulnerability is also "varied, and unique on the individual level" (Fineman 2013, p. 317). Individual vulnerability differs based on our embodied nature and our embedded social relationships, making each person's experience of risk and dependency distinct.

Pelling (2001) argues that vulnerability can also be shaped by local and global political and socio-economic structures; Ballard and his colleagues (2020), meanwhile, emphasize the influence of global political and economic structures and circumstances on vulnerability. For Pelling, human vulnerability comprises three components. The first is *exposure* – a product of physical location and the character of the built and natural environment, which can be reduced by hazard mitigation investments; the second is *resistance* – the capacity of an individual or

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3   On vulnerability and human rights law generally see Morawa (2003); Truscan (2013).

group to withstand the impact of a hazard, which can be enhanced through social, economic, psychological and physical health; the third is *resilience* – the ability of an individual or group to cope with or adapt to hazard stress, which can be enhanced through humanitarian relief or measures such as insurance. For Pelling, these factors are modified through the level of access the affected population enjoys to their rights, resources, and material assets – all of which will be impacted by armed conflict and crises that NATO may deploy to.

It is important to consider the risks of labelling a group as "vulnerable". Tobin (2015, 157) notes that, in the case of children, defining them primarily by their vulnerability can be problematic. Human security, however, offers a way to identify specific vulnerabilities that more accurately reflect individual needs. Individuals exposed to multiple or severe human security threats – such as health, food, or economic insecurity – are often more susceptible to personal violence. Refugees, for example, frequently leave their homes due to a combination of such threats, making them one of the most vulnerable populations.

For the application of this conceptual framework, NATO must include the clear identification of particular vulnerabilities in its planning processes. In the planning and execution of missions and activities, it must work with other actors and affected populations, to strengthen positive capacities and reliance mechanisms, and provide support for populations engaging in unfavourable coping mechanisms (the trade of sex for food, for example) that constitute protection problems. To achieve these outcomes, it is important to consider, understand and do no harm to the affected population's resilience capacities and coping mechanisms. NATO may also encounter displaced persons and need to meet basic needs, provide shelter and liaise with state authorities; it must monitor indicators and warnings, and have the tools to identify these vulnerabilities, which in part are provided through bottom-up engagement with the civilian population, and have personnel ready to work on building resilience where NATO is supporting state authorities in the long-term. NATO forces must be able to assess the exposure of the population to a given vulnerability, understand the capacity of the population to resist the impact of the vulnerability and the threat, and plan to build resilience, in part through supporting the population at local levels.

PRINCIPLE 4: THE PURSUIT OF PREVENTATIVE PROTECTION METHODS, WHERE POSSIBLE, AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE TO ACT ON THEIR OWN BEHALF AND IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS TO SECURITY THREATS

The United Nations Commission on Human Security developed a people-centred framework combining protection and empowerment. The first strand emphasizes that individuals need protection from a broad range of threats – not solely military – and that such protection should be preventive and guided by a long-term perspective. The second strand focuses on capacity-building, ensuring that institutions, communities, and individuals are resilient and can identify and address security threats locally while also participating in international efforts when additional support is needed. In essence: "human security helps identify gaps in the infrastructure of protection as well as ways to strengthen or improve it" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, 11).

The protection element means that a form of intervention may be necessary, whether it be preventative or reactive, to ensure the protection of a range of needs. What a human security approach requires is, at a minimum, recognition by an intervening force that legitimate threats to the population can materialize as non-violent. Therefore, NATO must be prepared to work alongside the host nation or, in the event the host nation is unable to act, have contingencies in place to operate without host-nation support in responding to non-violent threats. This may include, for example, logistical and engineering support to reestablish water supplies or emergency healthcare support where local healthcare systems and providers are overwhelmed.

The empowerment aspect of this principle demonstrates how human security enables a more legitimate response than existing security practices (Ogata, 2002, p. 5). Empowerment is "people's ability to act on their own behalf – and on behalf of others" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 11). Where people require protection, or have been protected, they can identify and implement solutions to security threats. To do so requires resilience where empowered people can "create new opportunities for work and address many problems locally. And they can mobilize for the security of others – say, by publicizing food

shortages early, preventing famines or protesting human rights violations by states" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 11).

Under traditional notions of security, not all threats will be recognized as requiring a securitized response by an organization due to institutionalized conceptions of threat-urgency (Hansen & Nissenbaum, 2009). The threshold for a securitized response to a critical and pervasive threat is an inherently political decision that is based on context-specific legal, social and cultural norms in relation to a minimum baseline of human needs, and securitization discourse between the securitizing actor, the audience, and the affected population (the referent object). As Jolly (2013) explains, in practice protection actors need to focus on a core of insecurities within each context and they will be directed by their own organizational values, policies, strategy and doctrine, as well as the duties and obligations that they bear under domestic and international law. Human security buttresses the needs of individuals impacted by the conflict or crisis amidst those institutionalized conceptions of how an organization should respond.

It is through bottom-up engagement where individuals in society are able to identify and communicate their needs to international actors such as NATO. Where people are adequately protected, they can be empowered to "make better choices, and actively prevent and mitigate the impact of insecurities" (Ogata, 2004, p. 26). If NATO is to execute a human security approach, it must focus on effective empowerment – particularly where the organization's policy prescribes institutional responses to the five CCTs under the Human Security Approach; without empowerment, these responses could unduly influence, enable or preclude the securitization of issues experienced by the affected population. And without empowerment, communities may challenge the legitimacy of the campaign and NATO activities outright. Furthermore, individuals could be forced to build their own security regimes within communities because the state is unwilling or unable to provide security, resulting in a more complex human terrain and suboptimal civilian protection (Hanlon & Christie 2016, p. 62).

The two strands of protection and empowerment are core to human security's novelty. They are mutually reinforcing where "people protected can exercise many choices. And people empowered can avoid some risks and demand improvements in the system of protection" (United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 12). A NATO operation guided by a human security approach is obliged to consider threats beyond physical violence, addressing a wider spectrum of insecurities. Protection strategies should be preventive where possible, fostering lasting peace and security through communication and collaboration with local communities. Empowerment is achieved by enabling local populations to identify the sources of insecurity, implement measures to address them, and build capacity so that they can sustain positive change within their own societies.

PRINCIPLE 5: RESPECT AND THE PROVISION OF SPACE FOR THE NEUTRAL, INDEPENDENT AND IMPARTIAL WORK OF HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

"Humanitarian space" has several meanings. As agency space, the agency of the humanitarian is at the centre with the space provided delineating the actor's ability to operate freely and meet humanitarian needs. Second, as affected community space, humanitarian space is defined by the actor's ability to uphold rights to relief and protection within space in which affected communities are centred. Third, as space provided for by international humanitarian law, humanitarian actors are given space by parties to the conflict adhering to their obligations and allowing the provision of humanitarian relief. Humanitarian space is also governed by complex political, military and legal considerations. Humanitarian actors are seeking to provide relief in a dynamic and complex environment (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012).

But humanitarian space is not an abstract concept. It is a tangible location or system – a hospital, say, or water infrastructure. It is also normative and rooted in the law of armed conflict: humanitarian actors are licensed to carry out impartial duties, and parties to the conflict must provide rapid and unimpeded access (Mardini, 2021). Coming to the aid of civilian populations in need and mitigating civilian harm as a result of armed hostilities ultimately contributes to the security and effectiveness of NATO, minimizing the negative impact of hostilities and the exploitation of civilian populations by the enemy.

Linking to the first principle on international law, but warranting its own separate principle, humanitarian access and protected spaces are guaranteed by the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). By singling out humanitarian space as a separate principle, the framework recognizes that the securing of humanitarian space requires continuous efforts from international actors to maintain, negotiate and secure space through high-level humanitarian advocacy and through tactical-level deconfliction and notification processes. Through a human security framework, those efforts must be given paramount importance and NATO and its members must do all they can to push back against the shrinking of humanitarian space.[4]

Supporting the missions of those who provide relief, strengthening their security without compromising neutrality and independence, and removing the obstacles to access – this, in turn, supports NATO's efforts both to meet its legal obligations and to promote its values when taking necessary military action.

PRINCIPLE 6: THE PURSUIT OF MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT ON HUMAN SECURITY RELATED ISSUES WITH RELEVANT ACTORS

Multilateral engagement with the United Nations, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is key for NATO at the operational and strategic levels; at the tactical level, civil-military relationships, through the CIMIC Joint Function, allow military and humanitarian actors to operate more effectively and accomplish their missions, some of which converge, without calling into question their respective operational independence.

Civil-military interaction, conducted by the CIMIC Joint Function, promotes the exchange of information on the humanitarian and security situation in the area of operation. This helps to maintain the distinction between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives, and to deconflict the activities of the various civil-humanitarian and military actors, thus minimizing or altogether avoiding involuntary disruptions between them. CIMIC activities can lead to a mutual understanding of the respective objectives, roles, mandates and actions of each actor on the ground, helping to integrate them into the planning and conduct of military and humanitarian operations. They promote strategies that mitigate the negative consequences of military operations on the civilian environment, while better integrating the principles of international humanitarian law and civilian protection.

Given the multifaceted nature of civilian protection threats and the complex contexts in which they arise, complementary, coordinated and collaborative (where possible, with respect for principled humanitarian action) activities by multiple organizations are required. There is increasing overlap between the activities of the humanitarian, development and peace sectors. In many settings, both humanitarian and development actors support the delivery of services. Civilian protection demands a system-wide commitment from many actors, in accordance with their mandates and sector-specific responsibilities. The "Nexus" approach, or "the triple Humanitarian, Development and Peace nexus", refers to the respective mandates and operational remit of humanitarian, development and peace actors, and to a "new way of working" that ensures complementarity and synergy through enhanced cooperation; this is achieved by leveraging the comparative advantage of humanitarian, development, peace and all relevant actors in a given context (Global Protection Cluster, 2022).

NATO is an actor in the "nexus" and NATO member states are development actors, in the sense that in their security force assistance and security cooperation activities they work with partner nations to train, advise, enable and integrate their militaries, in support of a legitimate authority and to build a safe and secure environment for peace. This is to recognize affected communities not merely as recipients of assistance but as active leaders with agency in their own protection. Existing community response strategies should serve as a starting point to understand local risks, threats, and protection needs. Identifying local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) is also crucial, as these groups often maintain access to affected populations even when international humanitarian actors face restrictions (Global Protection Cluster, 2022; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2021). Local NGOs and CSOs can assist NATO with the identification and mitigation of protection gaps that may emerge due

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4   On shrinking generally, see Sauter (2022).

to the narrow mandate restrictions of humanitarian and development actors, and the low security thresholds among other actors in humanitarian and development settings.

MAKING USE OF HUMAN SECURITY TO IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NATO MILITARY OPERATIONS

We argue that the above evidence-based framework of human security can make a positive contribution to NATO operations and would add important depth to NATO's existing, but limited, Human Security Approach. The framework has transformative potential because it will enable NATO personnel to more clearly implement a distinct human security approach within military planning. By harnessing the evidence-base for human security, the concept can be a vehicle for reshaping organizational thinking on how to respond to crises and conflict, how to plan for operations that prioritize the protection of civilians and a positive civil-military relationship, and ultimately place human security concerns at the forefront of the commander's mind.

NATO's Human Security Approach plays a practical role in the organization's strategic communications, particularly in competition with actors who seek to destabilize the rules-based international order and erode international norms. The evidence-based framework suggested in this article solidifies NATO as a bedrock of the rules-based order and would help to build support the organizations actions among local populations – something critical to sustaining an ally's will to fight.

An evidence-based framework for human security is vital not only for the ethical role in plays in the context of armed conflict; it lays the foundations for a deep understanding of the human environment. NATO commanders require a detailed understanding of the human environment if they are to effectively assess potential civilian harm from their own operations and anticipate adversarial actions. In this sense, a complete picture of the human environment enables greater freedom to manoeuvre and the effectiveness of NATO operations.

For example, NATO itself explains that human security "allows us to develop a more comprehensive view of the human environment" that enables improved effectiveness in achieving the goals of the CCTs (NATO, 2023c). Embedding our evidence-based framework for human security into NATO's planning processes, collecting information from the bottom-up and identifying the vital core, recognizes that the various affected population groups experience the effects of conflict differently. The evidence-based framework also encourages NATO planners to be preventative, with a focus on preventing the vulnerabilities of the civilian population being exacerbated by the conflict.

It is the CIMIC Joint Function that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the operating environment by identifying, analysing, and assessing civil factors (NATO, 2024b). The evidence-based framework requires these analyses to include assessment of vulnerabilities of the population and consideration of how to build resilience. By taking human security's preventative approach, NATO can plan alongside its member states to integrate aspects of resilience, which some regard as the "first line of defence in meeting human-security challenges" (Matyók & Zajc, 2022, p. 342).

NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept of 2021 offers the recognition that "layered resilience" requires both civilian and military resilience (Harig, 2024, p. 3). A human security approach serves the promotion of resilience by encouraging planners to focus on the adoption of human security methods to interrogate vulnerabilities and take preventative actions that contribute to the seven baseline requirements of resilience. By steering NATO towards prevention, such an approach is critically important for civil preparedness.

Recent conflicts have resulted in devastating civilian casualties, including allegations of mass killings and the use of starvation as a weapon of war (BBC, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). In Ukraine, for example, Russian actions – including the targeting of civilians, the commission of conflict-related sexual violence and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and cultural property – appear designed to erase Ukrainian identity and undermine national resilience (NATO, 2024a, p. 10; Straatsma, 2025, p. 60). Russia has demonstrated a "predisposition toward using human insecurity as a considered operational activity" (Straatsma, 2025, p. 58), which has significantly constrained the manoeuvrability of Ukrainian forces, particularly in civilian-populated battlespaces.

NATO's adversaries may similarly seek to influence civilian behaviour and coordinate lethal and non-lethal effects to maximize civilian interference with NATO operations. The war in Ukraine has shown that civilian populations can be instrumentalized as a weapon of war "at a grievous scale" (Kis, 2023, p. 114). From the deliberate targeting of civilians to the deportation of children, the challenges faced by Ukrainian forces have been extreme. During its retreat from Kyiv Oblast, for example, Russian forces reportedly booby-trapped bodies and removed physical evidence of Ukrainian culture (Straatsma, 2025, p. 60; Zelenskyy, 2022). These practices further constrained Ukrainian military freedom of manoeuvre and placed additional demands on CIMIC forces, which were required to manage evacuations, deliver supplies to civilians in combat areas, and assume local governance functions (Harig, 2024, p. 5).

In a peer-to-peer conflict, NATO can expect to encounter similar challenges. It would be wrong to assume that the intensity of a peer-to-peer conflict would make the security of the population a low priority. Conversely, the reality of the battlespace means NATO, alongside host state forces, may be the first responder to population groups fleeing across the battlespace or those unable to flee who lack access to basic services. A detailed understanding of the complex and ever-changing human environment enables NATO to both prevent and respond to such atrocities. Our framework can help NATO coordinate a consistent approach to atrocity prevention and to exercise a corresponding duty to act where a serious risk exists.

In a collective defence scenario, a human security framework serves as an enabler. NATO seeks to avoid unnecessary harm to civilians in member states and to protect civilian infrastructure that may be essential for post-conflict reconstruction. Our framework lays the foundations for an approach that would enhance operational effectiveness and the capacity of NATO forces to support the host nation in its primary duty to protect its population, contributing to a safe and secure environment and mitigating adversarial harm to the population. Under the framework, NATO would coordinate with a range of government, humanitarian and civil society actors to understand the vulnerabilities and movements of populations during the conflict, take preventative action, and support post-conflict dialogue between communities, NATO forces and state.

One way of achieving this is to use our evidence-based framework to guide the systematic collection and analysis of threats to human security, developing in this way a coherent understanding of the civil environment. This understanding can then integrated in the planning process through civil factor integration (NATO, 2025). This enables NATO planners to provide commanders with an improved common operational picture, enhance awareness of the effects of operations on affected populations, civilian objects, and essential services, and establish feedback loops within the targeting process to avoid or mitigate harm. Without such an approach, a large-scale great-power conflict would likely result in extensive civilian harm, exacerbated both by adversary actions deliberately targeting civilian populations to achieve tactical objectives and by higher levels of incidental harm arising from NATO's own operations.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that NATO must recognize the distinct nature of the concept of human security and harness its deep evidence base when developing doctrine and policy in this space. As NATO develops the military contribution to human security and implements new versions of its CCTs in the coming years, the evidence-based framework proposed here can move NATO beyond reliance on abstract notions of an existing UN approach to human security to help NATO build its own concrete understanding, so avoiding contestation within the organization. It is important to emphasize it as a distinct analytical lens, capable of assisting NATO staff in better understanding the contribution the principles of human security can make to the collection, analysis and use of information on the human environment. This, in turn, will permit NATO to better articulate the Military Contribution to Human Security (MC2HS) and its role in NATO's three core tasks.

Recommendations have been made for human security to be included in joint doctrine publications, for specific personnel to be assigned to implement human security, and for training to incorporate human security concepts – but this cannot be achieved without more extensive principles as a starting point (Grimes, 2023, p. 161). NATO personnel can also use the

framework we have set out here to guide the implementation of NATO's cross-cutting topics within operations as the organization develops its thinking on how to use human security at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. To do this effectively, NATO must be able to engage in a bottom-up manner with affected populations to identify crucially important security threats; it must be able to analyse threats beyond the threat of physical violence in line with the seven human security factors; it must able to recognize vulnerabilities and be able to plan appropriate resilience measures; it must take preventative measures where appropriate; and it must support the empowerment of populations. As Meharg explains, human security offers "a mutually reinforcing approach to understanding today's security challenges, providing militaries with thorough knowledge of the people-centric and people-driven contexts in which they operate" (Meharg, 2025, p. 5). But to unlock that knowledge, the military must adopt the unique methods that constitute the human security approach.

Ultimately, human security holds significant promise for NATO as an overarching framework with which to guide the development and implementation of the CCTs. A human security approach promotes solidarity and cohesion in the Alliance and the values, both common and national, of its member states. It enables greater freedom of manoeuvre through a deeper understanding of the human environment and builds NATO's credibility and legitimacy amongst conflict-affected populations.

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