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Matthew S. Weinert on Human Security and the UN: A Critical History by S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. 341pp.

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Abstract

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In 1999, convinced that "ideas and concepts are a main driving force in human progress," the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of The CUNY Graduate Center launched the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) to study the U.N. as "the creator and nurturer of ideas and concepts that have permeated international policy discourse" (UNIHP). Seventeen volumes have been commissioned—14 in the areas of economic and social development, and 3 in the peace and security arena. Human Security and the UN: A Critical History is the eighth volume in the former category. Wary that authors of such a book might proffer a sanguine, and hence uncritical, view of human security, the series editors deliberately sought "the hardheaded views" of two analysts—S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong, both of whom serve on the faculty at Oxford University (xii)—to approach the intricacies, complexities, and confusions of the human security agenda. Humor aside, the reader might expect a harsh assessment of the concept and work of human security; instead, what emerges is a most balanced, exhaustively researched, astute, and critically optimistic appraisal.

"Human security," as a concept, was comprehensively introduced in the *Human Development Report 1994* to bridge human development-oriented U.N. fieldwork and the movement to broaden security's conceptual parameters. The linkage underscores the mutually constitutive nature of human development, or individual viability and capability, and state security. In other words, healthy, educated, and employed citizens contribute to and maintain viable, stable, and peaceful societies. In this vein, the *Human Development Report 1994* set forth policy recommendations concerning the economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political dimensions of peoples' lives.

But there were several antecedents to human security, and MacFarlane and Khong account for them—both the theoretical and practical variants—in Part I. The three chapters that comprise Part I synthesize an array of material from Confucius to Westphalia, Bodin to U.N. resolutions. What strikes the reader is the sheer pervasiveness of human security's progenitor—the idea that the sovereign state is ultimately justified by its protection of individuals and communities within it—and the reality that the idea found little correlation in practice.

Part II explores the two distinct dimensions of human security—the developmental and the protective—and how the U.N. has promoted activity in each. Taking a more Realist or realistic view, the authors inquire into the practical import of human security. Moreover, they ask, has it been robbed of its theoretical and practical vigor by what the authors call "conceptual overstretch" (228)? With regard to the first question, MacFarlane and Khong identify several promises and achievements. Among them, human security: has eroded thought that reifies the state and its security; provides "a vocabulary for describing and understanding the human consequences of internal and civil wars" (228); informs foreign and security policies of countries such as Canada and Japan, and regional organizations such as the Organization of American States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; increases the likelihood of U.N. response to egregious threats to human security; and reframes human development concerns such as economics, the environment, health, and gender in ways that have won these traditionally conceived low-politics issues policy priority and institutional resource allocation (230).

With regard to the second question, the authors argue that "extension of the concept to cover almost every human malady conceivable as a security threat" renders human security "analytically incoherent and robs it" of its utility (228). They propose limiting it to its protective dimension in ways that confine human security to threats against individual "physical integrity that are planned and perpetrated by states, individuals, or groups that aim to 'do them in'" (228). They maintain that "this less-expansive notion, because it focuses on organized violence, has a better intuitive fit with what most consider to be 'security threats'" (228).

True, their limitation permits an extremely activist international agenda: combating genocide; crimes against humanity; torture; rape; war crimes; landmines; small arms trafficking; and even (on my reading) conflict diamonds. But, what of famine (which Amartya Sen has proven to be the result of planning and deliberateness, not the simple lack of food) and deliberate economic deprivation—issues that fall in the developmental dimension? If we take their threshold criteria of organized violence seriously, then famine counts as a threat to human security. But what of my second example, which they rule out? While I understand and appreciate their concerns, especially with regard to the sheer magnitude of human malady and the lack of resources to combat such ills, does not their limitation rob the concept of human security precisely of its ingenuity: that both our conceptions of "threat" and "security" need to be re-thought, considering that multiple agencies, the World Bank included, have linked persistent (and preventable) resource deprivation to endemic conflict (*The Economics of Civil War, Crime and Violence*)?

There are many hard questions related to human security, and MacFarlane and Khong cannot answer them all. But they have done much in this must-read *tour de force* to elevate human security to the most rigorous analysis for the purpose of revamping international public policy. As such, policy makers, analysts, and academics alike will find this book of exceptional value.

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