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A FAREWELL TO HUMAN SECURITY IN EU POLICY THINKING?

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REGROUP
REBUILDING GOVERNANCE AND RESILIENCE OUT OF THE PANDEMIC

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REGROUP

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Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the "reactive" level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.

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Executive summary

Emboldened by the Western-dominated, unilateral moment after the end of the Cold War, inspired by intellectuals who valued civil society at the expense of realpolitik, the EU aspired to construct a foreign policy based on values and to influence world affairs according to its image and likeness. In this context of confidence, the EU approached human security distinctively through the decades of the 2000s and 2010s. There was an emphasis on multilateralism and the nurturing of new partnerships; on connecting global agendas and local needs; on combining instruments to manage multiple facets of crises; on aligning short-term and long-term approaches to building human security. Today, however, human security has suffered two backlashes. Firstly, the application of the concept has been difficult. In striving for an increasingly multidimensional, broad, and inclusive approach, the EU's human security framework has weakened its edge and deferred tangible results. Secondly, a return of realpolitik in the European thinking of security has replaced peace and emancipation with militarised notions of security and defence. This paper not only argues that Europeans may have lost their moral backbone in foreign policy but also serves as a call to rethink and deepen security in EU policy thinking.

Keywords: Human Security; European Union; defence; crisis; peace

Introduction[1]

In February 2022, as countries were gradually recovering from the consequences of COVID-19, a Special Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warned of increasing global threats to human security: 'the pandemic could represent a dry run of worse things to come – a series of ever-growing waves crashing into the inability of governments and the international community to empower and protect people around the world, but especially the most vulnerable' (UNDP 2022, 140). To pursue human security amidst uncertain and interconnected crises, the report called for greater 'solidarity', underlining the need to strengthen interdependence among peoples and between humanity and the planet.

The UN report was prophetic but felt unheard. Since then, global insecurity has worsened, while the narrative of solidarity for human security has faltered. 2022 continued with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. 2023 was the hottest year on record, causing terrible climate impacts, and ended with Israel's war on Gaza. 2024 was even more violent due to the escalation in conflicts and political unrest worldwide. 2025 seems even more tumultuous and uncertain. The Trump administration has launched commercial wars across the globe, including with former partners, and frozen foreign aid programs, causing emergencies to soar.

The European Union (EU) continuously recognises the deteriorating security landscape yet appears to be detaching from the traditional narrative of human security. This is striking given that European member states were among the key advocates of the concept, delving on it to integrate their foreign policies and projecting it abroad to sustain the liberal international order (Kaldor, Martin, and Selchow 2007). Scholars such as Iavor Rangelov have argued that the EU's original contribution was the operationalisation of human security in practice, developing 'an ongoing experiment in adapting human security to the realities of twenty-first century conflicts and institutions' (Rangelov 2022, 373). As I will discuss in this paper, however, the values-driven foreign policy that once emphasised multilateralism for the collective efforts of development and peace appears to have been replaced by a more pragmatic, defensive, militarised and inward-looking foreign policy.

In 2025, the narrative of top EU officials is particularly fearmongering, aggressive and bleak, sidelining the usual commitments to human rights, protection, and development. 'Our values do not change – they are universal. But because the world is changing, we have to adapt the way we act. We need a Europe that is more pragmatic, more focused, more determined' said the President of the Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen (2025) at the 2025 Munich Security Conference (see, also, Kallas 2025). The Joint White

1. I would like to thank Elsbeth Bembom, Victor Burguete, Luis Pedro Espinosa, Piero Tortola, and Iavor Rangelov for the generous feedback and suggestions when writing the piece.

Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030 underwrites a shift towards a whole-of-so-ciety approach to deterrence, rather than interdependence, dialogue, and solidarity. This determination to rearm contrasts with the silence, vacillation and inaction in the face of war crimes in the Israel war on Gaza, or gross human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh or the protests in Serbia.

This focus paper does not seek to diminish the importance of defence; rather, it aims to inquire into the gradual disappearance of the human security narrative in EU policy thinking, given that security has become one of the most urgent concerns. The first section examines the integration of human security into EU foreign policy from 2003 to 2016, helping integrate the Union and projecting a distinctive way to deal with conflicts and crises abroad. The second section analyses the limitations in implementing the con-cept and reorientation of EU foreign and security policy. The conclusion submits that the absence of human security in today's European security narrative represents the loss of a moral compass and a singular way to address global insecurities. As militaristic and defensive narratives co-opt the meaning of security, it is essential to rethink and deepen European security.

Human Security: A pillar of Europe's peace narrative

Human security emerged in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional conceptions of security in international affairs, which focused primarily on state security against military threats. International Relations theorist, Ken Booth, called for placing 'emancipation at the centre of new security thinking in part because it is the spirit of our times' (Booth 1991, 321). The end of the Cold War tempered the need for strategic thinking and deepened discussions on security, as the world moved towards the erosion of sovereignty, globalisation forces and economic interdependence, advances in com-munications, or the flourishing of non-state actors and global governance of common goods. 'Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security. Emancipation, the-oretically, is security', wrote Booth (1991, 321). He criticised the prevalence of neo-realist apprehensions of security and suggested a new 'word' for security in a world ripe for cooperation and peace: 'we cannot expect to deal successfully with world problems if we cannot sort out our word problems' (Booth 1991, 314).

Human security suited the purpose. The UNDP defined human security in its 1994 report, shifting the focus from state protection to individual well-being. The report outlined two main aspects: 'Freedom from fear', which meant protecting people from violence, war, and human rights abuses as well as 'freedom from want', which implied addressing economic, food, health, and environmental security. It was a broad, bold and ambitious framework to rethink the tenets of security prevalent until then.

The ideal of human security was key to the building of Europe, imagined as a continent overcoming war and confrontation, and cultivating an integrated community around the values of freedom, peace, democracy, and respect for human rights (Kaldor 2011). During the 1990s and 2000s, the EU expanded and gradually emerged as a global security provider, projecting security as cooperation and peace, rather than deterrence. In a context of confidence in the liberal international order, the EU sought to promote a foreign policy based on its values and self-image, trying to shape world affairs via democratization, economic liberalism, and rules (Manners 2008). The ideal of human security seemed tailor-made.

In 2003, Javier Solana, then the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, appointed a group of prominent academics and practitioners, labelled the Human Security Study Group (HSSG), convened by Mary Kaldor, to advise on how to integrate human security in the nascent European foreign action. Three reports were published by the HSSG, recommending to overcome conventional thinking of security focused on states acquiring strategic assets to deter outside enemies, while embracing an emancipatory human security frame (Rangelov 2022). These reports emphasized human rights, multilateralism, and the building of legitimate institutions in conflict areas, combining civil-military capabilities, legal frameworks, and regionally sensitive, bottom-up approaches (Human Security Study Group 2004; 2007; 2016). Although the term was sometimes not used explicitly in EU policy reports, neither systematically nor coherently, from the 2003 European Security Strategy to the 2016 Global Strategy, human security became an overarching frame to guide a distinctive role for Europe in global affairs (Kaldor, Rangelov, and Selchow 2018). Influenced by the HSSG reports, the EU adopted a second generation of human security as an alternative to geopolitics and contestation with four essential features: multilateral, multilevel, multi-sector and multi-phased.

a) Multilateral – Since the late 2000s, the more international relations were perceived as uncertain, contested, and complex, the EU sought to advance rules-based multilateral cooperation, seen as the most inclusive and sustainable approach to security (European Commission and High Representative 2021). Multilateralism, however, does not refer to state-based traditional diplomacy. Building on the history and sui-generis experience of European institutions, which deal with difference across various scales in everyday negotiation and cooperation, the EU has championed a defence of 'smart' or 'creative' multilateralism (Human Security Study Group 2016). The EU thus insists on pursuing a wide range of partnerships with international (i.e. UN) and regional organisations (i.e. ASEAN, OSCE, MERCOSUR, etc.), as much as with other states or the private sector to engage in global crises. For example, the EU brought together the United States and Iran prior to the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 and stirs and facilitates the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue to normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations. It also

leads multi-track dialogues, forums and networks involving various segments of society to mediate and pursue cooperative solutions in conflict-affected societies (Council of the European Union 2020), including the introduction of new agendas to address the needs of marginalized communities in the most remote regions, as seen in the EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples' Dialogue.

b) Multi-level – Learning from the deficient results of statebuilding and crisis management processes, when engineered and implemented from the top, due to the limited buy-in by local actors, the EU has led a multi-level approach to peace and security that includes the international, regional, national, and local levels. This chimes well with a second generation of human security approaches that insist on 'addressing global challenges that involve politics, law, and economics, and that are both individual and collective, both top down and bottom up, and both global and regional and locally driven' (Human Security Study Group 2016, 4). In the Integrated Approach to external conflicts and crises the EU underlines the need to seek consensus 'at all levels, from global to local' (Council of the EU 2018, 2). The international, regional, and national levels are as important as the community level to attend the everyday needs, interests and experiences of the people. The local level suffers the most ominous consequences of conflicts, yet it is also the source of knowledge and leadership for bottom-up recovery and sustainable peace, according to EU reports that build local capacity or, for example, promote the inclusion and representation of women in state institutions and in the security sector (Women in International Security 2017)

c) Multi-sector – The EU's prevailing peace narrative has traditionally emphasized the use of non-military methods to address international crises and conflicts. The Security Strategy in 2003 raised awareness of new diffused threats that were different to the military or nuclear threats of the Cold War and urged for the development of 'a mixture of instruments' for EU foreign policy (Council of the EU 2003, 9). Since then, the idea of integrating instruments to tackle the multiple dimensions of crises has cemented in EU policy frameworks (EC and HR/VP 2017; Council of the EU 2018). Again, this resonates with the calls of the advocates of human security for combining a wide range of instruments in diplomacy, politics, law, and economics to address human insecurity (Human Security Study Group 2016).

Beyond the classic mantra of deploying military and civilian capabilities side by side, as intended in the first generation of human security approaches, the EU seeks for a creative use of tools to address overlapping risks. As stated by Federica Mogherini at the 2019 Munich Security Conference: 'we feel the need for a sort of 'creative mix' of tools that can – and sometimes does and sometimes has to – include the military one, but always requires also much more: economic support, protection and promotion of human rights, empowerment of young people and women, reconciliation, climate action and here again the list continues'. In consequence, human security is central not

only to civilian and military missions, or aid and development instruments, but also across other policies. For example, enlargement aims to transform institutionally weak or fragile candidate countries into stable, prosperous democracies that respect human rights, and the rule of law. Similarly, the European Neighbourhood Policy promotes good governance, democracy, justice, and human rights, while improving living standards and fostering sustainable growth (European Commission and HR/VP 2015, 3).

c) Multi-phased – The EU aims for sustained engagement in crises to avoid the pitfalls of quick-fix solutions, which are often incomplete and result in short-lived stability. Building on the second generation of human security approaches that are 'both reactive and preventative', prescribing 'continuous long-term engagement' (Human Security Study Group 2016, 14), the Global Strategy reads: 'The EU will act at all stages of the conflict cycle, acting promptly on prevention, responding responsibly and decisively to crises, investing in stabilisation, and avoiding premature disengagement when a new crisis erupts' (EEAS 2016, 9–10). Sustained engagement is important because crises are non-linear, and new cycles of violence can unpredictably occur, increasing human insecurities. The logic is one of connecting short-term and long-term efforts, combining aid and development tasks, which were traditionally separate. As stated in the Strategic Approach to Resilience report, 'given the more fluid landscape of global challenges and risks … It recognises the need to move away from crisis containment to a more structural, long-term, non-linear approach to vulnerabilities, with an emphasis on anticipation, prevention and preparedness' (EC and HR/VP 2017, 2). It is not only necessary to intervene at all stages of the conflict cycle (that is, before the conflict starts [conflict prevention], during the conflict [from mediation to peacekeeping] and well after a peace agreement has been reached [peacebuilding and recovery]; all these efforts should be carried out simultaneously. The notion of protracted and diffused conflicts further challenges the aspiration to find permanent settlements (Pospisil 2019). Prolonged engagements are necessary to strive towards long-term peace, in an approach that resonates with UN-led sustaining peace approaches (UN 2018).

In sum, a multilateral, multi-level, multi-sector, and multi-phased approach to conflicts and crises has been proposed to advance on a human security agenda that differs significantly from more traditional unilateral, top-down, military-based and state-centred, short-term national security initiatives. The ideal of human security has fed into the EU's peace narrative, portraying it as a continent capable of overcoming conflict both at home and abroad through the expansion of interdependence, cooperation and liberal norms. As Manners and Murray premonitorily sensed, however, the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the EU in 2008 represented the zenith of the peace narrative but also the beginning of a new story that EU policymakers would tell to make sense of the EU. Throughout the 2010s, an increasingly contested world marked by power rivalry and re-globalisation (Burguete 2024) has led to a drift away from the promotion of

human security. While some have already narrated a shift towards a more defensive, inward-looking and militaristic approach to security (Bargués, Joseph, and Juncos 2023), the second part of this report focuses on the two backlashes faced by the EU human security agenda.

The end of human security: Deferral and geo-politics

The decade of the 2020s began with a moderate optimism among EU leaders, but darkness and pessimism followed suit. The European Commission, led by Von der Leyen presented the European Green Deal to reduce the net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, which was key for mitigating risks and promoting sustainable development. However, a few months later the pandemic hit Europe hard, and the tsunami of security crises in the following years compelled the EU to shift its security narrative (Peoples 2022). The tipping point may have varied for different Europeans: for some it had already been Brexit; for others, the socio-economic crisis brought about by Covid-19, or the escalating US-China rivalry, the war in Ukraine and in Gaza, the severity of the global warming effects, and, for the most reticent, the United States' decoupling from European security in early 2025. In a remarkable feat, given a history marked by discord, Europeans almost unanimously realised the need to reorient the EU foreign and security policy.

In this second section, the paper examines what remains of the human security concept in the context of 'geopolitical awakening', to borrow the words of former High Representative, Josep Borrell. The central argument is that it has become irrelevant, while the EU's unique identity, moral values and integrative force are waning. There have been two backlashes against the concept of human security. First, the gradual blurring of the application of the concept. In striving for an always more multidimensional, broad, and inclusive approach, the EU's human security framework has weakened its edge and deferred tangible results. Secondly, a return of realpolitik in the European thinking of security has replaced peace and emancipation with militarised notions of security and defence.

There is something deeply corrosive in approaching security via the means of a multilateral, multi-level, multi-sector and multi-phased approach to security: it always seems incomplete, and it satisfies no one. EU efforts to coordinate multilateral responses to global problems have been difficult to sustain and substantive results have not been achieved in a multipolar world marked by competing great powers' interests. First because partnerships weaken when partners find alternatives to the EU, whether through incentives, opportunities, or coercion. This is the case with Balkan states like Serbia or

North African states that are strengthening ties with China, Russia, and the Gulf countries; as well as with the United States under Donald Trump, who shifts security priorities away from Europe. Second, multi-track dialogues aimed at including broader public segments in conflict-affected societies have lacked tangible outcomes. This approach that attempts to be comprehensive and cautious, inclusive of previously marginalised groups, such as women and youth, and context-sensitive is, however, perceived as too 'slow' for a world of speed and geopolitics, which requires 'fast-track negotiation' (Freeman 2025).

The EU has in consequence moved away from a human security approach that values multilateralism as an end in itself. 'We cannot be multilateralists alone nor only for the sake of it', read the EU report on multilateralism (European Commission and High Representative 2021, 1). Thus, a more selective and calculated form of multilateralism has emerged. Borrell highlighted the need to rethink the value of multilateralism in the foreword to the strategic compass: 'Europeans will continue to favour dialogue over confrontation; diplomacy over force; multilateralism over unilateralism. But it is clear that if you want dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it' (Council of the EU 2022, 6). The Strategic Compass pivots towards building 'strategic' partnerships to cooperate only with countries that are aligned with the EU's values or strategic goals. As multilateralism becomes strategic and narrow, human security is put to a halt.

Multi-level approaches have also encountered resistance. The EU has deepened cooperation with the UN and regional organisations such as NATO, OSCE, the African Union or ASEAN, through traditional and non-traditional coalitions and formats, to defend multilateral agendas (European Commission and High Representative 2021), but the global level has shrunk due to great power competition. The UN Security Council is blocked by the insurmountable divisions of its five permanent members, and its peacekeeping missions are underfunded. The politicisation of UN agencies such as the World Health Organization during COVID-19 or United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in the Israel-Palestine conflict, has further undermined global crisis governance. At the local level, the idealized view of civil society groups transforming governments has been challenged by resilient autocracies and fractured local agendas, resisting the EU's engagement and often preferring cooperation with other external powers (Kaldor 2003). The local ownership agenda in conflict zones has led to never-ending controversies over who are the most legitimate actors and how much time is needed until they could truly own and sustain the peace process (for a critical analysis, see Ejdus and Juncos 2018; Bargués-Pedreny 2017).

The EU has in consequence gradually rethought its engagement with the global and local levels. Facing 'a contested international environment', the EU embraces a 'shift towards mutually beneficial partnerships of equals' (European Commission and High

Representative of the Union 2024, 1). While the rhetoric is consistent with cooperation with the UN and other organisations to advance the human security agenda in a rules-based liberal order, the shift is plagued by contradictions, since the EU views partnerships as part of 'a global power struggle' (Niinistö 2024, 137). Dialogues and partnerships with the UN and others, therefore, become 'strategic' to defend Europe's competitiveness and increase its geopolitical impact. The Global Gateway strategy, for example, promotes sustainable development goals while competing with a more assertive and aggressive China, which advances the Belt and Road Initiative (European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2024). These contradictions are also seen in the energy transition agenda, where its promotion contrasts with Europe's growing dependence on the production and refining of critical minerals and rare earths, whose origin and extraction are intertwined with contexts of violence or security risks for the Union (Berthet et al. 2024).

At the local level, due to the proliferation of local actors with conflicting agendas, the EU only selectively collaborates with civil society, wary of supporting groups that do not align with European interests. As Sauli Niinistö, former President of Finland and adviser to Von der Leyen, notes: 'Europe remains a major humanitarian donor, but it has scaled back its security assistance and long-term development cooperation in such countries to avoid legitimising or propping up military juntas or other regimes disregarding fundamental human rights' (Niinistö 2024, 2). While local actors needed to be both protected and empowered in human security framings, even considered 'the hope for international values … the main partners in the search for peace' (Kaldor 1999, 63), they are now perceived much more negatively. Thus reads the European Global Compass report: 'Local and regional instability dynamics that feed on dysfunctional governance and contestation in our wider neighbourhood and beyond, sometimes nourished by inequalities, religious and ethnic tensions, are increasingly entangled with non-conventional and transnational threats and geopolitical power rivalry' (Council of the EU 2022, 17).

The multi-sector approach has also been revisited by EU officials. While promising in theory, for addressing multiple dimensions of complex crises, a multi-sector approach to human security has been haunted by discoordination and vagueness. The Global Strat-egy introduced the idea of 'resilience' in order to bring institutions and programmes in the different policy fields together, breaking policy silos by offering a common frame (Tocci 2020). However, the joined-up approach on resilience in the areas of climate-se-curity-development remains 'insufficient', Tocci (2020, 183–84) explains, because efforts for resilience in one area sometimes undermine developments in another. Particularly in times of power politics, in which dependencies are weaponised, it seems impossible to work jointly and coherently across the diverse policy fields. The main perception has been that too many instruments for security have in the end implied no security. Political emergencies such as containing migration, counterterrorism or supporting war efforts in Ukraine

clash with human rights, humanitarian aid, or energy transition goals. Contrary to the dominant framings of human security, which were oriented towards EU's contribution to wellbeing abroad (Kaldor, Rangelov, and Selchow 2018), current crises blur the Union's inside and outside, with insecurities now felt at home.

As a result, instead of opportunities to explore or emergencies to respond to, the perception is one of multiplying risks and threats against which the EU needs protection. The former arc of fragility surrounding Europe, from Eastern Europe to the Middle East and the Sahel, where the Union saw hunger, poverty, pandemics, and weak governance to be assisted, is perceived today as an arc of instability, an 'arc of fire' that directly threatens Europe (Borrell 2024). In response, every policy domain is securitized; every instrument is recalibrated so that it serves the Union's security interests. Geopolitics now drive enlargement and neighbourhood policies, shifting the focus away from tra-ditional concerns of democratic support and civil society engagement towards regional stability. In a geo-economic turn, the EU leverages an extensive economic toolkit to bolster security interests and gain strategic advantages over rivals, thus moving away from the ideals of interdependence, mutual benefit, and the expansion of a liberal world order where all could prosper (Herranz-Surrallés, Damro, and Eckert 2024)this article sets a common conceptual ground to assess whether, how and why the single European market is experiencing such a geoeconomic turn and how EU responses are shaping other international actors in the process. It develops a research agenda to ex-amine (i. Strategies such as nearshoring, friendshoring, and protectionist incentives are now based on friend-enemy distinctions rather than cost efficiency. Even civilian mis-sions, once focused on human vulnerabilities are now strategically reoriented towards geopolitically significant priorities (Smit 2024). The cross-sectoral approach, formerly essential for advancing human security, is now rebranded to serve power, competition, and defence.

The multi-phased approach, once critical to address crises in a sustained manner, has also lost impetus. The Integrated Approach to conflicts and crises, for example, clearly opted for integrating both short-term and long-term concerns, as crises overlap and are non-linear (Council of the EU 2018). In doing conflict prevention at the same time as post-conflict peacebuilding, emergency response at the same time as stabilisation, however, has grown the perception that there is always more work to be done. As security and stability are evolving, challenges, tasks, and commitments never cease. Success is difficult to claim, and the end goal remains perpetually just beyond reach. This constant involvement with little accomplishments can lead to intervention fatigue, particularly clear in enlargement policy (Petrovic and Tzifakis 2021). The long-term projection of peace offers an ideal aspiration to gradually advance for betterment, but it is deceptive in times of turmoil and anxiety, when immediate, pragmatic solutions are treasured.

As a result, the EU now yearns to take immediate action. As policies are revised to fit a more complex environment, they exhibit hurry and boldness. The Strategic Compass report, even if initially conceived as a generational project to cohere the security culture of the Union, is haunted by anxiety and exigency. It was written in response to 'a new strategic landscape emerging that requires us to act with a far greater sense of urgency and determination', and then redrafted, updated and published a month after Russia invaded Ukraine. In Brussels, every year, indeed every month, the security environment seems to be drastically deteriorating. Alarms are continuously sounding, countdowns are frightening. The boldest narrative is found in defence, where spending has risen notably: 'Together we must accelerate work on all strands to urgently ramp up European defence readiness to ensure that Europe has a strong and sufficient European defence posture by 2030 at the latest', claims the White Paper (European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2025, 2). Even if the military sector is considered central to human security, human security has disappeared from current concerns about security and defence preparedness.

Long-term thinking remains in EU policy, but this is no longer focused on communities' resilience and the development of long-lasting sustainable societies but on deterrence. The Niinistö report argues that a stronger, self-reliant EU will deter future threats. To build capacities and ensure future-proof security, a whole-of-society approach to defence is essential. This approach involves the active participation of all society sectors, including government, private sector, civil society, and individuals, in safeguarding national security. We need to be 'fully prepared' for a threatening future of 'worst-case scenarios', and 'a prolonged period of high risk and deep uncertainty for the Union' (Niinistö 2024, 13). The EU's long-term vision now concerns only its own stability, marginalizing its previous commitment to global peace.

A future without human security?

Since the early 2000s until the end of the decade of the 2010s, the EU approached human security distinctively. The commitment was high, as boasted by Mogherini (2019): 'we invest, as the EU, more in development cooperation and humanitarian aid than the rest of the world combined'; and the narrative was a transformative one to reduce poverty and inequality, promote good governance and human rights, assisting emergencies and long-term development, addressing the root causes of conflict and insecurity.

Today, however, there is a purposeful amnesia, and the principles glorified in past documents such as human security, resilience, humanitarianism, development or peace are reinterpreted or ignored. Indeed, the documents of 2025 do not build on or not even mention the Global Strategy, the Integrated Approach to Conflict and Crises, the

Strategic Approach to Resilience, the Strengthen Multilateralism or even the Strategic Compass (for example, see European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2025). The commitment with human security has faltered, and the narrative has dras-tically changed. The Joint White Paper for European Defence presented in March by Von der Leyen is one decisive example: to 'ensure peace is to have the readiness to deter those who would do us harm' read the initial lines of the document; to achieve European security, the report continues, Europe must 'restore credible deterrence and deliver the security on which our prosperity depends. This requires all Member States to act in solidarity and to invest in our collective defence' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2025, 1). No more innovative approaches to multilat-eralism, multi-level efforts, multiple instruments or long-term thinking. Approaches to human security are, according to Von der Leyen, an outdated option to 'muddle through the years ahead, attempting to adapt to new challenges in an incremental and cautious way' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2025, 1). Instead, de-terrence and defence seem to be the moves to 'ensur[e] that the people of Europe are able to live in security, peace, democracy and prosperity' (Ibid). Like peace, democracy and human security in the past, which were the fulcrum around which stability, resilience and progress followed, today the linchpin is defence:

> A surge in defence investment would have positive spillover effects across the economy, contributing to competitiveness, job creation and innovation in many sectors, from aeronautics to shipbuilding, from steel to space, trans-port to AI. Harnessed correctly, this could lead to a major leap in European resilience in a world where threats are proliferating (European Commission and High Representative of the Union 2025, 21).

In searching for a new compass for security and defence, human security has gradually faded from the strategies and policies. The concept is being reinterpreted outside the West in a much more meaningful, forceful, and distinctive way (Mine, Gómez, and Muto 2019)

This paper not only argues that Europeans may have lost their moral backbone in for-eign policy but also serves as a call to rethink and deepen security again. It would be too simplistic and likely naive to try to reclaim human security. Returning to a concept that was distinct and powerful twenty years ago would neglect Europe's current needs and concerns in a far more transactional, realist and geopolitical world, where security and defence dominate over cooperation and peace. But surrendering to conventional security narratives might limit European thinking, imagination and capacity to foster peace precisely when human insecurities are ubiquitous. Narratives of hard security or of rearming Europe are narrow and have deleterious consequences for peace. Zero-sum militarist security cannot be the sole available option, the alpha and omega of Euro-pean policy thinking. The challenge may be to consider human security and geopolitics

without compromising either, for example, by exploring ‘non-escalatory’ conceptions of security and defence (Kaldor and Rangelov 2023), or by sustaining pragmatic relations with multiple others to regain confidence and foster collaboration over common concerns (Alcaro and Bargués 2025). The tragic narrative and farewell of the ‘old’ human security concept, eclipsed by geopolitical frenzy, suggest that today’s world problems, to paraphrase Booth, need another word for security and emancipation.

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