

New Wine in an Old Bottle? The Chinese Perspective on Human Security: Implications for EU-China Security Cooperation¹

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Introduction

Since introducing the 'New Security Concept' (NSC) in the late 1990s, China's policy makers have exhibited wariness towards the idea of 'human security' (Chu 2002, Evans 2004). While retaining a high degree of sensitivity towards the sanctity of state sovereignty, China's security concept has broadened its scope beyond traditional security and included non-traditional security such as economic security, cooperative security, comprehensive security and more recently 'people's security' (People's Daily 2000, China Youth Daily 2004, Ma and Sun 2014). Despite concerns about its liberal normative underpinnings and its use to justify humanitarian intervention,² there has been an incremental, albeit partial, engagement with human security in Chinese official discourse (Breslin 2014, Li and Yu 2013, Ren and Li 2013).

Against the backdrop of changing norms of state sovereignty regarding human rights and China's new domestic and international security challenges in recent years, this paper reviews China's approaches towards human security, and its home-grown ideas which resonate with the functional concerns of human security. The paper thus considers the plethora of Chinese policy and academic writings that have emerged in recent years and reflects on the regime's acute awareness of the need to strengthen its legitimacy through enmeshing people's safety into national security concerns, and its conscious efforts in emulating international human security discourse while developing its own distinct priorities concerning its domestic and international security issues. The paper also aims at connecting this body of literature – both in English and Chinese – to that of the EU-China relations on security cooperation and norm diffusion.

In so doing, the paper first reviews China's evolving security conception since the end of the Cold War. It then proceeds to investigate how China approaches human security in theoretical and practical terms, including Chinese home-grown ideas which either resonate or emulate the existing definition of human security. The paper then assesses the prospect of EU-China cooperation on human security by asking: 1) whether it can be a substitute for a human rights dialogue; 2) what are the incentives for both sides to engage on this notion; and 3) whether the potential cooperation better serves the respective priorities of both sides.

1. Human security: engagement and interpretation

Since being introduced by the United Nations' Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 *Human Development Report*, the concept of human security has gathered unprecedented international attention as well as the momentum for discussing its theoretical formation and practical relevance in international relations (Evans 2004, Acharya 2001).

Regarding its definition, many question if its 1994 UN introduction represents the horizon of a new theory, concept, paradigm, analytical starting point, or even a worldview (Evans 2004, Buzan 2004, Paris 2001). In general, the policy-makers and NGO communities tend to be more receptive of the concept and engage in direct advocacy – either as a strategy for government to address basic human needs, for instance, in the case of Canada or the Human Security Network (HSN), or as a counterbalance its national constraints regarding traditional security in the case of Japan.

The academic community has been more skeptical regarding its formation and meaning. For Buzan (2004), human security is 'a reductionist, idealistic notion that adds little analytical value'. For Paris (2001), human security is not such a fundamental recasting of the security debate in an alternative paradigm (2001: 88), and the concept is not value-free (2001: 92).

While the UN has refrained from promoting human security, there have been divisive opinions regarding the EU's effort. Some argue that the European Security and Defence Policy Strategy and the European Commission have successfully linked physical security with material well-being (Martin and Owen 2010: 218-9, Hampson et al. 2001); others suggested that the EU has not applied human security to extra-regional human rights crises (Fioramonti 2012).

In the context of East Asia, countries remain deeply divided over human security (Acharya 2001, Evans 2004, Tow et al. 2013). Nonetheless, Evans (2004: 280) noted the trend that East Asian countries have not just responded to but actively shaped the international debate on human security. Japan, for instance, has proactively embraced the notion of human security in the region and globally without threatening its relations with the alliance or its constitution, and has contributed to the conceptual depth and demonstrated normative commitment to this notion (Evans 2004, Hoshino & Satoh 2013). Meanwhile, Japan's active role in supporting human security is said to be in its strategic interest, too – that is, to allow the government to increase its military expenditure within the limits of its constitution (Acharya: 2001).

2. China's conceptual approach to human security

Unlike Japan, Chinese government or intellectuals did not show immediate interest in the idea of human security nor the 1994 UNDP definition when it was introduced. Given the close association between human security and human rights promotion and humanitarian intervention, China had been suspicious of and uncomfortable with human security for much of the 1990s, when China was subjected to intense international scrutiny over its human rights record as the result of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Conceptually, China's developmentalist approach to human rights – that is, economic rights before political rights

– did not turn into forces of influence in shaping the development of the two schools of thoughts – ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom from want’. Instead, Chinese leaders and academics prefer the term and state-oriented concept of non-traditional security, rather than human security (Chu 2002, Li and Yu 2013).

Despite this initial wariness, the following section aims to demonstrate that human security is now gradually finding its place in China’s regional and domestic security discourse. Although the Chinese authorities remain hesitant to embrace this notion (Liu and Liu 2006), some interpretations of this concept have been partially adapted and reproduced for domestic consumption over state obligation and its relation to the individual sense of security in China (Zhang and Zheng 2013, Ren and Li 2013, Ma and Sun 2014).

2.1 China’s changing security concept and cautions over human security

There is a consensus that China has been cautious over the concept of human security because it potentially erodes traditional conceptions of sovereignty drawn from its historical experience and China’s position on humanitarian interventions (Chu 2002, Tow et al. 2013). In the mid-1990s, however, Chinese policy makers started to develop the ‘New Security Concept’ (NSC), realising that many security problems could no longer be effectively addressed unilaterally and that retaining Cold War-era perceptions of security would result in excessive rigidity in light of developing strategic challenges (Evans 2004: 275, Lanteigne 2014: 4). The terms ‘non-traditional security’ and ‘comprehensive security’, rather than human security, have thus become embedded in Chinese military strategy (White Papers 2011, 2013).

Nevertheless, following the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and the Iraq War after 2003, Chinese foreign policy continued to undertake a strict interpretation of sovereignty and reacted with caution over intervention in internal disputes. Since then, China has become more accepting towards interventions under specific conditions, especially when the UNSC is an optimal solution. At the turn of this century, China was openly supportive of peacekeeping ideas through committing its armed forces on ‘Military Operations Other than War’ (MOOTW) [*fēi zhàn zhēng jūn shì xíng dòng*] (非战争军事行动), a concept borrowed from US military terminology (Gill and Huang 2009: 4, Fravel 2011: 177, Lanteigne 2014: 5). China’s most recent security white papers (2011, 2013) have also seen increasing efforts in refining and broadening China’s traditional understanding of security by using terminologies such as comprehensive security, common security, cooperative security and sustainable security. This change of attitude towards peacekeeping and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) is also conveyed in practice, evidenced by its increasingly substantial contribution to UN peacekeeping missions (BBC 2013).

Despite the incentives and new conditions both internally and externally to embrace this notion, human security has largely been avoided in earlier Chinese academic research and public discourse, even though but it does not invoke the degree of political sensitivity as much as human rights (Liu and Liu 2006: 24). By acknowledging and supporting the concept as it is broadly defined by the international community, China would have exposed itself by subscribing to another notion which invites external criticisms both over its human rights

record at home and policies on humanitarian aid and interventions abroad (Hu 2011, Breslin 2014).

2.2 Human security: translations and interpretation

To understand this wariness, China's academic and policy engagement with human security, especially its various translations, usage and discursive exercise deserves more academic attention in the existing literature. Meanwhile, the Chinese notion of 'people security' – as a modified version of human security and home-grown alternative – resonates with the existing notion of human security. Despite only emerging as a new priority since Xi Jinping's leadership, this strand of literature – mainly by the Chinese military academic community – serves both as a useful and convenient political slogan as well as a key to a better understanding of how human security can be crafted to serve China's domestic and diplomatic needs.

Translation

Chinese translation regarding human security refers not only to the linguistic choices of characters and meanings to match a particular understanding of the concept, but also a careful selection of academic work by international scholars to be introduced to a wider Chinese readership – both of which are indicative of Chinese boundaries and attitudes towards human security.

There are two Chinese translations directly referring to human security in Chinese academic and policy literature: '*rén de ān de quán*' [人的安全] and '*rén lèi ān quán*' [人类安全]. The exact origins of these two translations remain a mystery according to existing credible sources, and the key differences focus on how 'people-centred' – a key element of the 1994 UNDP definition – is conveyed. The ambiguity of the former translation allows security to be considered both as an individual issue as well as that of 'people' in a more collective sense. The latter, '*rén lèi ān quán*' [人类安全] refers to 'people' as 'mankind' or 'humanity', therefore, the individual aspect of humanity can be understood in a broader notion of 'universality'. Unsurprisingly, the latter translation '*rén lèi ān quán*' [人类安全] is the choice of the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report in its Chinese version, which has been taken up by Taiwanese scholarship without duplication or alternative translation (Tsai and Tan 2006, Chou 2007), whereas the former translation '*rén de ān de quán*' [人的安全] seems only to be used by mainland Chinese scholars, but not exclusively in simplified Chinese language (the mainland version). While this dual usage is now subjected to individual interpretation, there is an initial preference for '*rén de ān de quán*' [人的安全], which tends to be used interchangeably with the latter version.

While the exact reasons for and implications of the two translations might be difficult to establish and verify, the creation of a translation other than the UNDP version is very likely the result of China's initial cautions and suspicions over the key elements of human security in its English language construction – especially 'people-centred' and its universal connotation.

Translation of scholarly work in English

It is also worthwhile noticing that the limited English scholarship on the notion of human security which has been translated into Chinese has used ‘*rén de ān quán*’ [人的安全] – the mainland Chinese creation (Buzan 2008, Acharya 2010). Where the Chinese language literature reviews how others, such as the EU, implement human security, the UN version translation applies (Song 2014). Barry Buzan’s (2004) critical piece on human security with an eye-catching title ‘A Reductionist, Idealistic Notion that Adds Little Value’ was amongst the first to be translated and published in Chinese language journals. This is followed by non-Western IR scholar Acharya’s work (2001, 2008), in which he argued that human security does not necessarily invoke tensions between universalism and cultural relativism, nor does the West have the defining power over its construction, which have been translated and published in university textbook form.

Chinese official discourse and academic engagement rarely explicitly articulates its wariness towards human security, with the exception of Chu (2002) which was published overseas in English. However, its selection of academic work to be translated and made available for a wider readership – either by a prominent critique of human security, or a prominent critique of the Western dominant understanding of IR – can be seen as China’s belated effort in carving out its own take on this notion. Therefore, by importing ideas that resonate with China’s suspicions towards human security, China intends to introduce this notion not as yet another product of liberal democratic thinking but as a neutral, non-Western concept (Acharya 2001) which sheds lights on ‘economic rights’ or ‘right to development’ already advocated by the Chinese government.

2.3 Partial engagement

Although the term ‘human security’ has not been used in China’s official policy language, the Chinese former President Hu Jintao did refer to the notion in his speech at the 2nd informal meeting of leaders at the APEC summit in Chile in 2004, for the first time by the Chinese leadership, regarding China’s determination in prioritising counter-terrorism and preventing pandemic diseases. Prior to Hu, Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s leadership in the 1990s held a non-negotiable and strident position of ‘sovereignty ranks higher than human rights’ [*zhǔ quán gāo yú rén quán*] (主权高于人权), and ‘sovereignty is the only premise and guarantee of human rights within each nation’ (People’s Daily 2000). In the first decade of the Post-Cold War era, China had been a strong defender of traditional concepts of security which emphasises national sovereignty and territorial security. The Asian financial crisis between 1997 and 1999, however, has brought the notion of economic security to the attention both of policymakers as well as the academic community (China Daily 1998, Chu 2002).

Hu Jintao’s era has seen China’s GDP growth and international presence expanded in an unprecedented speed and level since China joined the WTO in 2001 and other memberships such as the APEC. This one-off speech is a notable rhetorical change in conceptualising human security in what has been a predominantly ‘neo-Westphalian’ national security outlook (Tow et al. 2013, Lantaigne 2014), so that China can be seen as a more responsible and cooperative global player by being on the receiving end of international norm diffusion without structural compliance. However, it is argued that no consensus has been reached in

China on how the individual aspect of human security can be reconciled with China's focus on traditional security concerns (Li and Yu 2013). As a result, the concept of 'non-traditional security' seems the most conducive to bridging the gap, which can suitably honour the preference of 'people' [rén mín] (人民) – a trademark term by the Chinese Communist Party referring to people in a collective sense rather than individuals 'rén de' [人的] or 'gè tǐ de' [个体的].

The 'people first' doctrine

The notion of 'people first' [yǐ rén wéi běn] (以人为本) is an approach emanating from the 2003 SARS crisis and a new priority introduced in 2004 from the 4th plenum of the 16th Central Committee intended to move away from the growth-oriented policy guideline (Breslin 2014: 11, Ren and Yi 2013). A symbolic and rhetorical legacy of Hu Jintao's tenure, this doctrine, together with the 'scientific concept of development' [kē xué fā zhǎn guān] (科学发展观) was added to the Party's Constitution at the 17th Party Congress as a major strategic thought guiding China's economic and social development. This doctrine is primarily understood as a response to the concerns that regime security and social security are intertwined in time of high GDP growth with mounting environmental degradation and social costs. The initial mis-handling of the SARS crisis regarding transparency and contingency served as another catalyst for the government to recognise the need to expand its traditional sense of security to include public safety and public health, otherwise internal stability and regime security would be endangered.

Although the Chinese government avoided using the term 'human security' on most occasions, Ren and Yi (2013) argued that the 'people first' doctrine is a similar idea which overlaps with the concerns of human security. This effort in identifying basic connotations of human security and the 'people first' doctrine and the policy areas they both address demonstrates the Chinese functional approach to the understanding of human security. Taking the 'people first' doctrine seriously does not answer how the Chinese government addresses the tension between individual and collective security, nor has it demonstrated norm diffusion or any effort on China's behalf in shaping the current human security discourse.

2.4 People security: home-grown or norm diffusion?

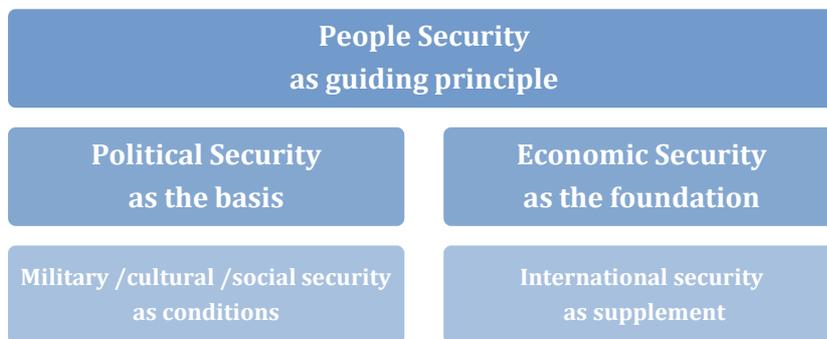
As demonstrated above, the Chinese government seldom uses the term human security, but it has constructed ideas and policies which resonate certain aspects of human security without an obvious attempt to emulate the discourse. Unlike the 'people first' doctrine, the term 'people security' [rén mín ān quán] (人民安全) which has emerged during Xi Jinping's leadership has shown direct influence from human security in its formation.

Since Xi Jinping took power as the head of the Communist Party, the State, the military and newly added national security, followed by the establishment of the National Security Commission of the Communist Party in 2013, there has been a need to fashion a new security concept, alongside other political slogans. This attempt in creating a new discourse on security issues reflected the new priorities that the regime is prepared to undertake without fundamentally challenging the government's traditional approaches. Consequently

a plethora of new writings on what Xi called ‘the Overall National Security Concept’ (*zǒngtǐ guojia ānquánguān* 总体国家安全观) in official media, dedicated websites and social media channels have emerged using and articulating this notion and its meaning.

In line with the ‘people first’ doctrine, the term ‘people security’ [*rén mín ān quán*] (人民安全) was coined by Xi Jinping in the first meeting of the newly founded National Security Commission of the Communist Party on 15 April 2014 in which Xi Jinping described the pressing new security challenges facing his leadership as domestic counter-terrorism, tensions with neighbouring countries and other threats associated with the domestic economy in its transitional period (Legal Daily 2014, Ma and Sun 2014). While articulating his comprehensive national security concept, Xi is most often quoted as stating ‘people security is the guiding principle, political security as the basis, economic security as the foundation, military/cultural/social security as necessary conditions and international security as supplement’.

Figure 1



Source: Xi Jinping’s Speech at the 1st meeting of the National Security Committee, 15 April 2014.

In order to realise the new national security system, the quote proceeds with: ‘combining external and internal security, territorial and civil security, traditional and non-traditional security, self [*zì shēn*] (自身) and collective [*jí tǐ*] (集体) security; security and development’. The carefully crafted wording both reflects key aspects of human security while underlying the existing tension between individual and collective security in Chinese security conception. Without highlighting some inherent contradictions, Xi’s speech further elaborated 11 security priorities to be integrated into the national security system, which exhibits a hybrid of China’s traditional security concerns and some non-traditional security issues which were also part of the UNDP 1994 definition of human security.

While China’s 11 security concerns underlying the new security concept suggest that certain norm diffusion might have taken place, the writings by official media and academics as part of the overall discourse do explicitly refer to the UNDP 1994 definition of human security as the global context before introducing its Chinese version of ‘people security’ (Ma and Sun 2014, Su 2014). The notion of human security as coined in the 1994 UNDP document thus becomes the legitimate basis and global normative context for ‘people security’ to emerge, while combining necessary Chinese particularities rooted in China’s past. The term ‘*rén mín*’ [人民] as ‘people’, for instance, is a familiar phrase which is highly consistent with the

Chinese Communist Party’s past discursive practice, unlike ‘citizen’ [gōng mín] (公民), which invokes rights and other liberal values. It thus allows China to emulate the notion of human security without committing to any Western/liberal concepts the notion might insinuate.

Table 1

	UNDP 1994 Human Development Report	Xi’s New Security Concept 11 elements
<i>Commonalities</i>	Economic security, political security	
<i>Functional overlap</i>	Environmental security	Ecological security
<i>Non-traditional security</i>	Health Security	Cultural Security
	Food Security	Social Security
	Personal Security	Technology security
	Community Security	Information Security
		Resource Security
<i>Traditional security</i>		Nuclear Security
		Territorial Security
		Military Security

Source: UNDP Human Development Report (1994) and People’s Daily (2014)

In its rhetorical practice, applying ‘people security’ to China’s reality also invites justification of Chinese government legitimacy by citing ‘success stories’ such as SARS 2003, or the 2008 Sichuan earthquake disaster relief. In some writings by semi-official academics, the term has been applied to China’s conditions 120 years ago during the Sino-Japanese war so as to justify the Communist Party’s legitimacy to rule (Ma and Sun 2014). In some cases where human security and people security are used almost interchangeably, the differences between China and Western developed countries take a much less defensive tone, indicating the non-ideological interpretation of human security by Chinese thinkers and policy-makers (Ma and Sun 2014, Hu 2011).

3. Implications for future EU-China cooperation

Concerning the climate of changing norms of state sovereignty regarding human rights, there has been an unwritten assumption, at least from the EU side, that human security might offer a way out of the current deadlock over the EU-China human rights dialogue. This implication on human rights promotion in turn explains China’s reluctance to engage with the EU over human security, despite its relevance in tackling climate change and food security which are currently included in *the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* (EEAS 2013). Other conventional and non-conventional security concerns of China’s interests

– the 11 security priorities embedded the China’s new security system – are almost all covered by existing agreements and communiqués, therefore, there is little incentive for China to further include human security which is only expected to be a recipe for disagreement or conflicts, due to the EU’s much more normative interpretation of the concept.

It would also be a futile effort for the EU’s normative agenda to replace human rights dialogue with that of human security, even if China does agree. As a much less established norm of no obvious liberal underpinnings, the notion of human security allows China to undertake a value-free approach, and the ‘cooperation’ is likely to end up as a battleground over the importance of sovereignty rather than the meanings of people-centred security concerns. Finally, China’s endorsement of the notion of human security is still at its initial stage. The current rhetorical practice remains domestically focused and consistent with China’s non-interference stand, thus ruling out any immediate possibility for both sides to cooperate.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated whether the Chinese official and academic communities have started to embrace human security, and if so, in what terms. Having identified subtle changes in China’s official rhetoric, I conclude that the source and motivation for such a shift is both the consequence of norm diffusion and home-grown concerns. Central to this paper is the argument to make sense of China’s official rhetorical changes regarding human security as well as to explore the consistency and focus of China’s security concept against the background of a changing domestic and international security environment. The findings suggest that the concept of people security advocated by Xi Jinping’s leadership does resonate with human security in its broadest sense, but remains value-free and domestically oriented.

The Chinese approach to human security has highlighted China’s tentative efforts in broadening its own traditional understanding of security as protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity but without any serious intention to redefine the concept as this stage. In the meantime, the development of people’s security has strong roots within the international human security debate, which could provide a source of legitimacy for promoting China’s non-ideological, people-centred (in the Chinese way) and collective human security agenda.

So far, China has proven to be a selective norm taker, and not yet a shaper regarding human security. And yet, human security has been partially taken and crafted to serve China’s domestic needs. This domestically focused advocacy approach to human security leaves little space for the EU to engage bilaterally with China on this issue. Furthermore, the existing EU-China cooperation on traditional and non-traditional security issues as well as climate change matches the priorities and capacities of both sides in the immediate future; therefore, there is little incentive for either side to include human security which only serves to re-configure how current issues are packaged rhetorically.

To identify a common conceptual ground between the EU and China on human security remains a challenge for scholars and policy-makers concerned with the promotion of any further meaningful engagement. The EU and Chinese perspectives on human security are not necessarily incompatible, but they do create grounds for mutual suspicion if this concept is to be adopted in bilateral settings. For China, human security, or people security, has been an instrument of national strategic priorities that have primarily domestic origins and purposes. As such, human security has been presented as a strategy to enable the government to justify its past achievement in addressing people's needs, and as a concept that China is prepared to operationalize in a just and secure world – as seen by the Chinese.

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² See the remarks by the Chinese delegation at the UNGA regarding a draft resolution on human security. Available at: www.china-un.org/chn.lhghywj/fyywj/fayan2012/t968626.htm (accessed 9 November 2014).