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vol. I / no. 06 | August 2020

## Striving for Human Security in the Era of Multilateralism: Bargaining Sovereignty through the Battle of Narratives

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### Summary<sup>4</sup>

Despite the success of multilateral diplomacy to raise a global concern over human security, the principle of state's sovereignty often clashes with the idea and practice of people-centred security itself—whereby state does not only act as an impediment but also threat to the security of their people. Multilateral diplomacy, on one hand, provides opportunity for international actors to continuously contest and reconstruct ideas of human security, yet whether discursive power of multilateral diplomacy can actually protect human security remains an open question.

**Keywords:** *international cooperation, discursive power, multilateral diplomacy, narratives, sovereignty.*

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<sup>4</sup> This edition is the output of 'DefiningNurani: a Dialogue Series on Human Security' held by the IR-UI as part of its 35th Anniversary celebrations, and supported by its Alumnae Association (ILUNI HI-UI), series 1/06, titled: "Human Security dalam Diplomasi Multilateral", with Nara Masista Rakhmatia (Speaker), Hariyadi Wirawan, PhD (Discussant), and Ali A Wibisono, PhD (Host). [http://tiny.cc/ir-ui\\_definingnurani06](http://tiny.cc/ir-ui_definingnurani06)

## Human Security in the Age of Multilateral Diplomacy

As the end of the Cold War marks the start of the liberal democracy era, interstate cooperation begins to flourish and transform the dynamics of international politics. The introduction of the term human security, which was first coined in 1994 by the United Nations Development Programme, was both the result of and a call for strengthening cooperation between states. As the perceived common global challenges has shifted to the more relevant issue of development, the spirit of international cooperation heightens and states are determined to work across borders to address global common threats. This is also related to the evolving traditional perspective that security is no longer defined as referring to border and military security of the state, but to complex dimensions of peoples' daily lives.

It is explicitly mentioned that [the practice of diplomacy](#) within the paradigm of multilateralism must be advanced to promote people-centred policy frameworks. Particularly referring to the mandate of the United Nations (UN), all member states are required to carry common missions to fight against various types of global threats. However, although the idea of human security itself has been internalized in various global agendas, notably in development areas, the achievement is still far from ideal. Non-state actors are increasingly involved in various multilateral forums and expected to balance the hegemonic control of the state and to represent the voices of those who are most vulnerable. Yet, state actors retain the domination and sovereign power in international politics, which eventually serve as an additional challenge in realizing the human security agenda. This is probably because not all states practice security provision professionally, and some even excel at providing insecurity

## Bargaining State Power and Sovereignty

Multilateral diplomacy has demonstrated its success in promoting the idea of human security in various sectors. Though the term per se is not literally adopted into multilateral diplomacy agendas, its core values and components are well translated in the current multilateral diplomacy discourse, as can be observed in the globally recognized 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Even though the fulfilment of the goals remains to be seen, yet its capacity to bring together state representatives to discuss global development concerns and agree on a set of milestones to respond to people's needs and interests, particularly for developing and least-developed countries, is already a remarkable achievement in itself. Furthermore, the era of multilateral diplomacy has also seen rise in the participation of non-state actors in various development-related issues in multilateral forums. An example is the involvement of city mayors, academics, and civil societies in the process of formulating the [New Urban Agenda](#), as adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III). This agenda has acknowledged the important role of non-state actors and global cooperation, particularly in the local level, to respond to people' needs in the age of urbanization.

In spite of the efforts to mainstream the core values and components of human security in the development agenda through international organizations, a number of existential threats to humanity persist. Cases that demonstrate the clash between human security ideas and states' concerns over their sovereignty persist. Some countries even prefer to close their doors from the international community to avoid accountability measures over their course of actions against their citizens.

There have also been cases where the UN and other international organizations criticized, and to some extent, intervened under principles of humanitarian intervention and Responsibility to Protect, such as in the case of [UN intervention in Rwanda genocide](#). Yet, both principles are heavily criticized as the interventions were abusively conducted in the name of 'humanitarianism' and breach the principle of respect to national sovereignty—beside other realistic-pragmatic concerns, such as the costs of intervention and potentials for conflicts with other states. Thus, in the condition where state retains its sovereign power to control its intrastate politics, multilateral diplomacy is believed to be able to 'intervene' only in a softer way. Employing non-coercive character, multilateral diplomacy works by exercising discursive power to encourage states with human security issues to acknowledge their own problems and foster good will to resolve them. Only by the virtue of their recognition and willingness to be assisted, can other states and international actors step in to provide some sorts of 'interventions'. In this respect, power consideration is not irrelevant to human security agenda, securing the willingness of major powers – particularly members of the UN Security Council – are critical to the pursuit of these humanitarian purposes

### **Contested Narratives, Conflicting Interests: Does Multilateral Diplomacy Matter?**

The aforementioned discussion has shown how the attempt to realize the agenda of human security often requires interventions which infringe state's sovereignty. However, the reluctance among some states to receive 'assistance' from other states and international organizations to address the issue of human insecurities are often the result of different level of acceptance to the idea of human security—where the substance and importance of the idea itself is constantly contested due to conflicting interests between states—and also the lack of trust among international actors. This is a gap which multilateral diplomacy should address. Since diplomacy is essentially an art of contesting ideas, multilateral forums become a battlefield of narratives where international actors constantly debate and bargain norms, values and standpoints regarding a certain issue.

The discursive dynamics of multilateral diplomacy, however, is difficult to settle. It is important to note that the nature of the battle of narratives in multilateral forums are complex and fast-changing. In various multilateral forums, we can identify multiple negotiation groups based on criteria such as economy, region, issues, etc., where different states employ different narratives for one concern. In [global climate negotiations](#), for instance, the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was preceded by the interplay of discourses on climate change denial, which was influenced by changing domestic politics. This certainly presents additional challenge to the global commitment to fight the climate catastrophes, given that the United States is the largest economic power that possesses the capacity to contribute to the global

efforts to meet the internationally agreed target of limiting global warming. Not only between states, the opening of platforms for non-state actors' involvement in multilateral forums further fuel the dynamics. There are cases where non-state actors are carrying their political agenda into multilateral settings by all means, by themselves or through the medium of other state actors, and sometimes by conveying substances that have no direct relations to the substances of the multilateral meetings itself. These cases exhibit some examples of challenges in multilateral diplomacy. These fast-changing and unexpected advances in multilateral forums urge every country to prepare the intricate situation with quick but well-targeted responses.

Within this dynamic, multilateral diplomacy is expected to bridge contesting ideas, which also means to involve in the work of constructing (and deconstructing/reconstructing) certain norms and values upheld by international actors. They also have to build the spirit of trust and cooperation in a way that changing one's standpoints on security does not mean 'intervening' or 'dictating' other states' domestic affairs, but to collectively address common concerns. In the attempt to realize the agenda of human security, they must ensure that the discursive power of multilateral diplomacy will win narratives which carry human-centred values. However, it should be continuously questioned whether multilateral diplomacy is an effective tool; whether the power of the 'better' arguments is sufficient to attain the human security agenda. Multilateral diplomacy practices are constantly criticized by human rights group for their failure to protect international society. Moreover, the structure of power relations which still dictates the international politics also reproduces the gap between major and small powers; 'developed' and 'developing countries'; West and East; North and South —where the former exerts its material power over the latter to shape global narratives and consensus according to their interests. In the case of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), for example, the authority to decide which security issues deserve to be prioritized remains at the hands of the 'Big 5'. Hence, does discursive power of multilateral diplomacy really matter?

## **Conclusion: Multilateral Diplomacy at a Crossroad**

In the age of multilateralism, the international society has witnessed the success of multilateral diplomacy to put forward the agenda of human security. Yet, in multiple cases, states' differing interpretations of human security challenge its realization. While the principle of sovereignty further hinders states to intervene in the political realms of other states, multilateral diplomacy becomes a tool to channel aspirations of human security proponents. Interstate negotiation forums retain a primary role to bridge contested narratives to ensure that narratives carrying human security values are listened, preferred, adopted and translated into concrete political actions. However, multilateral diplomacy is both an art and a practice of business as usual. It is an art where diplomats exercise its negotiating skills to encourage actors to resolve insecurities without pointing finger at one state, but in the collective spirit and trust to address common threats all together. The process could certainly take a longer time, but the absence of open conflicts ultimately reduces costs for the use of coercive measures. On the other hand, it seems to be a business as usual where major powers exert their controls over others and manipulate international politics. Therefore, while multilateral diplomacy remains at the forefront of the

battle to fight global challenges, only time can tell whether the discursive power of multilateral diplomacy is proven forceful to promote and protect human security ideas or that the politics of sovereignty will continue to nurture the realm for power struggle. \*\*\*

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