

When “Security” Loses Its Meaning

NATO's human security doctrine promises to put civilians first. Critics say its legal vagueness is quietly eroding the very laws meant to protect them.

Since the end of the Cold War, the definition of security in international relations has been quietly rewritten. What used to mean, almost exclusively, the defence of borders and state sovereignty has expanded to include the protection of individuals and communities from a much wider range of threats. At the centre of that shift sits a single phrase: “human security.” First articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, which defined it as “freedom from want and freedom from fear,” the concept has since migrated from development economics into the heart of NATO's military doctrine. In doing so, it has quietly begun to compete with, rather than complement, two of the most rigorously defined bodies of law in the world: the law of armed conflict (LOAC) and international human rights law (IHL).

Founded in 1949 as a Cold War deterrence pact, NATO has spent the past three decades stretching its mission far beyond its original mandate. Interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan pulled the alliance into conflict management and stabilisation work well outside allied territory, and human security has increasingly become the language used to justify it. The alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept, agreed at the Madrid Summit, formally embedded civilian protection — and the underlying drivers of conflict, such as governance and economic instability — into NATO strategy. NATO's own guidance, [Human Security: Approach and Guiding Principles](#), along with newer policy documents on [human trafficking](#) and [conflict-related sexual violence](#), extend that logic further, explicitly framing civilian welfare as a security concern in its own right.

On paper, this looks like moral progress: an alliance built for deterrence learning to prioritise the people caught in the crossfire. But the legal picture is murkier. Human security has never been codified. It carries no treaty basis, no binding thresholds, no enforcement mechanism and no fixed definition — it is, by design, a policy framework rather than a legal one. And that is precisely the problem, critics argue, when it is layered onto legal regimes that depend on the opposite: total clarity.

Why precision matters

Legal certainty — the principle that [law must be clear, precise and foreseeable](#) — is not a bureaucratic nicety. It is what allows the law of armed conflict to function at all. LOAC rests on tightly drawn principles: distinction, which separates combatants from civilians; proportionality, which weighs civilian harm against military advantage; and necessity, which limits force to what is strictly required. These are not vague aspirations. They are meant to produce answers — is this a lawful target, is this response excessive — in real time, under fire. International human rights law depends on the same kind of precision: when France formally derogated from parts of the European Convention on Human Rights after the 2015 Paris attacks, it did so under [defined legal conditions](#), not simply by invoking security concerns in the abstract.

That system worked, at least in principle, in Libya in 2011, when Canadian pilots aborted an approved airstrike after judging the risk to civilians too high — a textbook proportionality call that the Red Cross has since [studied as a case in point](#). It broke down more visibly in Afghanistan's Helmand Province in 2007, when a NATO strike killed dozens of Afghan civilians after a target was misidentified — a strike [The Guardian reported](#) left dozens dead. Episodes like Helmand are exactly what critics of human security point to: once “security” is defined broadly enough to include governance, economic development and social stability, the line between a legitimate military objective and a policy goal becomes difficult to hold. As political scientist Roland Paris warned in an influential 2001 critique, a concept expansive enough to mean almost anything risks meaning, analytically, almost nothing.

International human rights law faces a parallel strain. Its extraterritorial reach — whether a state's human rights obligations follow its soldiers abroad — remains legally contested, but has been tested directly by NATO-adjacent operations. In *Al-Skeini v United Kingdom*, the European Court of Human Rights found that Britain's control over territory and detainees in Iraq triggered its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, even though the operation was formally a UN mission. The ruling showed both that courts are willing to extend rights protections into military operations abroad, and how legally uncertain those operations already are — precisely the kind of environment into which a loosely defined human security doctrine is now being introduced.

That uncertainty has consequences. [Human Rights Watch has documented](#) allegations of prolonged detention without trial in Afghanistan — a practice that sits uneasily with the due process guarantees in Articles 5 and 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — even as security operations in the country emphasised, and were partly justified by, humanitarian goals such as education and economic development. When rights protections and security objectives are pursued through the same broad policy language, it becomes harder to tell whether a restriction on liberty was legally justified or simply operationally convenient.

The case for human security

None of this makes the doctrine indefensible. Its defenders argue that human security fills real gaps left by traditional law. LOAC, for instance, is deliberately narrow: it governs the conduct of conflict but says nothing about the governance failures, economic collapse or social unrest that often cause it. Human security, by contrast, is preventative — it pushes military planners to think about civilian consequences before, not just during, an operation. NATO has pointed to its own [civilian casualty guidance](#) as evidence the approach improves compliance rather than eroding it, and researchers have [credited](#) its Afghanistan-era engagement with local communities and humanitarian actors as a case where the doctrine steered operations toward, not away from, civilian protection.

There is something to that argument — a purely reactive legal framework will always be one step behind the crises it is meant to address. But the same Afghanistan campaign that supplies the doctrine's best evidence also supplies its clearest warning: counterinsurgency operations there frequently justified military action in the name of development and governance, blurring precisely the line between civilian and military objectives that LOAC exists to police. A framework flexible enough to justify both outcomes is not really constraining anything.

A doctrine in need of a boundary

The deeper issue is one of hierarchy, not intent. NATO's strategic documents rarely spell out how human security interacts with binding legal obligations in practice; it functions as guidance and best practice, not law, which leaves it able to expand almost indefinitely into territory that LOAC and IHRL were built to regulate narrowly. That flexibility is useful to a military alliance operating across dozens of legal and political contexts. It is far less useful to the civilians, detainees and communities who depend on predictable legal protection rather than shifting operational priorities.

None of this means NATO should abandon human security as a policy lens — as a tool for anticipating the underlying causes of conflict, it plainly has value. But value as policy is not the same as authority as law. Left unanchored to LOAC and IHRL, human security risks becoming not a complement to international law but a quieter alternative to it — one flexible enough that institutions can reach for whichever framework, legal or political, best fits the operation at hand. Legal certainty exists precisely to prevent that kind of selective reasoning. As NATO's operations continue to expand into legally contested territory, restoring that boundary — making clear that human security informs policy but never substitutes for binding law — may be the only way to keep the protection it promises from becoming the exception that undermines it.