

## Review

# Human security in the Asia Pacific: perspective of food and health security

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As combined new factors could further complicate the food supply and health security for regional countries, new perspective on human security should be prioritized on securitizing health security in the region. In recent years, food production and supply has been affected by unpredictable climate change and unaccountable man-made factors in the region. With increased pressure from food security issues, personal health and human security is badly affected. It poses a threat to human security and becomes a concern of all states. In the new era, the pressing reality for all countries is that there is no exception for anyone before a pandemic. Threats to human security become not only a national security issue but also a transnational challenge.

**Key Words:** human security, food security, health security, climate change, food supply

## INTRODUCTION

The recent multi-faceted crises in terms of energy, food, climate change, as well as the economic & financial crises, to health security have caused new concerns in the Asia Pacific region. As combined new factors could further complicate food supply and health security for regional countries, new perspective on human security should be prioritized on securitizing health security in the region. In recent years, food production and supply has been affected by unpredictable climate change and unaccountable man-made factors in the region. As a result, increased pressure from food security issues impacts on personal health and becomes a matter of human security concern of all states in the region.

The outburst of the new influenza A (H1N1) in Mexico in April 2009 has not only raised enormous anxiety in terms of health security in the region, but has also directly threatened human security of individual states. Especially, after the World Health Organization (WHO) raised the worldwide pandemic alert level to phase 6 on 11 June 2009,<sup>1</sup> the new influenza A (H1N1) virus threatening the well-being of human society has become a new focal point for global health security. It also raised great concern in terms of the overall development of human security in the Asia Pacific region, as frequent trans-Pacific communication help quickly transmit the H1N1 virus from North America to Asia and elsewhere. For commuters and travellers, their livelihoods are under immediate threat. Regional communities are also vulnerable to wide spread of pandemics, and it is clear that no any individual state could, and should, cope with it alone. Broader international cooperation to counter the challenge together is needed.

Increasing challenges in food security and health security underline the importance of human security, which has been referred to as a serious subject of national security. The well-being of individuals would always suffer

more, if climate change and environmental crisis continue to impede chains of food supply/production and increase alert of pandemic. Since the early 1990s, attention to these issues and elements of national security has become prevailing in the region, as challenges to human security are much more salient than traditional security threats. Causes for security concerns in terms of food and health are inevitable items for national security, individuals would always suffer the most rather than would the states. It therefore new efforts in redefining the balance of national security in which the main focus of national security largely shifts toward protecting interest of individuals are needed.<sup>2</sup> While food and health security has become a critical part of human security, the concept of national security today emphasizes more pressing challenges to human security. Reflecting the transnational nature of non-traditional security threats, elaboration of human security always underscores necessity of transnational cooperation, i.e., sharing updated information, conducting common measures, helping each other strengthen capacity building.

## THE IMPLICATION OF HUMAN SECURITY FOR HEALTH

In international security studies, it is a conventional approach to focus solely on the role of nation states. The concept of security during the bipolarity of the cold war era thus was simply defined "as security of territory from

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external aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust".<sup>3</sup> Immediately after the end of the Cold War, the understanding of security however began to be broadened; including the traditional sense of security, namely military and political security, and non-traditional security in terms of health, food, water, environment, climate change, transnational crimes, terrorism, and etc. The end of the Cold War symbolized the shift of international system and security studies. Those critical issues, prevailing in developing countries, were suppressed or neglected during the era of ideological contest by two superpowers. For many in the large part of the world, security indicated protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, transnational crimes, terrorism, social conflict, political repression and environmental hazards. Conflicts no longer necessarily happen between nations. In the new era, many conflicts are within nations or perhaps even between different ethnic groups or different religions. Nowadays, for most people in the world, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about hazards to their daily life than from the fear of military conflict or invasion. In Asia, many non-traditional security threats, in particular, direct the development of national and regional security policies. That is where human security comes into the new arena of national security.

#### ***Defining Human Security***

According to the 1994 *UN Human Development Report (UNHDR)*, human security is defined from two aspects: "first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities. Such threats can exist at all levels of national income and development."<sup>4</sup> Threats to human security would jeopardize development and the rights of individuals. It is important to note that due to various factors, e.g., man-made, natural, and socioeconomic causes, human security may be lost in a long and silent process or abruptly during emergencies.

The characteristics of human security, according to the UNHDR, have four focuses: universal, interdependent, preventive, and people-centered. The commonality of those human security elements is identical to protecting personal well-being. With newly developed unconventional understanding, the purpose of human security is essentially to protect people in general from fear and want.<sup>5</sup> When health security of people is under threat, the level of human security in any states could therefore not be considered satisfactory. The UN Commission on Human Security continues to advocate for shifting the paradigm of security, in which security should center on people and not solely states. "It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations."<sup>6</sup> It would then create a complex system of political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural elements to assure that the survival, livelihood and dignity of people can be well maintained.

#### ***Focuses of Health Security***

The main elements of human security include economic security, environmental security, food security, health

security, personal security, community security, and political security. The Report argued that health security aims to "guarantee a minimum protection (of individuals) from diseases and unhealthy lifestyles." Regarding health security, in underdeveloped and developing countries, the major causes of death are infectious and parasitic diseases, while in industrialized countries, the major threats are diseases of the circulatory system.

In many cases, poverty remains the number one threat to all human societies, because malnutrition, short supply of medicine, low quality of drinkable water and insufficient healthcare derived from poverty could result in serious health crises. Thus, the international community and all states should act together to provide a much better living environment, so that human rights can be assured, good governance would be offered, and life prospects could be ensured. Reflecting the importance of caring for personal interests, it emphasized that the concept of security today should be shifted from a state-centered to people-centered definition.

#### **HEALTH DIMENSION OF HUMAN SECURITY**

Hunger and diseases have become the key elements of the United States foreign policy agenda today.<sup>7</sup> It clearly shows that together with other security challenges, wars in the Middle East, violent extremism, nuclear proliferation, global recession, climate change, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor, not only affect America's security and prosperity, but also threaten global stability. Global recession, climate change, violent conflict, hunger, diseases and poverty will definitely affect the quality of health and food security in general. On the health security front, three kinds of challenges are closely linked with human security: global infectious diseases, poverty related threats, and violence as well as humanitarian crisis. In the Asia Pacific region, it appears that infectious diseases and poverty continue to endanger health related human security, while communal conflict is less a factor of concern in terms of human security.

#### ***Regional Awareness of Health Security***

Derived from human security, health security refers not just to keeping up with normal standards in terms of people's livelihood but also protecting the well-being of individuals from being disrupted in times of outbreaks. Within the domain of human security, health security emphasizes on taking preventive measures to protect people from infectious diseases, distress of insufficient health care, and poor public health infrastructure. In the past few years, the regional health community has focused its effort on cooperation of pandemic preparedness and response. In light of the emergence of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) established the Health Task Force in October 2003 to tackle health related threats, mainly infectious diseases, for member economies' trade and security. Later, it came up with the "Health Security Initiative" and the "2005 Enhancement of APEC Work on Preventing, Preparing for and Mitigating the Effects of Avian Influenza and Influenza Pandemic Initiative." As a regional coordination body, the main target of APEC in terms of enhancing health security is to pursue focused

efforts to monitor progress of diseases, contain outbreaks, coordinate responses via the APEC Emerging Infections Network and collaborate with relevant multilateral organizations in the event of a disease outbreak. In responding to SARS, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries in April 2003 worked collectively and swiftly to make sure that the region became SARS-free. It was the first region in the world to respond to SARS on a region-wide effort. ASEAN decided to expand cooperation to include China, Japan, and South Korea. In 2004, the ASEAN+3 Health Minister's Meeting began. It then reinforced health mechanisms that existed: the ASEAN+3 Health Ministers hotline, the ASEAN+3 List of Contact Points for Communicable Diseases, and the ASEAN Disease Surveillance.net website

In large parts of Asia, cases of Avian Influenza (H5N1) were prevalent in many countries especially between 2003 and 2008. As the aftermath of fear from SARS, H5N1 became the most urgent pandemic to be noticed and monitored. According to the WHO situation updates – with regard to Avian Flu, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and China have the most cases found in the region. Even if many countries tried very hard to make preparation for the worse situation, people still can not be sure how severe the next pandemic would be and how much our societies can do in terms of protection from it. To have immediate and timely surveillance on global and regional levels is extremely critical at this stage. Countries therefore will have to take preventive measures collectively to ensure human security of their own people. After all these years of preparation for much better pandemic preparedness, a regional assessment finds that preparedness in all developing and developed countries is still lacking at every level.<sup>8</sup> The key challenge is how much is enough and to what extent preparation sufficient to cope with the next pandemic? Now, the global outburst of H1N1 in 2009 would test the case. Before all health security schemes could be proven to be effective, the health cooperation advocated by the international community and many countries to focus mainly on protecting the general population from threats of prevalent infectious diseases.

### ***Real Challenge to Health Security***

As the purpose of human security is to protect people from fear and want, what health security is concerned with is insufficient health care and inappropriate health policy in general and a vulnerable supporting health system in times of emergency, such as the outbreak of pandemics. Although most countries in Asia have varied pandemic preparedness plans and developed certain coordination with each other, the big challenge remains in terms of their operability and effectiveness. For this reason, in facing up to pandemic threats, regional organizations have encouraged all countries to share information, make coordination of responses, control outbreaks through International Health Regulation network and help push effort of capacity-building.

### **UNDERSTANDING FOOD SECURITY**

According to the World Health Organization, the concept of food security is commonly known as including both physical and economic access to food that meets people's

dietary needs as well as their food preferences.<sup>9</sup> It encompasses the safety, quality and sustainability of food supply, and access to a healthy diet. The concept of food security has three pillars: “food availability - sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis, food access - having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet, and food use - appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that all human beings at all times should have “access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods, produced in an environmentally sustainable way and provided in a manner that promotes dignity.”<sup>11</sup> The *1994 UN Human Development Report* also indicates that “food security requires that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food.”<sup>12</sup> In the context of human security in the region, food security is concerned with food safety, supply chain and continuous production.

In the international trade practice, tainted food supplies become part of transnational issues. Regional countries would have to adopt common export guidelines in order to solve the issue. International traders would want to ensure reliability of the food supply chain, so that through international trade food can be delivered to all related markets at reasonable cost. Reliable production of food is contributive to food security and food distribution is the key in terms of food security. As every household would depend on sufficient food supply and enough nutrition for all their members, it shows that food security is closely linked to health. Food security has long been placed with health security in the region. Climate change and urbanization shifts the demographic patterns and leads to crisis of the food supply. Therefore, to assure quality and quantity in terms of the food supply, regional countries and organizations have appealed for further cooperation.

### **REGIONAL PROGRESS IN HEALTH SECURITY COOPERATION**

How does the Asia Pacific region enhance regional awareness in terms of health security and regional preparedness for pandemics? In 2003, SARS alerted the region that health security/human security is something to be put forward by all governments of the regional on their national security policy agendas. Countries could no longer treat the pandemic as they were merely a health issue in their domestic context. Since then, Avian Flu has been haunting the region with outbreaks of sporadic cases in a number of countries. As the H5N1 virus types continue to evolve and may adapt themselves in new carriers, regional effort to facilitate the work in terms of preparation remains a big task. Now, the region is unfortunately under another threat of the new Influenza A. ASEAN held the “ASEAN+3 Health Ministers' Special Meeting on Influenza A (H1N1)” on 7 May 2009 in Bangkok. The special meeting notified the share recognition among all member countries for collective action in addressing the threat. It concluded by mapping out cooperation plans and strategies to handle the possible outbreak of pandemic in the region. It also called for a network of national systems to share anti-viral vaccines.

On July 23, 2009, a new round of ASEAN Regional Forum Meeting (a region-wide security cooperation body) was held in Thailand. Foreign Ministers and representatives of member countries stressed the urgency of enhanced regional cooperation on pandemics in various regional and multilateral fora, “particularly in the areas of timely data sharing and exchange, capacity building, development of effective national pandemic preparedness plans, strengthening surveillance and responses, and effective communication.”<sup>13</sup> Experiencing continual threats of various infectious diseases and pandemic in the region, the Asia Pacific region as a whole is pushed for collective cooperative response. Presently, the most important works are regional pandemic preparedness and response.

### FUTURE DIRECTION

To protect people from fear of violence and pandemic, countries have gradually shifted focuses of their national security agenda to include health security and food security. In the new era, the pressing reality for all countries is that there is no exception in terms of a pandemic. Threats of human security become not only a national security issue but also a transnational challenge. On the national level, human security together with health and food should be included on the top of the policy agenda list. On the regional level, it is expected that more multilateral cooperation would be soon facilitated and reinforced.

It is always important to note that increasing awareness of regional decision makers and enhancing capacity-building effort to these new security issues should be considered top priority on the national security agenda today. During the 15<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit held in Thailand in October 2009, food security and pandemic diseases were all brought to the spotlight. Regional leaders have pledged to strengthen regional cooperation to enhance food security on both production and distribution fronts and reaffirmed their collective efforts to enhance regional capabilities in surveillance, preparedness and response to pandemic diseases.

### AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

Fu-Kuo Liu, no conflicts of interest.

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### 亞太區域的人類安全：糧食與衛生安全的觀點

由於複雜的新因素出現，對區域國家糧食供應和衛生安全進一步產生衝擊，因此人類安全的新觀點應以確保區域衛生安全為優先目標。近年來，亞太區域糧食生產和供應已經受到難以預測的氣候變遷和人為的不負責因素影響。糧食安全問題的壓力升高後，個人健康和人類安全也嚴重受到影響；這已經對人類安全形成威脅，也成為所有國家的顧慮。在新世紀中，所有國家迫切的現實問題是：面對世界性流行疾病時，沒有任何人得以倖免。因此對於人類安全的威脅不僅是國家安全的議題，也是跨國性的挑戰。

**關鍵字：**人類安全、糧食安全、衛生安全、氣候變遷、糧食供應