The meaning of security is being transformed. Security traditionally has focused on the state because its fundamental purpose is to protect its citizens. Hobbled by economic adversity, outrun by globalization, and undermined from within by bad governance, the capacity of some states to provide this protection has increasingly come into question. This incapacity is particularly obvious in war-torn societies. The state has, at times, come to be a major threat to its population’s rights and welfare—or has been incapable of restraining the warlords or paramilitaries—rather than serving as the protector of its people. This drives us to broaden the focus of security beyond the level of the state and toward individual human beings, as well as to consider appropriate roles for the international system to compensate for state failure.

The present discourse of security reflects this change in the global reality and the change in perspective that goes with it. No longer are we limited to discussions of states’ rights and national sovereignty. Protecting civilians, addressing the plight of war-affected children and the threat of terrorism and drugs, managing open borders, and combating infectious diseases are now part of a dialogue.

This shift reflects a growing recognition that the protection of people must be a principal concern. But the term is not really new. A recognition that people’s rights are at least as important as those of states has been gaining momentum since the end of World War II. The Holocaust forced a serious examination of the place of international moral standards and codes in the conduct of world affairs. It also caused us to rethink the principles of national sovereignty. The Nuremberg trials acknowledged that grotesque violations of people’s rights could not go unpunished. The United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Genocide and Geneva conventions all recognized the inherent right of people to personal security. They challenge conventional notions of sovereignty when serious violations of rights occur.
Human security today puts people first and recognizes that their safety is integral to the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security. The security of states is essential, but not sufficient, to fully ensure the safety and well-being of the world’s peoples. Several current challenges are particularly compelling.

One concerns the evolution of new links between local conflict and the international economy and the impact of these perverse linkages on vulnerable communities. Doubtless, high-value commodities like diamonds or oil can prolong and intensify conflict. Angola and Sierra Leone demonstrate the extreme impact of personal greed on vulnerable populations. The Security Council embargo on rough diamonds from Sierra Leone is a positive first step toward preventing the use of profits from diamond sales to finance wars and crimes against civilians.

Another challenge is the suffering of vulnerable populations in war, one particularly painful aspect of which is the issue of children. At the September 2000 International Conference on War-Affected Children in Winnipeg, over 130 countries along with youth, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and experts gathered in common cause to improve the plight of war-affected children. Governments adopted a fourteen-point agenda to be taken to the UN special session on children in 2001. Governments also made specific concrete commitments, including greater program investment, diplomatic initiatives, and support for international legal instruments.

The compelling need for a permanent court to judge crimes against humanity has been underlined by ongoing events in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. In June 1999, coalitions of like-minded states and NGOs produced the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This court is a significant new international institution in the battle against war crimes and genocide, a major step toward real international accountability.

This international discourse on human security is beginning to effect change on the institutions and practice of global governance. In this interconnected world, our own security is increasingly indivisible from that of our neighbors—at home and abroad. Globalization has made individual human suffering an irrevocable universal concern. While governments continue to be important, global integration of world markets and instant communication have given a role and a profile to those in business, civil society, and NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs).

Synergies between issues and the new coalitions that result have produced new forms of diplomatic action. Coalition building among like-minded states and nonstate actors is one dynamic element of this “new diplomacy.” The Human Security Network, which now includes over a dozen countries from all regions of the world, working in concert
with civil and intergovernmental organizations, originally grew out of a bilateral arrangement between Canada and Norway—the “Lysoen” partnership. The network has promoted international support for UN efforts to protect civilians and identified opportunities for collective action, like the UN Conference on Small Arms in 2001. It is also bringing international attention to such emerging issues as making armed groups comply with international humanitarian and human rights law.

Another example of how the dialogue on security has changed can be seen in the Group of 8 (G-8). Five years ago the discussion was on liberalizing trade. In 2000, at the foreign ministers’ meeting in Miyazaki and at the Okinawa Summit itself, issues such as conflict prevention, arms control and disarmament, terrorism, crime, and the environment were front and center on the agenda. Ministers agreed upon an ambitious plan to help nurture a “culture of prevention.” This has meant improving development policies to address the causes of conflict, but also, most immediately, stemming the uncontrolled and illegal transfer of small arms and light weapons. These armaments have had a tragic impact on civilian populations caught up in armed conflict. Thus, the means of war can be restricted by limiting access to and availability of these weapons.

Yet there will continue to be instances when conflict prevention diplomacy or the deterrent effect of new international law does not succeed. In these cases, the international community must be prepared to end suffering. Deciding when intervention is warranted poses serious questions. Under whose auspices? By what criteria? Recognizing what standards? Using what tools? Canada has sponsored the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, under the leadership of Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun, which will submit a report to the secretary-general in 2001. Spanning a range of perspectives and experiences, the commission will examine legal, political, ethical, and operational dimensions of the complex question in collaboration with a network of scholars, experts, and NGOs around the world.

The need to rethink intervention leads inevitably to necessary reforms of international institutions. Using the UN Security Council to effectively address human security requires a broadening of the security concept, new operating methods, and transparency. Canada, during its tenure on the council, has pushed for the inclusion of civilian protection initiatives in peacekeeping mandates, child rights monitors, rapid deployment capacity, and much more.

But whether as a result of permanent member prerogatives or the secrecy of council deliberations, too many pressing security issues are excluded from the agenda, and too many voices that should be heard are not. In a time of increasing attention to “codes of conduct,” it is
striking that the Security Council has never formally adopted rules of procedure. Preserving the discretionary power of the permanent members has not always served the interests of the council’s global constituency.

Adding to the permanent membership of the Security Council will not result in a more accountable and representative body. Instead, the focus should be on increasing the elected membership as a way of asserting greater democracy and accountability in the world’s paramount peace and security body. Opening up the council to more systematic and wide-ranging input from civil society would help.

Too often, national or regional interests, as well as bureaucratic inertia, get in the way of the UN’s ability to fulfill its charter. The recent crisis in Sierra Leone is a perfect example. When Canada and Norway offered staff to bolster the UN Mission in Sierra Leone’s (UNAMSIL’s) planning capacity at the height of the crisis, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations remained silent. Gratis personnel had become politically unacceptable because a coalition of nations unable to provide such free support had collaborated in the General Assembly a year earlier to prevent any country from doing so. This does not serve the UN well, nor did it help the people of Sierra Leone.

Without the capacity to deploy rapidly, the UN depends on the willingness of individual states or regional alliances to carry out the work of maintaining international peace and security. The effort of some states to prevent the United Nations from developing standby force arrangements is particularly unhelpful. The Brahimi Report, which presented a blunt appraisal of UN peacekeeping operations, offers a way to get back on track.

Promoting human security globally also requires that governments work more closely with the nongovernmental sector. Increasingly, the private sector is recognizing the value of developing corporate social responsibility initiatives for its domestic and international operations. In 1997, a coalition of Canadian companies enunciated an International Code of Ethics for Canadian business.

The activities of corporations make a positive contribution to the economic and social development of communities and human security by advancing human rights, good governance, and democracy. At the same time, the purely extractive and exploitative behavior of some private firms can endanger human security. By developing clearly enunciated principles and guidelines regarding corporate social responsibility, companies will be better prepared to navigate some of the difficult ethical decisions that businesses can face when operating internationally. Forums such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the G-8, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
(OSCE) have been working with corporations on developing social responsibility guidelines. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in particular is playing a leadership role on this issue through its revised Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

The need to work in partnership with civil society and the NGO community is perhaps more important now than ever before. NGOs can play a variety of important roles: they bring technical expertise and experience to the policymaking process, often work with government to implement international agendas, inform citizens about challenges and choices on the international agenda, mobilize human and financial resources to help solve local and global problems, work to end human suffering, and hold governments accountable. One need only look at the Ottawa process leading to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to see the benefits of this new type of coalition between international and nongovernmental organizations and states. Similar issue-specific coalitions have formed to stem the spread of small arms, protect war-affected children, and secure justice for war crime victims through the International Criminal Court, with similarly positive results. State–civil society partnerships on global issues are not necessarily smooth, as was evident in the disruption of the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle in 1999.

Activism is enhanced by information technology. Integrated networks and e-commerce are having a profound impact on how business is conducted worldwide. Information systems can change the politics of human security, but the potential of this new tool is immense. Yet the public sector’s use of the new tools of the new economy has been primitive and unsophisticated. These tools represent a chance to leap forward, to connect better, to better articulate our ideas and take action.

Actualizing the concept of human security requires all actors—states, international organizations, NGOs, and businesses—to act responsibly. This includes developing codes of conduct where appropriate, working to establish new international norms regarding the protection of peoples, and incorporating the human dimension into the work of international organizations. At the start of this new century, the protection of peoples is among the most important issues before us. Peace and security—national, regional, and international—are possible only if they are derived from peoples’ security.

Note

Lloyd Axworthy is director of the University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Global Issues and former minister of foreign affairs of Canada.