Introduction

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The collapse of the Cold War brought about a tremendous change to security theory in general. The ending of the geopolitical stability under a bi-polar security complex opened the path to a new comprehension of the root causes of human susceptibility. An increasing number of scholars have argued that traditional or conventional theories of security, which largely focus upon state as the referent object, are insufficient to explain a new landscape of security issues and actors; rather than inter-state war, the primary threat to people's lives derives from a mix of vulnerabilities. They argue that a range of potential harms to human vulnerability, which had been largely marginalized owing to the prioritization of the worldwide threats during the Cold War, should now be given pride of place.¹ In the UNDP's definition of human security, these threats are categorized into seven groups: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political.²

A shift in the referent of security from the state to the individual is the fundamental element of the concept of human security. While scholars in general agree on this referential shift, the question of "what threats" should be included is still under discussion. The debate is quite distinctive as it is interdisciplinary in nature, linking nationalism studies, political philosophy, peace and conflict studies, to name a few. Because standpoints on the question "what threats" are diverse, it is not easy to compile a list of human security definitions and their supporting arguments. For example, some support a broad development-focused definition. Some narrow the range by focusing on violent threats. Some emphasize the practical utility of the notion of human security, citing its early policy achievements. Some insist on its theoretical utility as a critical instrument with which to evaluate discrepancies of gender, state, and economic power in the traditional security discourse.³

Though there are now many scholars who recognize the importance of human security and write extensively about it, this does not suggest that traditional security, which aims to protect the integrity of the state, has disappeared from the world of academia and practitioners. Traditional security scholars would argue that the 9/11 attack on the US, the wars toppling the regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and the increasing nuclear proliferation, for example, make traditional security as vitally relevant as before. Yet, despite the growing revival of interest in traditional security and the lack of any consensus on the definition of human security, the sheer volume of literature shows the vigorous development of thinking on human security and its applications.

The theme of Asian Review 2012 is human security in Asia. The eight articles in this issue are extracted from researches conducted by nine individuals under the Human Security Cluster supported by the Higher Education Research Promotion and National Research University Project of Thailand, Office of the Higher Education Commission (HS1069A and HS1069A-55).

The rationale behind these researches was simple. The vibrant economic growth in many parts of Asia—especially in China, India, and ASEAN countries amid the economic stagnation in the US, EU, and Japan—has convinced many that the twenty-first century will be the “Asian century” where Asia will parallel the characterization of the nineteenth century as a British century and the twentieth as an American one. While it is true that Asian’s aggregate economy is growing rapidly, especially if one uses the traditional gauge of GDP, the swathe of human security problems cast some doubt on this prospect of an “Asian century.”

The eight articles in this volume aim to bring about more research and debate to enrich the knowledge on how to make Asia grow sustainably, prospering not from a state-centric perspective alone but also from a human-centric perspective which seeks people’s security.

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Notes

