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Unlocking Human Capacity for Equitable Peace in an Anarchic and Hierarchical World

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For much of modern history, global security has been understood through the lens of dogmatic realist paradigms, state sovereignty, military power, and zero-sum competition. From the balance-of-power dynamics of the 19th century to Cold War deterrence strategies, the prevailing assumption has been that peace is best achieved through heavy-handed dominance and deterrence, as well as the prevention of parity and delicate strategic equilibrium. But the threats of the 21st century are borderless, interconnected, collective, and increasingly existential in nature – as highlighted by pandemics, climate change, cyberwarfare, space militarisation, and mass disinformation. These threats cannot be contained by tanks or treaties alone, they require a new framework for global security, one that integrates transdisciplinary insights from science, psychology, and systems thinking to understand both the roots of conflict as well as the human psychological and neurochemical underpinnings of peaceful coexistence. I call this approach sustainable global security. It challenges traditional notions of security and helps unlock the human capacity for peace. In particular, it recognises that durable peace is built not only by countering threats, but by nurturing the capacities and conditions that reduce the human impulse toward violence in the first place.

What if the greatest threats to global security no longer came from rival armies or state aggression, but from invisible forces like disinformation or unmet human dignity needs? How do our emotional biases and neurochemical impulses shape the way nations compete, cooperate, or spiral into conflict? Can we build a more peaceful world by rethinking what security truly means – and by reimagining the very nature of power, identity, and trust?

Outgrowing Old Paradigms

Classical theories of international relations have made major contributions to our understanding of global order. Realism, still the dominant lens in many security circles, views states as rational actors operating in an anarchic international system where self-help and power maximisation are paramount. It emphasises the security dilemma: efforts by one state to improve its security often threaten others, creating arms races and cycles of mistrust. Variants such as balance-of-power theory and hegemonic stability theory offer different visions of how stability might be imposed.

Yet realism's zero-sum logic is poorly suited to today's world. Transnational threats such as climate breakdown, pandemics, and cyberattacks require cooperation rather than competition. Liberal traditions, such as collective security and institutionalism, offer a more cooperative view. These approaches, enshrined in bodies like the United Nations, posit that peace is achievable when states commit to rules-based systems and resolve disputes through diplomacy. But such institutions have often proven ineffective or politicised in the face of real-world crises.

Meanwhile, other theoretical models have sought to broaden the field. Human security focuses on individuals rather than states, emphasising freedom from fear and want. Feminist and postcolonial approaches critique dominant paradigms and draw attention to systemic power imbalances, including gendered and racialised dimensions of insecurity. Securitisation theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, shows how threats are constructed through political narratives, and how this framing expands the reach of state power into new domains. Yet even these expanded models tend to lack a strong empirical foundation in human behavior and psychology.

Unlocking Human Capacity for Equitable Peace in an Anarchic and Hierarchical World

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These approaches have undeniably enriched debates on global security by offering influential perspectives and collectively contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the field. However, a common shortcoming across these theories is their limited engagement with empirical sciences and their reliance on speculative assumptions about human nature and its role in promoting peace and security.

Reframing Global Security: The Five Dimensions of Security

My theory of sustainable global security aims to bridge the aforementioned gaps by incorporating transdisciplinary research to better understand the preconditions for security. Adopting a more anticipatory approach, designed to respond more effectively to the accelerating pace of technological innovations and global change, I propose a refined classification of global security consisting of five interdependent dimensions:

1. Human security: Centering the dignity, rights, and well-being of individuals.
2. Environmental security: Protecting the biosphere and the conditions that sustain life.
3. National security: Ensuring the safety and sovereignty of states.
4. Transnational security: Managing border-spanning threats like terrorism and pandemics.
5. Transcultural security: Promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse cultural and civilisational groups.

This framework avoids the definitional sprawl that often plagues expanded security models. Each dimension is clear and interlinked. Most existing theories cover the first four dimensions in some way. What sets this model apart is the fifth: transcultural security. Culture is often neglected in security studies, yet most of the world's conflicts today have a cultural dimension. With 89% of current conflicts occurring in countries with low intercultural dialogue, and three-quarters of major conflicts having a cultural dimension, fostering peaceful cross-cultural interaction is essential for global security. We must acknowledge that peace is not merely the absence of war, but the active construction of trust across diverse cultural and civilisational groups, both locally and globally.

A Transdisciplinary Approach: Unlocking Human Capacity for Peace

Sustainable global security is deeply rooted in transdisciplinary research that explores how human predispositions influence both peace and conflict. Drawing on research from fields such as dignity neuroscience, the neuroscience of privation, and developmental psychology, we know that certain conditions undermining human dignity (such as resource scarcity, perceived insecurity, and human rights violations) significantly increase the human propensity for violence, aggression, tribalism, racism, and xenophobia. At the heart of this is what I call our emotional amoral egoism: an evolved predisposition to prioritise self-interest, respond intensely to emotion, and interpret morality in context-dependent ways. Moral behaviour, in this view, is not fixed, but shaped by circumstances and cognitive biases. The implication is profound: our capacity for peace can be enhanced or diminished by our environment.

Empirical research supports this. Studies show that our moral values emerge from “a sophisticated integration of cognitive, emotional, and motivational mechanisms shaped through evolution, development, and culture”. In other words, our moral judgments are deeply influenced by external conditions – both personal and political – and by emotional biases that affect cognitive functions such as our perceptions of others and political decisions. People raised in secure, inclusive, and dignified conditions are more likely to develop empathy, pro-social behavior, and cooperative instincts. In turn, societies that meet the basic dignity needs of their populations are less prone to internal and external violence as this allows them to redirect their inherent egoistic and amoral tendencies toward cooperation and peaceful coexistence. I have previously outlined eight key elements of a dignified life that must be upheld through Dignity-Based Governance: security, human rights, inclusiveness, accountable and transparent institutions, a reason-based society, access to opportunities, and socio-economic justice.

Symbiotic Realism and Multi-Sum Thinking

The same emotional dynamics that drive individuals also shape the behavior of states. A growing body of empirical evidence illustrates the intricate interplay between collective interest and perceived self-interest, which is contingent on our group membership. As individuals come to identify with one another through shared history, identity, and

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culture, group-level emotions arise that cannot be reduced to individual experiences. These collective emotions, such as national pride, a sense of shared grievance, or fear of external threats, shape the motivations and actions of the group as a whole, leading to patterns of collective behaviour that influence state policies and decisions.

This dynamic can be further understood through the concept of the emotional amoral egoism of states. Just like individuals, states are not purely rational actors; they are driven by emotional interests, strategic self-preservation, and context-dependent moral considerations. Their behavior is shaped by the pursuit of status, prestige, security, and influence: all filtered through emotional and historical narratives. Moral conduct in international affairs is thus highly contingent, fluctuating with shifting interests, perceived threats, and evolving collective identities. Recognising this emotional amoral egoism is essential to developing more realistic, cooperative, and dignity-centered approaches to global governance. Consequently, when national dignity is perceived to be under threat – whether through insecurity, exclusion, or humiliation – states often respond defensively or aggressively. This can lead to in-group moral frameworks that demonise and dehumanise others, justify violence, and fuel conflict.

This understanding is further enriched by the concept of the Neuro-P5, which identifies five neurochemical rewards that underlie human motivation: power, pride, profit, pleasure, and permanency. These drivers shape not only individual behaviour but also the strategic decisions of states. From the quest for geopolitical dominance to the pursuit of technological prestige, the Neuro-P5 explains how deeply rooted emotional and neurochemical impulses influence the structure and conduct of global politics. Recognising the Neuro-P5 allows us to move beyond abstract models of rational actors and better anticipate how states, driven by both insecurity and reward, pursue national interests in ways that can either fuel conflict or foster cooperation.

In response, I propose a strategic model called Symbiotic Realism that acknowledges these neurochemical and emotional drivers of state behavior, yet seeks to redirect them toward mutual benefit. Unlike zero-sum thinking, multi-sum strategies seek arrangements where all parties benefit through non-conflictual competition, mutual respect, and shared goals, even if gains are unequal. Security is not a finite resource to be hoarded, but a shared good that can be expanded through cooperation and productive, non-conflictual competition: improvements in one area can bolster stability across others. By shifting the focus away from zero-sum thinking to a multi-sum logic, Symbiotic Realism acknowledges the transnational nature of many contemporary challenges. Multi-sum thinking acknowledges that today's security challenges are deeply interconnected. For example, addressing environmental degradation not only protects ecosystems but also reduces displacement, hunger, and social unrest, thereby enhancing national and global stability. Transnational concerns like climate change, migration, and economic inequality intersect with broader issues such as environmental sustainability and resource preservation. Central to this balancing act is addressing the dignity needs of all actors in the international system, which are guided by distinct values and perspectives. Respecting these values is crucial for fostering peace and stability.

Confronting Civilisational Frontier Risks

In addition to shifting the conceptual framework, sustainable global security helps proactively address a new class of emerging threats I call civilisational frontier risks. This subset of frontier risks is capable of catalysing significant shifts in the course of human history, while also presenting existential challenges if mismanaged. They include: Weapons of mass destruction and the growing militarisation of Outer Space; Artificial intelligence and quantum computing; Climate change and biodiversity loss; Pandemics and synthetic biology; Deepfake disinformation, cyberwarfare, and invasive surveillance; Neurotechnologies, human enhancement, and posthuman risks.

These are not theoretical threats, they are unfolding in real time. What unites them is their capacity to dramatically alter human civilisation, either through disruption or catastrophe. They are characterised by high uncertainty, global impact, and the need for anticipatory governance. Human predispositions again play a crucial role in shaping our responses to frontier risks. Without regulatory foresight and shared norms, actors driven by short-term gain and emotional gratification will exploit new domains at the expense of long-term stability. As history shows, governance rarely keeps pace with innovation.

New Arenas of Geostrategic Competition

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Cyberspace and outer space have become the new frontiers of geopolitical rivalry. Some states use cyberspace for espionage, infrastructure sabotage, and influence operations, while non-state actors such as extremist groups and organised crime networks exploit cyberspace to extend their influence far beyond their physical borders. Social media is weaponised to polarise societies, while deepfakes erode trust in truth itself. In outer space, the race for military and commercial dominance is intensifying. Continued investment in space capabilities, such as communication and reconnaissance satellites as well as emerging commercial ventures, highlights the fierce competition for superiority in this strategically critical domain. And yet, space remains largely unregulated. As I explore in this analysis of lunar governance, legal and normative ambiguity surrounding celestial resources risks intensifying geopolitical tensions. A new politics for outer space is urgently needed to prevent this domain from becoming the next theater of unconstrained rivalry.

Both domains suffer from governance vacuums. The absence of shared rules allows the emotion-driven self-interest of both state and non-state actors to prevail and it encourages the rise of zero-sum dynamics. Sustainable security requires establishing norms and institutions that prevent these spaces from becoming conflict zones

Debiasing Strategic Culture

Another barrier to sustainable peace is the persistence of ethnocentric strategic cultures: the inherited assumptions, myths, and historical grievances that shape how states interpret and interact with the world. These mental models often perpetuate an “us vs. them” mindset and blind decision-makers to alternative perspectives. States must take a hard look at their own strategic culture through a multi-sum perspective. This means reassessing how historical narratives have shaped current policies. When history is misread or selectively used, it can lead to misguided lessons and strategies that escalate international tensions. A multi-sum perspective promotes a more balanced and critical examination of historical legacies and underlying biases.

Drawing on research into cognitive debiasing and building on my analysis of grand strategy’s interplay with human nature, I argue that states must develop the capacity for strategic self-reflection. This will enable policymakers to tackle challenges with greater objectivity, reducing the chances of decisions based on biased information. Moreover, debiasing fosters empathy by encouraging individuals and governments to consider the perspectives, values, and histories of other countries. A multi-sum worldview requires empathy: not as sentimentality, but as a disciplined capacity to understand the dignity needs and fears of others.

To meet today’s complex, emotionally charged, and interconnected challenges, strategy must evolve. Traditional models rooted in deterrence and state-centric power no longer suffice. What’s needed is a new kind of grand strategy, one that integrates psychological, cultural, and systemic insights to shape a more adaptive, inclusive, and cooperative global order

Grand Strategy as a Transdisciplinary Endeavour

My approach to grand strategy is firmly rooted in a transdisciplinary framework that integrates insights from diverse fields ranging from neuroscience and psychology to systems theory and geopolitics. I believe that global security challenges cannot be understood through traditional, state-centric paradigms alone. Instead, grand strategy must account for the complex interplay between human nature, strategic culture, and the evolving transnational threats we face today. In this context, grand strategy is not solely about military dominance or territorial control; it involves deeply understanding the human psychological and neurochemical underpinnings of conflict, as well as the historical and cultural factors that shape state behavior.

A transdisciplinary grand strategy, therefore, requires a more holistic perspective, one that acknowledges how power, security, and identity are intricately woven into the fabric of global relations. Strategy is no longer a linear pursuit of dominance; it is an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and cooperation. Success in today’s world depends on engaging with new technologies, anticipating their global impacts, and addressing the dignity needs of all actors within the international system. In essence, grand strategy must evolve beyond outdated frameworks that focus only on traditional statecraft, embracing a broader, more inclusive understanding of what it means to secure

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peace and stability in a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations for Advancing Sustainable Global Security

To move from theory to practice, we must cultivate environments that support multi-sum outcomes and human dignity needs, thereby enhancing humanity's collective capacity for peaceful coexistence and sustainable global security.

Key steps include: (1) Combatting disinformation: Fake news undermines shared reality and impedes cooperation. A common factual ground is essential for any multi-sum engagement. (2) Promoting objective academia: Evidence-based research serves as a counterweight to politicised narratives and helps societies rebuild trust and make informed decisions. (3) Encouraging responsible multipolarity: A fairer global order with multiple centers of power can enable more inclusive solutions, if it avoids great-power zero-sum rivalries and ensures that the dignity of all human beings is respected and upheld. (4) Depoliticising international institutions: Bodies like the WHO or IAEA must maintain neutrality to effectively coordinate global responses. Their non-political stance allows them to facilitate dialogue, build trust, and coordinate efforts between diverse actors, including nations. (5) Supporting transnational youth movements: Young people bring fresh perspectives and digital fluency. When guided constructively, their energy and openness to new ideas can be a force for transcultural cooperation and innovation. Finally, (6) Uniform standards: The credibility of international law and international humanitarian law relies on their consistent and impartial application. Selective enforcement erodes trust and deepens global divides. To foster fair and lasting peace, all actors must uphold these legal frameworks equally, holding both states, non-state actors and individuals to the same standard.

To translate multi-sum logic into durable practice, states must also develop the internal capacities that enable them to weather global volatility while contributing to shared peace. My Meta-Geopolitics framework outlines seven critical capacities ranging from socio-economic equity and governance to environmental sustainability and scientific innovation. Together they determine a state's ability to act as a stable, constructive player in the international system.

The Future of Global Security

Sustainable global security is not a utopian project. It is a necessary evolution of security thinking, one that draws heavily from a transdisciplinary philosophical foundation, which I have articulated in my Transdisciplinary Philosophy Manifesto as essential for addressing complex, interconnected global challenges. By integrating transdisciplinary insights from the empirical sciences, sustainable global security grounds strategy in a realistic understanding of human nature, one that accounts for our emotional biases, primordial egoistic predilections, cognitive limits, and dignity needs of all.

Recognising the realities of human nature and the anarchic structure of today's international system, sustainable global security aims to find the most effective way to confront transnational challenges rooted in human limitations and predispositions. At its core lies a Symbiotic Realist approach grounded in multi-sum strategies – where all parties gain, even if unevenly, through the balancing of diverse interests and capacities. The end goal is to meet the dignity needs of all actors in the global arena. This requires a rethinking of peace, not as the simple absence of conflict, but as the active presence of systems, values, and institutions that enable human flourishing, mutual benefit, and non-conflictual competition across borders. It demands a pragmatic mindset: one anchored in what is achievable and sustainable, informed by a deeper understanding of relative needs. That means bold thinking, fresh mechanisms, and above all, the courage to lead with empathy and shared humanity. It also means facing a difficult but necessary challenge: reimagining how we govern an international system that is anarchic, hierarchical, and still rooted in self-help, a subject I have explored in depth in *The Demise and Durability of Political and Societal Frameworks*, where I examine the resilience and fragility of governance models in light of contemporary pressures.

Without a credible overarching authority, we must work toward building frameworks capable of resolving disputes fairly, without favouritism or bias; and in ways that reflect both the complexity of our world and the common interests that bind it together. The future of global security will not be written solely by generals and diplomats. It will depend on how well we understand ourselves and whether we can build a world that channels our passions, fears, and hopes

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toward a sustainable, fair, equitable and dignified peace and prosperity for all, without leaving anyone behind.

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Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan is a philosopher, neuroscientist, geostrategist and futurologist. He is the Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Department, and head of the Outer Space Security Cluster, at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy in Switzerland, and a Member of the Global Future Council on Complex Risks at the World Economic Forum. He is also an Honorary Fellow at Oxford University's St. Antony's College and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of London.