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# Global Security: Strategic Imperative or Aspirational Goal?

*by John L. Craig*

Threats to humans have evolved throughout history. Traditional security meant defending borders with armies and weapons. Security has been state-centered, emphasizing military strength, deterrence, and alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in more modern times. The focus was largely on territorial integrity and sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> The Cold War was a bipolar, state-centric ideological conflict between the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union. Both sought dominance through military strength, containment, and deterrence, while using proxy wars to avoid direct conflict between superpowers, though Korea and Vietnam are possible exceptions.<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-first century, threats are increasingly not confined to battlefields or political boundaries and are carried out by state and non-state actors alike. The currently accepted definition of global security focuses too narrowly on physical aspects of national sovereignty. A more complete definition should include the broader challenges of climate change, public health, cyber, and other borderless-interconnected vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup> This paper offers a synthesis of available information and, while not comprehensive, it is illustrative of global security threats in our current times. A more comprehensive synthesis is beyond the scope of this article.

## **Current and Emerging Threats and Challenges in the 21st Century**

The challenges of global security have existed throughout much of human history. They include nationalism and sovereignty concerns, competition for power among nations, inequality between developed and developing nations, resource allocation and access, and political will.

Global security in the twenty-first century is threatened by complex, interconnected events

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that cross national borders. Unlike traditional state-on-state wars that once defined international conflict, today's challenges are multidimensional. These threats destabilize governments, strain economies, and endanger human lives, necessitating coordinated international responses. These are in no priority order.<sup>4</sup>

## Changing Landscape of Warfare

The nature of war—violence, bloodshed, logistics, imposing will and winning—remains unchanged.<sup>5</sup> A modern military must develop capabilities that align with war's unchanging nature while remaining agile enough to adapt to its rapidly evolving character. Rising tensions among major powers heighten the risk of military confrontation. Competition for influence, resources, and strategic dominance can escalate into proxy wars or direct conflict. Regional disputes, such as territorial claims and ethnic tensions, also threaten stability. Modern warfare has become increasingly technologically advanced, involving drones, artificial intelligence, and precision weapons, raising both strategic and ethical concerns.<sup>6</sup>

The structure of warfare can be easily misinterpreted if changing paradigms are not recognized, and history is replete with armies trained and equipped to fight previous wars. This is similarly true for security in general. Military tools, perspectives, and capabilities that succeed in one warfare or security paradigm may be inadequate in another. A paradigm shift occurs when the context, means, or goals change so significantly that earlier approaches no longer function effectively, necessitating a new framework of thought. Emerging twenty-first-century warfare is characterized by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), cyberattacks on infrastructure, autonomous weapons, low-cost, high-impact weapons, accelerated adoption, and space militarization,

creating a complex, interconnected threat landscape.<sup>7</sup> These challenges can also be a business risk and include climate-induced conflict and hybrid, non-military strategies that blur the line between war and peace, significantly lowering the barrier for state and non-state actors to disrupt global stability.<sup>8</sup>

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A case in point is the Ukraine War, where drones now dominate the battlefield, inflicting eighty percent of casualties, up from ten percent in 2022, and account for ninety percent of armaments, up from ten percent a few years ago.<sup>9</sup> Ukraine has become the world leader in the accelerated development, adaptation, production, and use of drones, both offensively and defensively. Other countries, including Russia, are catching up.<sup>10</sup> Iran also recently closed the Strait of Hormuz during the "Iran War" with inexpensive drones, effectively blocking twenty percent of the world's oil in this narrow shipping channel. These expanding wars should be studied for lessons learned, including whether cheap drones will outlast million-billion-dollar weaponry, resulting in a potential "drone arms race." This should also include evaluation of a U.S. national strategy that, at best, is ambiguous, and at worst, incoherent, while the U.S. military is performing brilliantly operationally and tactically according to reports. The U.S. has learned these lessons before.<sup>11</sup>

Non-state actors continue to pose significant threats through terrorism and ideological extremism. These groups operate across borders, recruit online, and exploit political instability. Although international counterterrorism efforts have weakened some organizations,

decentralized networks remain difficult to eliminate entirely.<sup>12</sup> Thus, armies must adapt to the ever-evolving nature of warfare if they want to fight and win. The U.S. Army Transformation Initiative, the Army's comprehensive transformation strategy, is one leading effort to adapt to the evolving nature of warfare.<sup>13</sup>

## Artificial Intelligence

Unlike warfare, AI is ubiquitous and rapidly reshaping the meaning and practice of global security. Traditionally, global security focused on military threats between states. Today, AI expands the tools of security and the nature of threats, affecting warfare, cybersecurity, economic stability, and human rights. As AI becomes more integrated into defense systems, intelligence operations, and civilian infrastructure, it presents unprecedented opportunities and serious risks to global stability.<sup>14</sup>

### Despite its advantages, AI poses destabilizing risks.

There are advantages to AI, including its ability to enhance national and international security in several important ways. Many AI systems can quickly analyze vast amounts of data, identifying patterns related to terrorism, cyber threats, or military movements. Governments also use AI for predictive analytics, facial recognition, and satellite imagery analysis to prevent attacks and improve situational awareness. AI strengthens digital defenses by detecting anomalies and responding to cyberattacks in real time. Organizations, including NATO, increasingly rely on AI-assisted cybersecurity frameworks to safeguard critical infrastructure against hostile actors. Autonomous, AI-guided weapon systems can improve targeting accuracy, potentially reducing collateral damage. The use of AI in logistics,

strategy simulations, and battlefield coordination can increase operational effectiveness. Global security beyond warfare, including humanitarian and disaster relief, medical diagnostics, and other areas, can be enhanced by AI. It can help predict natural disasters, manage refugee flows, and coordinate humanitarian aid—reinforcing the broader concept of human security.

Despite its advantages, AI poses destabilizing risks. Lethal autonomous weapons can select and engage targets without human intervention. Critics warn that widespread deployment could lower the threshold for war and create accountability gaps, especially for nuclear weapons. Debates within the United Nations underscore the urgent need for regulation. Major powers, including the U.S. and China, are heavily investing in AI-enabled military capabilities. This competition risks triggering an AI-driven arms race, thereby increasing global instability. Cyberattacks, deepfakes, automated misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and near-perfect images of people and other subjects can be produced and enhanced by AI, threatening democratic institutions and social cohesion. AI can amplify and influence operations, making them faster, more targeted, and harder to detect. If AI systems make life-and-death decisions, concerns arise regarding ethics, accountability, transparency, and compliance with domestic and international laws, including human rights.

Governance of AI clearly depends on international collaboration, as no single country can manage AI risks alone. Effective strategies might include:

- International agreements regulating autonomous weapons
- Shared cybersecurity norms
- Transparency in AI military development
- Ethical AI frameworks aligned with human rights

Multilateral institutions must adapt quickly to these technological changes. Just as nuclear weapons reshaped global security in the twentieth century, AI may redefine security in the twenty-first century.

Inherently, AI is neither stabilizing nor destabilizing—it depends on how states develop and govern it. AI can strengthen global security through improved defense, intelligence, and humanitarian response. However, without cooperative regulation and ethical safeguards, it risks accelerating arms races, cyber warfare, and autonomous violence. The future of global security will largely depend on whether the international community prioritizes collaboration over competition in the age of intelligent machines.

## **A Rise in Autocracy around the World**

Utilizing many of these threat mechanisms, autocracies seek to control and oppress people. As such, we are living through a period of profound political and social instability around the world. The rise of autocracies and the decline of ethical democratic leadership have undermined coordinated global action. According to a 2024 report, seventy-two percent of the global population, or 5.7 billion people, live under autocracy, forty-eight percent more than ten years ago.<sup>15</sup> There are those who argue that autocracy is growing in the U.S., including as a flawed democracy.<sup>16</sup> While this commands our attention and action, it also exacerbates and diverts attention from other ongoing security threats.

## **Cybersecurity and Information Warfare**

Unlike other threat mechanisms, cybersecurity and information warfare can act as “threat multipliers.” These attacks are among the fastest-growing security challenges. Governments, corporations, and critical infrastructure are vulnerable to hacking,

ransomware, and digital espionage. Because cyber operations can be launched anonymously and across borders, they complicate accountability and deterrence.<sup>17</sup> Cyber activities can involve currency manipulation, disinformation, misinformation, threats to the integrity of the press and science, election interference, vulnerabilities in the digital economy, and artificial intelligence—essentially threats to the truth. Modern societies rely on digital networks, and cyberattacks on energy grids, hospitals, financial systems, elections,

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and communication networks can bring our daily lives to a screeching halt. Nearly everything we use to work, play, and live relies on digital systems and computers that are vulnerable to attack. For example, an attack on an electrical grid could leave millions without power during hot summer or cold winter months. An attack on transportation systems could bring traffic to a standstill. If our financial institutions are attacked, bank accounts could be drained, and important financial records could be stolen and shared online. If our communications are disrupted, there could be left with no way to report an emergency, get help, or coordinate a response.<sup>18</sup>

Cybersecurity and information warfare risks also involve state and non-state actors who use digital attacks, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda to disrupt critical infrastructure, steal data, and undermine trust. These campaigns and activities skew the truth and spread rapidly on social media, eroding trust and political cohesion. This can make rational decision-making difficult, if not impossible. Unlike conventional warfare, cyber threats are often difficult to

trace and respond to, requiring cooperation between governments and private technology companies. These attacks can paralyze hospitals, disrupt fuel supplies, manipulate democratic processes, and cause widespread societal chaos and long-lasting psychological harm without a single soldier crossing a border. Protecting digital infrastructure is, therefore, as critical as defending physical territory.<sup>19</sup> Of course, cybersecurity and information warfare primarily operate on the Internet, which can be a tool for good as well as for harm.<sup>20</sup>

## **The spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction remain a persistent threat.**

### **Economic and Supply Chain Vulnerabilities**

Cyber and information warfare can negatively impact economies and supply chains. We live in a global economy characterized by interdependence. Some of the risks include inflation, resource shocks, competition, interdependencies, financial crises, technological competition, and interdependent supply chains.<sup>21</sup> Severe economic inequality and financial crises can trigger political unrest, populism, and state fragility. Global markets are deeply interconnected; a financial collapse in one region can quickly ripple across the world. Economic insecurity fuels migration pressures and social tensions within and between nations.<sup>22</sup>

Economic interdependence also reshapes the meaning of security. Global supply chains link factories, ports, and consumers across continents. Disruptions in one region can cause shortages and inflation worldwide. Financial crises ripple through markets at unprecedented speed. Economic instability can trigger political unrest and exacerbate inequality, undermining long-term peace. A secure world economy

requires transparency, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Security must encompass economic resilience alongside military preparedness.

This changing landscape has prompted reflection on possible policy responses to economic security concerns. While the debate over the best policy responses continues, supply diversification appears to be one of the most effective ways to reduce risks arising from the geopolitical environment. Cooperation among trusted partners is important and can help reduce risks. It both enables trade to provide mutual benefit to trusted partners and reduces the risk of supply disruptions from less reliable sources. Other approaches include greater transparency in supply chains through public-private partnerships, diversifying supply across companies and countries, and domestic production. There are rarely simple ways to reduce these threats.

### **Nuclear Proliferation and Weapons of Mass Destruction**

The spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction remain a persistent threat. Although arms control agreements have reduced stockpiles since the Cold War, modernization programs and treaty withdrawals have increased uncertainty. The possibility of nuclear materials falling into the hands of non-state actors further heightens global risk. Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal) is now defunct, it exemplifies the need for global cooperation to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. This says nothing of the chemical and biological threats.<sup>23</sup>

### **Climate, Environmental, and Health Threats**

Unlike the aforementioned man-made threats, the natural world has its own threats, although many are human-exacerbated. For centuries,

humanity has operated under the assumption that human health exists independently of the health of the planet. However, growing scientific evidence has dismantled this notion, revealing a deeply intricate and symbiotic relationship. The convergence of three major global issues—environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity, and rapid climate change—is now understood to be a powerful driver of disease emergence, spread, and severity. This paradigm shift recognizes that human health is strictly linked to the quality of the global environment and, therefore, to security.<sup>24</sup> Good health depends on clean air, a stable climate, a preserved natural environment, and access to adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene. It also requires protection from harmful radiation, unsafe chemicals, and unhealthy working conditions. A healthy environment has been reported to potentially prevent a quarter of the global disease burden.<sup>25</sup>

Climate change presents myriad risks to humans.<sup>26</sup> The International Court of Justice has called this an urgent existential threat to mankind.<sup>27</sup> These include environmental instability, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, resource scarcity, food insecurity, water scarcity, forced migration, increased diseases, and economic and political effects.<sup>28</sup> The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) Military Advisory Board, composed of retired three and four-star generals and admirals, stated that climate change, beyond natural variability, acts as a “threat multiplier,” increasing risks such as human conflict and criminal behavior.<sup>29</sup>

This was echoed in 2021 by the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change.<sup>30</sup> Climate change also offers one of the clearest reasons to reconceptualize global security. Rising global temperatures intensify wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and floods, heightening the risk of famine and migration, destabilizing entire regions. Coastal cities face displacement from sea-level rise. These changes strain governments’ capacities to respond, particularly in fragile

states.<sup>31</sup> These environmental stresses also often fuel political instability and armed conflict over scarce resources. We still have a lot of work to do to mitigate the effects of climate change.<sup>32</sup> No single nation, regardless of military power, can defend itself against atmospheric warming alone. Environmental security is inherently global; carbon emissions in one country affect communities worldwide. Therefore, global security must include environmental stability, including climate change, as a core pillar.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how vulnerable even the most powerful nations are to non-military threats. The pandemic disrupted healthcare systems, shut down economies, and claimed millions of lives. The virus crossed borders with ease, underscoring that national security cannot be isolated from global health. Vaccines, research collaboration, and information sharing required international

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coordination. Military strength offers no protection against microscopic pathogens. If security means ensuring safety and stability, then public health infrastructure and global disease surveillance must be considered essential components of global security.<sup>34</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed the vulnerability of global systems to infectious disease outbreaks. Health crises disrupt economies, overwhelm healthcare systems, and destabilize societies. Unequal access to vaccines and medical resources further widens global inequalities, creating long-term security concerns.<sup>35</sup>

These evolving threats support a broader, people-centered understanding of security, often called human security. Rather than focusing solely on states, this approach prioritizes safeguarding individuals’ access to food, water,

healthcare, economic opportunity, and political stability. Institutions such as the United Nations have increasingly emphasized sustainable development, humanitarian protection, and international cooperation. By addressing the root causes of instability—poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation—nations can prevent conflict rather than merely respond to it.<sup>36</sup>

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### **Recent Events and Our Interconnected World**

The risks of these global security threats are laid bare by the ongoing U.S.-Israeli “Iran War.” This is no longer a local or regional conflict; it is a conflict that reflects our hyper-connected world and has global impacts. These impacts likely exacerbate every emerging threat in this article, including global chaos and disruptions such as shortages of oil, liquefied natural gas, fertilizer, helium, semiconductors, aluminum; food and water insecurity; displacement of over 3.2 million Iranians and one million Lebanese; extremist group recruitment; supply chain disruptions; loss of life and property; windfall profits for U.S. adversaries, including Iran and Russia; negative impacts on allies and alliances; the creation of another proxy war; misinformation and disinformation; climate and environmental impacts; and others. These events continue to evolve as of this writing.<sup>37</sup>

### **Human Security as the Core Principle**

Traditional security focuses on protecting states from external aggression. While national defense remains important, military strength alone cannot address issues such as pandemics,

climate change, or food insecurity. Human security broadens the definition to include economic, health, environmental, political, and personal safety. For example, a country may have a strong military yet still face instability if large segments of its population lack access to healthcare, education, or employment. In this sense, human insecurity can generate internal unrest, migration crises, and regional instability—ultimately undermining international peace.

For much of modern history, global security was defined primarily by the protection of state borders, military strength, and national sovereignty. However, the concept of human security reframes this traditional approach by placing individuals, not just states, at the center of security policy. Popularized in the 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Program and reinforced through initiatives within the United Nations, human security holds that true global stability depends on safeguarding people from chronic threats such as poverty, disease, repression, and environmental disaster.<sup>38</sup> As global challenges become increasingly interconnected, human security has emerged as a foundational principle of sustainable global security.<sup>39</sup>

While this is somewhat ideological, perhaps it is better to say we need both state-centered and people-centered security.<sup>40</sup> Many nations, institutions, and the United Nations also recognize the need for both and have acted accordingly. Efforts toward people-centered security include protection and relief from natural and human-caused disasters, food insecurity, water scarcity, inadequate public health, disease, economic crises, and political instability. Many, perhaps most, of these institutions or governments, public or private, try to act in the best interests of people-centered security as a core principle.

Human security is often described by two key principles: freedom from fear and freedom

from want.<sup>41</sup>

- Freedom from fear emphasizes protection against violence, conflict, and human rights abuses.
- Freedom from want focuses on economic security, access to basic services, and protection against deprivation.

These dimensions are interconnected. Economic inequality can fuel political extremism; environmental degradation can spark resource conflicts; and weak healthcare systems can turn local outbreaks into global pandemics. Protecting individuals from these threats strengthens the broader international system.

When individuals feel secure, societies become more resilient. Investments in education, healthcare, climate adaptation, and poverty reduction directly contribute to political stability. International development programs, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping missions often reflect human security principles by addressing the root causes of conflict rather than merely responding to violence. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that neglecting human security anywhere can have consequences everywhere. Weak public health systems and unequal vaccine access not only endangered lives but also disrupted global supply chains, economies, and diplomatic relations.

Despite its strengths, human security faces criticism. Some argue the concept is too broad, making it difficult to prioritize policies or allocate resources effectively. Others contend that expanding the definition of security risks blurs the line between security and development policy.<sup>42</sup> However, these critiques highlight the need for clearer frameworks, not the abandonment of the concept. In a world of multidimensional threats, limiting security to military considerations ignores the underlying causes of instability.

Human security recognizes that the safety and dignity of individuals are the bedrock of

international peace. Military defense can protect borders, but it alone cannot prevent pandemics, economic collapse, or environmental catastrophe. By prioritizing freedom from fear and freedom from want, policymakers can build more resilient societies and a more stable international order. In the twenty-first century, safeguarding people is not separate from safeguarding nations—it is the very foundation of global security.

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### **The Role of Cooperation and Multilateralism**

In an era defined by transnational threats—terrorism, cyberattacks, climate change, pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and regional conflicts—no nation can secure itself alone. Global security today depends not on isolation or unilateral power but on cooperation and multilateralism. Institutions such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the World Health Organization demonstrate how collective action strengthens international stability. Despite challenges—political disagreements, enforcement limitations, and power imbalances—multilateral systems remain essential pillars of modern global security.<sup>43</sup>

While unilateral, state-centered policies and actions are important, collective action is essential to achieving global security. Diplomacy, international law, and cooperation are the means to this end. Strengthening global governance systems, such as the United Nations, is also important. Public-private partnerships are critical, both for leveraging all available expertise and for securing the resources needed to meet these global challenges. These efforts require cooperation, compromise, and consensus grounded in ethical leadership, good faith, and good intentions.<sup>44</sup>

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depends on interconnected systems of cooperation and shared responsibility. No nation, regardless of its power, can address cyber warfare, climate change, pandemics, or nuclear threats alone. Although multilateral institutions are imperfect and require reform, they remain indispensable to maintaining peace, stability, and collective resilience. In a world where threats transcend borders, security must do the same. There are also recent and significant concerns about global cooperation and multilateralism.<sup>45</sup>

## **Toward Global Security**

We live in the real world, not an ideal one. Still, we should strive to be our best and protect the planet that sustains us. In that ideal, global security should encompass the collective efforts of nations, institutions (public and private), and communities to safeguard human life, environmental health and stability, digital systems, and economic resilience through cooperative, preventive, and sustainable strategies that transcend national borders.<sup>46</sup>

Today's global security challenges are interconnected, complex, and transnational. Military power alone cannot address cyber threats, pandemics, climate change, or economic instability. Effective responses require cooperation, diplomacy, technological innovation, and strong international institutions. In an increasingly interdependent world, the stability of one nation is inseparable from the security of all. Security is no longer merely about preventing invasion; it is about sustaining the conditions that allow societies to thrive.

## **Conclusion**

As we pursue the ideal of global security, we should not be naïve about the risks, both now and in the foreseeable future. Strong, professional militaries and alliances must be maintained where geopolitical rivalries persist. Indeed, deterrence and defense alliances remain important. Global security does not diminish the importance of national defense; it expands the concept to reflect current realities. Military power alone cannot guarantee safety in an era defined by climate disruption, pandemics, cyberwarfare, and economic volatility. A narrow focus on armed force diverts attention and resources from the underlying drivers of insecurity.

A clear path for rectifying the challenges of global security can be overwhelming, not because strategies and institutions don't exist, but because many do. And, if they do not exist, as intelligent people, we can create them. The inherent challenge lies in our human nature, which is capable of great evil as well as great good. Finding the collective good in our global humanity is the answer—it is the foundation of global security. The most important element of success is building trust, perhaps the most difficult task of all. Thus, while global security is likely aspirational in the foreseeable future, we must maintain it as a strategic imperative in the long term.

Ultimately, the world's greatest threats are shared. Climate change does not stop at checkpoints. Viruses do not recognize passports. Cyberattacks ignore physical boundaries. Economic crises spread across continents within hours. If security is to mean protection in the modern world, it must reflect this interconnected reality with interagency, whole-of-government, and global cooperation. It must also enable accelerated adaptation and response to evolving security threats. Historically, this has been neither proactive nor swift, hampered by bureaucracy and a lack of imagination. By embracing an ethical, multidimensional, and cooperative definition of global security, nations can move beyond outdated paradigms and build a safer, more stable future for all. **IAJ**

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