

Cooperative Security Initiative

[Seven Substrates for a Symbiotic, Secure and Sustainable Global Future](#)

8 July 2020

Opinion by Nayef Al-Rodhan

Conflict and cooperation have been central to theories of international politics – which emerged into a distinct discipline during the Cold War – and for centuries prior to that, through the writings of philosophers who contemplated what made distinct political communities cooperate and what triggered conflict. The cynical tone of philosophers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, on the one side, and the more hopeful views of Rousseau and J. Locke, on the other, identified different sources of conflict but shared an important premise, which was that it was ultimately human nature that explained conflict and cooperation. The first group – whose writings laid the foundations for the Realist school, held that human nature was essentially selfish, power driven and that conflict was a constant threat; the second group, which influenced the Liberal/Idealist school, anchored its view in a more optimistic belief that human nature was perfectible, and in the [Kantian](#)-inspired views that conflict was against reason. Foundational to the Idealist school was also the deep belief that foreign policy must be a reflection of domestic policy and values. The latter views materialized during the interwar period with the early efforts for multilateralism (e.g. Woodrow Wilson) and then with the ‘institution-builders’ in the decades following WWII.

International cooperation in the 21st century, given the scale of interconnectivity and interdependence today (reconfirmed in strong terms with the Covid-19 pandemic) needs new paradigms as well as normative frameworks that advocate for new ways to achieve a sustainable future for global security. At the same time, a persistent and critical element from earlier theories remains ever valid, and that is the basic fact that [human nature](#) informs and must be accounted for in governance paradigms domestically and globally. Here too, however, developments in neuroscience in the past decades, shed new light on what is meant by ‘human nature’. The previously speculative accounts in political philosophy, which usually dichotomized humans as either ‘good’/moral or inherently ‘bad’/immoral can now be replaced by hard evidence, such as from the study of neuroanatomy and neurochemistry.

With insights from neuroscience, I previously theorized that human nature is *emotional, amoral and egoistic*. Briefly, this means that the assumption of ‘rationality’ of human nature is not supported by evidence from neuroscience, which demonstrates the salience of emotions to our existence and to all aspects of life (however, it should not be understood that emotions lead to haphazard courses of action); humans are not innately moral or immoral but rather amoral, and their moral compass will be developed in the course of their existence, depending on circumstances; we are, however, hard-wired with some basic predilections, the most important of which is for survival, which is a basic form of egoism. This very basic wiring invalidates the assumption of human nature as a blank slate upon birth; more accurately, we are defined by what I previously conceptualized as the [predisposed tabula rasa](#). This concept captures the amoral side of our nature, which lacks any notion of what is moral or

immoral, but equally our predilection for survival, which is encoded in our genetic makeup, and which will push us to seek those actions that maximize our chances of survival.

There is, therefore, very little in our nature that is innate or ‘finished’, and we are highly malleable to circumstances – this leaves a great deal of importance to institutions. Good and dignity-based governance will enhance the chances for social cooperation while conditions of fear and insecurity will heighten the most negative manifestations of our emotional amoral egoism.

Institutions are also critically important in relation to human nature in order to limit the extreme manifestations of (the search for) power. In previous studies on the [neurochemistry of power](#) I discussed the highly addictive nature of political power, especially unchecked power. Political power is neurochemically associated with a release of dopamine – the same neurochemical that is responsible for the feeling of pleasure. The reward circuitry that is set in motion will push an individual to search for more power or at the very least do anything not to relinquish it. This is an extremely powerful conditioning mechanism that functions similarly to the craving for drugs or anything that engages neurochemically the release of dopamine – this includes productive endeavors such as reward-based learning and anything that makes us repeat certain actions. In the absence of accountable institutions, term limits, or systems of checks-and-balances, it is unrealistic to expect any leader to willingly give up on power, or limit the power they can accrue – and no arguments rooted in moral imperatives stand a chance because the search for power is simply too powerful to resist.

Power is one of the most important drivers of human action – and one that will take extreme manifestations in the absence of institutional barriers – but it is not the only one. Our nature is strongly driven by a set of motivators that I called the [Neuro P5: power, profit, pleasure, pride and permanency](#). Permanency here refers to actions that ensure our physical survival (and our effort to extend life), but also anything that leaves a legacy behind.

In the following paragraphs, I will sketch a framework for sustainable global cooperation and *cooperative security* based on this neurophilosophical account of human nature, which includes seven substrates.

Dignity-based governance is critical both in domestic and global governance

Globalization and digital tools have accelerated the reckoning that regimes which fail to meet the [dignity needs](#) of their citizens are bound to become obsolete. At the end of the Cold War, the notion of the End of History emphasized the primacy of political freedom and that humanity was moving in the direction of a universal validation of liberal democracy. That prediction did not materialize, and past decades have only reconfirmed that it is dignity that is first and foremost fundamental to governance. As conditions of misery, alienation, [discrimination](#) exist even in advanced democracies that otherwise guarantee freedoms and political rights, we are reminded that the pursuit of dignity is even more crucial to governance.

Sustainable history

In thinking about our common future going forward, we must think in terms of [Sustainable History](#), which prioritizes the attainment of dignity for all, at all times and under all circumstances. This paradigm aims to reconcile the ever-present tension between the three main attributes of human nature (emotionality, amorality and egoism) and human dignity in its holistic sense. I define dignity as

much more than the mere absence of humiliation. Human dignity is instead a comprehensive concept that includes [nine critical needs](#): reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness. Public policy must relentlessly prioritize the attainment of dignity in order to prevent the worst manifestation of our nature and the collapse of social order and cooperation.

This does not have a domestic dimension only, and it also reverberates in transnational and transcultural relations as well – elements that sustain international cooperation. Greater efforts towards recognizing the dignity of others implies a deeper understanding of our shared humanity and, critically, our [shared history](#).

Global Trans-cultural Understanding and The Ocean Model of Civilization

Narratives of incompatibility and ‘clashes of civilizations’ must be overturned in favor of a more accurate and judicious [account of history](#) that testifies to countless mutual borrowings between geo-cultural domains across centuries. This is also the case, for example, for the West and the Arab-Islamic world, which share a long history of intellectual, scientific and cultural exchanges. We must revise our historical curricula to go beyond narratives that only serve [divisive leaders](#). Rather than perpetuating the notion of separate civilizations, we must think of humanity as an ocean into which many rivers flow and add depth. [The Ocean Model of Civilization](#) is a paradigm that can guide new thinking on transcultural relations and our common history as one human civilization.

Just Power

Politically, at the international level, one way to achieve greater cooperation and understanding is through [Just Power](#). This complements previous paradigms of ‘hard’, ‘soft’, and ‘smart’ power, which emphasized various material and/or diplomatic capabilities but failed to account for a critical element that creates legitimacy in leadership: the promotion of justice, fairness and respect of international law. Zero-sum games may have worked in a purely anarchic or bipolar global system, but the 21st century presents unique characteristics that constrain the application of Realist power calculations.

Symbiotic Realism

In order to better explain international relations today, I previously proposed a new paradigm called [Symbiotic Realism](#), which builds on methodological and epistemological elements from the philosophy of Realism (e.g. the analogy man-state, the anarchy of the global system) but equally reflects on the profound transformations to the state system. Symbiotic Realism rests on four pillars: (1) *the neurobiological substrate of human nature*, the persistent (2) *anarchy* of the global system (in the sense of an absence of global government), which today is simultaneously defined by (3) *global interdependence* and (4) *instant connectivity*.

Multi-sum security

These latter elements severely limit [the ability of states](#) to pursue zero-sum games, despite political rhetoric that may at times emphasize relative gains. Rather, it is the *multi-sum security principle* that best describes the dynamics of cooperation in this era. I previously defined this principle as follows:

“In a globalized world, security can no longer be thought of as a zero-sum game involving states alone. Global security, instead, has five dimensions that include human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural security, and therefore, global security and the security of any state or culture cannot be achieved without good governance at all levels that guarantees security through justice for all individuals, states and cultures.”

Even as it is politically difficult for many leaders to acknowledge these complexities and, implicitly, the limitations on their ability to chart unilateral courses of action, these realities call for more cooperative frameworks.

Five dimensions of global security

Finally, and as mentioned above, global security in the 21st century is defined by security challenges that extend beyond the scope of ‘national’ security alone. There are *five dimensions of global security*: [human, environmental, national, transnational and transcultural](#), and these must be tackled holistically. This also requires, by definition, reenergized efforts to promote international cooperation, and states must be reminded this serves their own interests. [Outer space security](#) stands as a classic example of the need for international cooperation, given its relevance for terrestrial security and the future of human civilization. Humanity is today critically dependent on space assets and it is in the best interest of all states to reach consensus and progress on legal and technical matters in multilateral fora such as the Conference on Disarmament. Ultimately, space will either be safe for everyone or unsafe for all.

The way forward

International cooperation and solidarity may have receded during the Covid-19 crisis but it remains the only way forward to tackle our common security threats, and most security threats today are no longer contained within national borders. What makes it even more indispensable to our future is that today, unlike in previous centuries, we are faced with a series of truly existential risks that – quite literally – cast our own existence in uncertain terms. I am referring specifically to the risks brought about by [transformative technologies](#), especially in areas such as human enhancement, quantum computing, and advanced machine-learning. These technologies have the potential to enable both extremely intelligent machines to learn and function alongside humans – with the attendant risks of machine and algorithmic unpredictability – as well as to enable us, humans, to [enhance our cognitive and physical functions](#) – again, with [risks](#) of destabilizing institutions that are critical for social cooperation, as well as characteristics that have been part of our evolutionary inheritance.

Other technological developments, such as in the area of synthetic biology and genome editing pose immediate risks, including in the form of bio-terrorism, which makes international cooperation vital in order to tackle risks of proliferation. More importantly, it is critical, going forward, to regard international cooperation not only as a way of countering threats and reducing harm but also as a proactive mechanism to gain the best possible outcomes that benefit all.

It is ultimately only through *cooperative security* that both immediate and long-term threats can be met. The ongoing and looming crises and political divisions in Europe, though a continent that has known peace for decades, are a reminder that more cooperation is vital to prevent a deterioration of

the security situation – and history shows that periods of relative peace should not make us complacent. That is why the *Cooperative Security Initiative* is a crucial project to build momentum for further cooperation and collaborative thinking on regional and global security. The emphasis of the initiative on reflective processes and Socratic methods (i.e. working “[through questions](#)”) is exactly what is needed to infuse fresh critical thinking in security debates and policy-making. Furthermore, the goal of the initiative can create a catalyst for continued cooperation. As evidence from neuroscience shows, especially on the activation of [reward pathways](#) and the link with dopamine, creating common goals and linking processes to a reward (peace and security, in this case) enhance motivation and the drive to pursue those goals. That process, however, needs to be maintained through learning and memory – in other words, remembering why the goal is important – and CSI can fulfil that tasks not only through repeated dialogues but also through wider engagement (“road shows”) for truly effective multilateralism.

About the author

[Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan \(@SustainHistory\)](#) is a Neuroscientist, Philosopher and Geostrategist. He is an [Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College](#), University of Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the [Geneva Centre for Security Policy](#), Geneva, Switzerland. Through many innovative books and articles, he has made significant conceptual contributions to the application of the field of neurophilosophy to human nature, history, contemporary geopolitics, international relations, cultural studies, future studies, and war and peace.