OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE · INTERDEPENDENCE/SOLIDARITY · TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTIONS · ACCOUNTABILITY/RULE OF LAW · PROTECTION OF LIFE

PRINCIPLES FOR REFRAMING
THE NATIONAL SECURITY NARRATIVE

Othering & Belonging Institute

Narrative Initiative

WCAPS | WOMEN OF COLOR ADVANCING PEACE, SECURITY, AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

In August of 2020, historic levels of national protest in the United States against the system of white dominance and anti-Black racism coincided with the crisis of the Covid pandemic. At the same time, there was a rise in national security rhetoric from inside and outside the government to describe these events. Given this moment, Open Society-US (OSUS) saw an opportunity to set in motion a fundamental narrative change in the US national security story from one that invokes structures of marginalization and violence to one that centers inclusion and wellbeing of our diverse communities and interdependent world.[1]

Over a six-month period, a dozen colleague organizations gave shape to this project. Convenings first focused on identifying the characteristics of the dominant US narrative around national security and then helped to pull out values important to an alternative approach. The cohort was led by OSUS in partnership with Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (WCAPS) and Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI), with later assistance from Narrative Initiative. Perspectives spanned movement building among veterans and university students, organizers fighting US Sinophobia, climate and racial justice activists; women of color; and reform efforts across foreign policy, global health policy, and local political dynamics in Portland, OR, among others.[2]

The conversations and written outputs highlighted challenges of reshaping or upending a narrative that is deeply rooted in the US imagination and its sturdiest and most opaque institutional architecture. The cohort found that while the national security label conveys importance, urgency, and a commitment to resources, it leaves open questions of for what purpose, defined by whom, and on whose behalf. The group concluded that the dominant national security narrative 'otherizes' and over-militarizes its subjects with a negative impact on rights and liberties domestically and internationally. While the national security label might convey much needed urgency in the context of a pandemic or the climate crisis, it also serves as a cover for excessive government secrecy, executive overreach, and an excuse for bad acts and impunity. As Narrative Initiative observed, the dominant narrative themes in our national security discourse drive a "fatalist excusal" of egregious

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1   The work of this project cohort and its subsequent working group does not represent an institutional position of Open Society Foundations or any individual organization that formed a part of the cohort or working group; rather we hope it represents a collective effort to generate ideas and share them with a wider public

2   A number of papers were not published, but several were and are available as follows: Arun Kundnani, "Abolish National Security," Transnational Institute, June 2021, https://www.tni.org/en/publication/abolish-national-security; Alexandra Stark, Candace Rondeaux, and Heather Hurlburt, "The Meaning of Security: Can a Divided Society Provide for the Common Defense?," New America, updated 19 April 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/the-meaning-of-security; Tobita Chow, "How China Threat Narratives Feed Anti-Asian Racism and How to Fight Back," Justice is Global, 8 June 2021, https://peoplesaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JIG_AntiAsianRacismReport_2021_0608.pdf; Redefining National Security Working Group, "Policy Papers by Women of Color, Fourth Edition — A New Normal: Redefining Normal Security Beyond 2020," Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation, May 2021, https://issuu.com/wcapsnet/docs/policy_papers_by_woc_-_redefining_national_securit; Global Health Council, "From Security to Solidarity: Examining Language To Make the Case for U.S. Investments in Global Health," December 2021, https://globalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Security-to-Solidarity-Paper.pdf.

harms that are in fact neither inevitable nor acceptable. From President Ford's dishonest reflection on Japanese internment ("We know now what we should have known then") to President Obama's dismissive observation about ongoing illegal practices in the so-called "war on terror" ("We tortured some folks"), we see how deeply embedded assumptions about national security policy are inimical to achieving justice and accountability.

In late 2021, in a second phase of this project, OSUS convened a narrative change Working Group, co-led by Narrative Initiative and OBI, with representatives from Institute for Policy Studies, Western States Center, and WCAPS. One of the tasks of this Working Group was to draft a set of narrative principles that could be used by a variety of narrators to reframe national security discourse in a way that effectively disrupts its negative effects and places human wellbeing and thriving at the center. Through an iterative process, the Working Group teased out a group of principles that we feel are ready to share more broadly.

The idea behind narrative principles is to equip as many narrators as possible to frame their messages in a way that, over time, will shift the public's assumptions and understanding about a field of discourse — in this case, the discourse around national security. To equip the largest possible group of narrators, we try to minimize specific content in favor of principles articulated in broad terms of values and vision. This allows narrators to apply the principles over a broad range of fields and contexts, and thereby reinforce and amplify the narrative change work of partners narrating in other arenas.

We invite social justice narrators to use these principles when communicating about national security issues or issues that may be overshadowed by a mainstream discourse of "national security."

We know that many narrators who focus on a certain area may search these principles for language that pertains specifically to their work and concerns. But as you approach these principles, bear in mind the intention is that they should have as much flexibility in application as possible. There may be values and concerns that we all share that do not receive specific attention in the principles. Including too many prescriptive or affirmative statements would risk turning the principles document into a manifesto, which would serve a different purpose. By the same token, these principles are not meant to substitute for specific policy recommendations or advocacy goals, which must necessarily be further grounded in detail and tactical considerations. Rather, these are anchoring principles that we hope might check unintended incorporation of common harmful narratives.

Accordingly, we suggest that you approach the principles with this question: can you use the principles to frame your communications and still be true to your core mission and priorities? If the answer is yes, then the principles have achieved their aim. If on the other hand you feel that applying the principles would distort or detract from your communications goals, or if these principles do not seem to overcome problems you find inherent to the dominant national security narrative as it plays out in your space, we encourage you to expand on these principles or develop new ones in dialogue with your practice community. Our narrative strategy should adapt as situations evolve and power shifts.

NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

Our public discourse is seeded with ideas about security that are so deeply embedded we may be unaware that we are invoking or reinforcing them in our own narration. These principles shine a critical light on those deeply embedded ideas, and equip audiences to envision a different reality organized around the health and thriving of our human communities and natural world. In particular, we hope to call out and eradicate narratives that sow division and weaponize fear. We also reject narratives that falsely insist that peace for some can only be achieved through the deprivation of justice for others. Finally, we wish to call attention to the very poor record of security solutions to political problems: in the medium and long term, the only guaranteed outcomes of security-based solutions are the diversion of public resources and postponement of inevitable crises. In contrast, an affirmative emphasis on the values we wish to see at the center of our discourse reveals the possibility for transformative solutions based in human and natural well-being.

With these concerns in mind, these are the principles we encourage people to use in framing their communications in debates where "national security" may be invoked.

PRINCIPLE 1

PROTECTION OF LIFE

Center life, including human communities and the environments that sustain them. Choose language that reflects the lived daily human struggle to attain conditions that protect life, including, a healthy natural environment, full recognition of every human being's equal value and dignity, the freedom to enter voluntarily into economic and social relations, and freedom from both physical violence and systemic oppression.

PRINCIPLE 2

OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE

We wish for a transformation to sustainable political and economic order organized around well-being. The current "national security" approach pulls us ever further from this goal, normalizing a world view where insecurity and hardship for most is seen as an acceptable tradeoff for "security" for some. We recognize a general trend in which actions and policies justified

on national security grounds are predicated on centralizing power among elites and diverting resources away from meeting broader human needs. We seek to promote a collective vision of well-being, in which individuals and collectives can exercise power over resource decisions, including the freedom to reject harmful and extractive security policies in favor of resource uses that sustain life.

SUSTAINABILITY. True security lies in providing the material conditions to sustain individual and community life beyond the decision–making elites. We reject state-centric models of security that accept extractive economies and destruction of the natural environment as "necessary evils."

DIGNITY. The dignity of persons, human collectivities, cultures, and the natural environment is essential to well–being. We reject "security" narratives that do not recognize the centrality of dignity.

PEACE AND JUSTICE. We understand "peace" to be not merely the absence of armed conflict but also the presence of justice. Both depend on the ability of individuals and collectives to pursue authentically meaningful lives according to their beliefs.

PRINCIPLE 3

INTERDEPENDENCE AND SOLIDARITY

We can only heal and repair our home planet through collective action that recognizes the interdependence of all human communities and natural systems. We seek to forge and strengthen solidarity across communities and geographies. We refuse to repeat divisive, zero-sum frames of national security that engender adversarial feelings toward some human communities, such as threat inflation and scapegoating. We do not repeat frames that dehumanize or exceptionalize persons or peoples based on their characteristics or circumstances. In particular, we recognize the harmful prevalent narrative framing that posits an inextricable link between security and US hegemony.

PRINCIPLE 4

TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTIONS

We recognize that security-based measures do not resolve problems; instead, they forestall reckoning with contestations over power and resources. When narrating in this space, we seek to highlight solutions that would transform situations of friction or conflict. Security measures are rooted in zero-sum thinking. Solutions that transform arise from a holistic vision of human communities whose conflicts do not eclipse their essential interdependence.

PRINCIPLE 5

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE RULE OF LAW

Individually and collectively, states are governed by domestic and international legal frameworks that constrain and compel their conduct. Respect for the rule of law by honoring norms and principles — such as transparency ascertainability, accountability in applications and violations of legal rules, mechanisms for review, among others — is considered a hallmark of a state's legitimacy. At the same time, we recognize that in some circumstances, rules entrench systemic injustices or are applied unfairly. Though this framework is not perfect, we believe that demanding compliance with applicable rules — both internal and international — is a useful way to shift the conversation and foster awareness of the fact that much of what is done in the name of "national security" does not conform with widely accepted global standards. We provoke people to ask what other ends and interests are served by our narrative framing when we communicate about national security. We invite people to be guided by the question: does your narrative and rhetorical framing advance justice for those most affected?

This document resulted from two years of convenings of two working groups (a larger cohort and a smaller working group that worked on drafting the principles) to critically re-examine dominant narratives concerning "national security," and the penumbras of those narratives as they affect a wide range of issue areas. Initially formed in the cultural and political ruptures of 2020, the cohort was invited to analyze dominant "national security" themes in popular discourse about the pandemic crisis and the civil rights uprising protesting police killings of Black men and women. In a moment when dismantling harmful old narratives felt eminently possible, the overarching project aimed to (1) delineate the harms of otherizing and militarization in so-called national security discourse, as it emerged in these settings; and (2) envision together a new narrative about security and well-being that would transcend conventional hegemonic framing.

Each participating organization made valuable contributions to the process, which led to several publications, including this collaboratively authored document and a forthcoming video explainer. At different times over the course of the project, Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation; Othering & Belonging Institute; and Narrative Initiative served as the collaborative leads. Narrative Initiative was the collaborative lead on drafting the Principles for Reframing the National Security Narrative. Other members of the working group responsible for drafting the principles included the other leads and Foreign Policy in Focus, at the Institute for Policy Studies.

This publication is the product of an active collaboration by the full cohort of organizations that contributed to the larger project over the course of at least the first year, beginning in 2020. In addition to the collaborative leads named above, participants included: Dissenters, Foreign Policy in Focus, Global Health Council, Justice is Global, National Immigration Law Center, National Priorities Project at Institute for Policy Studies, New America, ReThink Media, Transnational Institute, Veterans Organizing Institute, and Western States Center.

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