



THE HILL TIMES

Will we get around to abolishing war before it destroys us?

A system of sustainable common security, with a more effective UN isn't a naïve dream; it simply requires cooperative decisions to make the UN work as intended. A big joint project may be the critical first step.

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PUBLISHED : Wednesday, May 25, 2016 11:01 AM

It's been nearly fifty years since humans first walked on the moon, transplanted human hearts and built weapons for mutually-assured destruction. At the United Nations, there's also been substantive progress. Yet last week, senior UN officials conceded that, 70 years after its founding, the United Nations is still not equipped to meet its overriding objective —to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

Developing a rapid and reliable system to prevent armed conflict and protect civilians won't get you a ticket to any party and most would agree it's an unrealistic, non-starter.

So, why bother? Well, the costs and consequences of our current priorities aren't sustainable. Worse, the risks are increasing. Soon, they may move beyond political control.

Last year, the Global Peace Index reported the annual cost of war had reached a staggering \$14.3 trillion. Aside from diverting enormous resources, with untold lives lost and human suffering, there are now more than 60 million displaced persons world-wide, many of whom are fleeing armed conflicts.

Worse, the prognosis for what's ahead includes overlapping crises. As the Oxford Research Group cautions, climate change is coupled with competition over scarce resources, increasing militarization, and the majority of the world's population living in impoverished conditions.

Former American general and president Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address in 1961 warned:

“This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government...In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

The price of ‘violent peace’

The earlier Cold War, with the support of NATO, helped to spread and consolidate the military-industrial complex in most Western states. Countries like Canada and Britain, with advanced defence and economic integration, simply emulated the American model to attract profits and high-technology growth. Similarly, the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact did their share of promoting military-industrial development among their satellite allies.

With globalization and a ‘violent peace’ in the aftermath of the Cold War, the peace dividend was too brief, too small and too elusive to stem the process. The military-industrial complex expanded world-wide into finance, banking and insurance sectors, big oil and gas, telecommunications, media and advanced technology. For those with the resources, investing in protracted violent conflict was a pretty safe bet, with substantive profits and few risks, especially when aligned to overwhelming political, economic and military power.

With a global war on terrorism, national defence requirements would trump social spending; domestic demand would increase with an expanding homeland insecurity industry and troubled regimes would purchase any surplus, assuring a stable export market.

And, who could seriously argue with the numerous defence and security lobbies in every national capital? Civil society organizations were largely decimated by austerity. A complacent academe has largely bought in. What remains of a peace movement tends to focus on protest and opposition to particular weapon systems, ignoring the conversion, transition, and common security approaches of an earlier period.

Sadly, little has changed. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned in a series of articles, “the world is over-armed and peace is under-funded.” In a recent address to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis spoke to the crux of the problem:

Being at the service of dialogue and peace also means being truly determined to minimize and, in the long term, to end the many armed conflicts throughout our world. Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood. In the face of this shameful silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and stop the arms trade.

Yet governments sustain the arms trade and the war system at enormous expense, not only because it serves powerful interests and profits, but also from perceived insecurity due to the lack of a viable UN system to deter aggression and maintain security.

But now, even presidents and prime ministers are caught in a complex system, often seemingly powerless to resist the military-industrial imperative to buy, sell and develop more. The examples and contradictions pile up almost everywhere.

Canada, US setting poor examples

Here, Canadian officials may talk of human rights, but a sale of \$15 billion for LAV-6 armoured fighting vehicles to Saudi Arabia promptly shifts a serial abuser to a preferred partner.

In 2009, President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize largely for his pledge to abolish nuclear weapons; the weapons program he's now promising to modernize at a cost of \$1 trillion, including new cruise missiles, long-range bombers, nuclear submarines and inter-continental ballistic missiles. This virtually ensures Russia and China respond to the perceived threat with more of their own. In turn, the risks increase for another Cold War, another arms race, global proliferation, accidental war, nuclear terror and yes, mutually-assured destruction.

Apparently, there was substance to the earlier warning of a disastrous rise of misplaced power. Regrettably, we're deep within a defence trap and a system that has no easy exits.

Last week, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made another plea to move prevention of armed conflict and protection of civilians to the forefront of international priorities. Governments usually respond with lofty rhetoric, but slim substance beyond calls for early warning and further cooperation with regional organizations. On this occasion, the interest is up, partially due to concerns over UN peace operations becoming larger, longer and costlier endeavors. Many governments hope to cut the organization's annual budget of \$7-to-\$8 billion for peace operations. Few, if any, want to provide sufficient support to operationalize prevention and protection. But most are likely aware that step is fast approaching.

Notably, following the former UN Secretary-General's 1992 An Agenda for Peace, two Canadian peace researchers, professor Anatol Rapoport and Major-General (ret.) Leonard Johnson, stressed the importance of converting or changing the principal functions of military force and the larger war system. UN peace operations were viewed as a timely conversion strategy. In their words:

“We thus have on the one hand, growing maturation and enlightenment at the highest levels of political thinking, as reflected in the Secretary-General's report. On the other hand, this trend is opposed by institutional inertia, obsolete habits of thought and action. The war system still exists, with its vast infrastructure – the military establishments, the armaments industries, the weapons research and development centres, the think tanks, above all the flourishing arms trade. Those who benefit from this infrastructure will resist all plans to eliminate it. There may be a way of overcoming their resistance, namely by gradually but persistently changing the functions performed by the infrastructure.”

The functions performed by the infrastructure can be shifted and the costs reduced. The elusive solution to the larger problem is within UN peace operations.

The way forward

In fact, Governments have known this and how to proceed for more than 50 years. As early as 1961—when then-president Eisenhower was warning of the unwarranted influence of a military-industrial complex—officials in the U.S. State Department drew a compelling connection between a wider disarmament process and the development of a UN peace force. As they wrote,

“There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds.”

These are intimately related, overdue processes with the potential to free up substantive resources for addressing other pressing global challenges. A system of sustainable common security, with a more effective UN isn't a naïve dream, it simply requires cooperative decisions to make the UN work as intended. A big joint project may be the critical first step.

A Canadian proposal for a standing United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) might help to seal a better deal. It was initially developed in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide for a former Liberal government as part of their study and multinational initiative to improve UN rapid deployment capacity.

A UNEPS is specifically designed to help prevent armed conflict and mass atrocity crimes, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding peace operations, and to address human needs where others either can't or won't. It's intended to complement existing arrangements with a rapid and reliable first responder, effectively a 'UN 911' for complex emergencies. But, who knows? It might actually be a game changer and system shifter when that's really needed.

Whether we abolish war before it destroys us will likely depend on what we do about it. Good ideas seldom work unless we do. Perhaps it's now or never.

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