

GLOBAL PEACE AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

AN IDEA

The United Nations must expand its role and shift focus from the prevention or containment of military conflict to the achievement of comprehensive global peace by ensuring the satisfaction of basic needs for the poorest sectors of humanity. True peace will only be achieved when all people have enough to eat and live decently. To that end the waste and misuse of resources that are now so conspicuous in richer countries must be stopped so that effective redistribution may take place.

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In the post-Cold War era of the twenty-first century, nations are no longer apprehensive about a Third World War although fears have been rising in the last years. The lessons from the two previous world wars may have made states more sane and sober. Since the onset of globalisation, the world has been moving towards multipolarity and while superpower rivalry had somewhat diminished, it now seems to be on the rise again. However, extremism and terrorism influenced by ethnicity, regionalism, religion and/or language are the security challenges confronting the nations and peoples of the world today. Details of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, American support to the *Taliban* and *al Qaeda*, the eventual withdrawal of the Russians and *Taliban* rule in Afghanistan are

all well known. The 9/11 attacks on the United States of America (US) and its subsequent retaliation on Afghanistan and Iraq have fuelled Islam-influenced fundamentalism and terrorism in parts of Africa, Asia and to some extent Europe.

Any discussion on global peace and security invariably makes one think of wars waged among/between nations, of threats due to ethnic/religious conflicts and of hegemony and terrorism on an international scale. This is the perception not only of the common people but also of diplomats, officials, planners, politicians and scholars. Since the First World War, nations of the world have tried to achieve global peace by initiating efforts to maintain an international order, leading to international security. In this endeavour, the primary objective of major global powers, international organisations like the League of Nations/United Nations (UN), the intelligentsia and even the media has been to stop or contain wars among nations to ensure international security—such an approach equates peace with an absence of war. Thus, the concept and meaning of “peace” itself evolved from an “international security” dimension after World War One.

The term “peace”, though generally understood as an absence of war or violence, an occurrence of harmony characterised by a lack of conflict behaviour and freedom from fear of violence, has many connotations and interpretations. There are even different beliefs on peace. To Christians, peace prevails when there is no sin being committed in the world, while Islam says peace reigns when the infidel is dead or has embraced the faith. Many diverse theories of “peace” also exist in the world of peace studies, which involves the study of conflict transformation, disarmament and the cessation of violence. The definition of “peace” varies with culture, religion and even subject of study. Mahatma Gandhi contemplated peace not merely as the absence of war and violence but also as a condition of society in which individuals, groups and states reside in joint understanding and assistance abjuring or refraining from ruling or dominating each other. Peace to him was thus akin to an adhesive force for society as well as the world. Peace may be

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also considered a state of balance and understanding in oneself and between others, where respect is gained by the acceptance of differences, the persistence of tolerance, a resolution of conflict through dialogue, respect of people's rights and voices and where everyone is at their highest point of serenity without social tension. The first objective of the UN Charter is the maintenance of international peace and security.

Peace in and of itself is a complex concept. It pervades from a person to a family, community, nation, region, continent to the whole world. While it is perceived and desired from the individual to the global level, in form it is altogether different from "global peace and international security". The peace of an individual or a family is affected not only by wars but also by poverty and hunger, especially in poorer nations. Even when a person's nation or region is not at war, an individual or family may not be "peaceful" if they do not have the security of basic needs. Poverty and hunger are as devastating and dangerous to them as wars and conflicts, as they can starve or even kill people. It is seldom realised that the very perception of peace by a community or region in "peaceful" but poor Bangladesh is completely different from the mindset in a city like New York, which comprehends peace as an absence of terrorist attacks and not of poverty and hunger. Moreover, most war/terrorism affected zones around the world also face disease, a lack of basic amenities as well as poverty and hunger. The conditions of displaced populations and refugees in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, Syria or Vietnam are all similar. There is a vast perception gap in understanding the term "peace and security" between the Global North and the Global South.

Peace starts at the individual level and then extends to the family, community, ethnic group, nation, region and the globe. The peace of an individual or family from the Global North usually does not constitute the absence of poverty and hunger or the provision of basic needs. The concern is more of rights (economic, human and/or political), the freedom of religion, the provision of security by the state, etc. In the Global South, conquering poverty and hunger constitutes peace, while the security of the individual from war and conflict comes later. The fulfilment of fundamental needs like food, clothing, shelter and water is itself seen as ensuring or achieving a state of peace. This paper offers a multidimensional, holistic understanding of peace. At the individual or community level, this includes security from poverty and hunger, the security of basic needs and ethnic rights as well as security from conflict, terrorism, violence, war and so on. The

state or nation is obliged to provide holistic peace and security to individuals and the community. Under normal circumstances, just as the head of a family is responsible for the holistic peace of its members, the state or nation is responsible for the holistic security of its community or citizens. Hence, it is natural and justifiable that at the global level, the duty of providing holistic peace to citizens should fall on the shoulders of the UN.

The United Nations is globally empowered legally and morally by an absolute majority of nations to maintain international peace and security. However, due to the perceptual difference between the Global North and the Global South, its approach for global peace has been largely aimed at maintaining an international order that prevents or mitigates wars.

While the UN, other international organisations, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), etc have been doing an often commendable job in preventing wars, taking care of refugees, assisting flood/drought affected nations/regions, eliminating dreaded diseases, providing education, water and sanitation, their approach has been mainly to direct humanitarian efforts in violence/war affected zones. As a result, people who suffer from poverty and hunger in non-war affected zones have not received the attention they

deserve. The UN's main approach so far has thus drawn from its perception that peace needs to be established and promoted in war affected zones. It seems not to have paid enough attention to global holistic peace, which includes the elimination of poverty and hunger from non-war affected zones as well. The intelligentsia and global opinion makers also seem to think along such lines. However, peace is not simply the absence of war but also the absence of poverty and hunger and the security of basic needs.

To achieve global holistic peace, the UN must continually monitor international security so that global citizens, especially populations in war prone/affected areas are guaranteed security from aggression, terrorism and violence. At the same time, it should also strive to achieve food security, a security of

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minimum needs of global citizens, including in non-war affected areas. The structure of the UN, as an international organisation is concerned primarily with international security and peace through various committees/organs such as the Security Council, the General Assembly First Committee (Disarmament and International Security, the General Assembly Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonisation), Peace Building Commission, the Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force, the Disarmament Commission, the Committee on Disarmament, the Committee on the Peaceful uses of Outer Space, etc. The UN is also involved in electoral assistance, peacekeeping, the protection of women and children, especially from sexual exploitation and abuse, organised crime, etc.

Although the UN is involved in humanitarian work, its main aim and purpose as indicated by its structure and programmes, is maintaining international security. This is not surprising as this was the very purpose of its foundation. According to the UN Charter (online at <http://www.un.org>), the organisation has the primary responsibility:

“To maintain international peace and security and to that end to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace (Article 1 (1) UN Charter). ... If it determines, in accordance with Article 39 UN Charter, the existence of a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression, the UN Security Council may make recommendations or decide what measures shall be taken by members of the UN to maintain or restore international peace and security”.

The Fulbright Scholarship, the Gandhi Peace Prize, the Rhodes Scholarship, etc were all established to promote international peace and understanding. Several other international organisations and NGOs such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the International Peace Bureau, the International Peace Institute, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, etc are also involved in working towards global peace. However, their focus is on war affected zones/regions and they emphasise security related issues. For example, the International Peace Institute, through the Global Observatory, lists key global events to watch security and terrorism related issues in countries/regions such as Gaza, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen, etc that may affect global peace. The Global Peace Index of the International Peace Institute is

again mainly concerned with security issues as its parameters to indicate peace.

The UN and other international organisations and NGOs understand international peace through the prism of security, terrorism and violence. It is now time to eradicate global poverty—another great threat to global peace. It is necessary to distinguish between international security and global security as well as international peace and global peace. International security and peace in the perception of the Global North seem to be as peace pertaining to the safety and security of life. Global security and global peace seem to be futuristic concepts linked to the Global South's perception of peace as the provision of basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and water, etc.

As the only global institution with comprehensive competency and universal membership, the UN is uniquely positioned to deal with complex and multiple challenges. On the operational level, it has a well-established institutional framework for deliberation, decision-making and implementation. More importantly, the UN confers a unique legitimacy upon actions and mandates on an international level. It has always been the forum for countries to have their views heard, regardless of influence, political system or size. The UN must increase its involvement in various initiatives ranging from the

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alleviation of poverty to the prevention of conflicts around the world. It has largely fulfilled the chartered goals established in San Francisco almost seventy years ago and in doing so has spawned an extensive body of international institutions, law, norms, practices and treaties that govern most facets of interstate relations. With these laws and treaties, the UN Charter has become the world's central operating system—the motherboard of global governance—making it possible for ideas such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to become policy drivers and for other organisations, notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the G8, the G20, ASEAN, APEC and civil society, to function more effectively.

The UN and agencies like the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation, the World Trade Organisation,

etc have been formulating rules and treaties with regard to international finance and trade as well as social issues like diseases, the environment, health, human rights, pollution, sustainable development, etc, all of which are regarded as “international problems”. It was only through the MDGs set in 2000 that the world powers recognised poverty as a global problem requiring global efforts to be eradicated. While prior to this, the UN and several other agencies had made some efforts to tackle poverty through aid even in some non-war affected zones, the MDGs were the first global effort by the international community to fight global poverty in the Global South. The scope of the UN as articulated in Article 55 of the Charter provides that it shall promote:

- Higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development.
- Solutions for international economic, social, health and related problems and international cultural and educational cooperation.
- Universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

On 4 December 1986, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development (to be distinguished from mere economic growth), which entitles every human being and all peoples to participate in, contribute to and enjoy development, in which human rights can be fully realised. This right is recognised regionally in the Charter of the Organisation of American States and more concretely in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. At the international level, it appears in a number of important soft law instruments, such as the World Conference on Human Rights’ Vienna Declaration (1993), the Millennium Declaration (2000) and the Rio+20 Outcome Document (2012). In 2007, the Human Rights Council created an opening for treaty-making, by adopting without a vote resolution 4/4, deciding to take appropriate steps for ensuring respect for and practical application of these standards, which could take various forms, including guidelines on the implementation of the right to development evolving into a basis for the consideration of an international legal standard of a binding nature through a collaborative process of engagement.

However, the fight against global poverty or providing basic needs to the Global South is still not perceived as an attempt to achieve and maintain holistic global peace. Only recently have those in power started considering the right to

development (understood as the right to fulfil basic needs) as a part of human rights. International opinion makers have yet to consider seriously poverty, hunger and the inability to access basic needs as fundamental violations of peace and security of poor people, especially in the Global South. To wipe out poverty and realise the MDGs, nearly \$70 billion per year (0.7 per cent of gross national product) are needed which the governments of the world are finding difficult to achieve. In contrast, \$1.3 trillion has been spent so far on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. It is hard to comprehend the skewed priorities of the world where important issues like the development agenda and climate change receive less attention than narrow national strategic objectives.

The right to food implies that everyone in the world should have enough to eat and it is not acceptable to just reduce the proportion of people suffering from hunger by a certain year or ignore the impacts of the financial sector on food prices. It is paradoxical that in the Global South people find it difficult to earn enough for a meal a day when as per 2011 statistics of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1.3 billion tonnes of food or about one-third of all the food produced globally was lost or wasted. In developed countries, the average person wastes about 100 kilograms of food every year and in the United Kingdom 20 to 30 per cent of the food bought is thrown away. If everyone in the world chose to live like an average North American, it would require four Earths to produce all the necessary food. The waste that people throw away in Europe and North America is about equal to all of the food that Sub-Saharan Africa produces. The World Food Programme estimates that 870 million people worldwide do not have access to enough food to be healthy.

The primary role of the UN should be to change the perception of global peace and security. Elimination of poverty and hunger as well as the right to basic needs of food, clothing and shelter should form a part of its framework and programme. The UN and the international community through partnerships

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and agreements should strive to achieve holistic global peace and security for which the following three-pronged approach may be adopted.

1. The UN and other agencies should continue their work on security issues such as mitigating wars and conflicts, violence and terrorism, which affect peace and security.
2. They should also continue their humanitarian work of providing aid to poverty affected nations through MDGs and other efforts.
3. They should start working towards providing basic needs to the poor in the Global South, recognising their right to development. They should also visualise a concrete global plan to achieve global minimum basic needs for all the citizens of the globe, to ensure holistic global peace and security. ❏