

The Concept of Universal Security: A Revolution of Thinking and Policy in the Nuclear Age

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National Security

“Peace is the greatest good that people can wish for in this life.” When the great humanist Cervantes wrote this he was stating the principle position of pacifism, where attainment of peace is regarded as the highest possible value to which all other aspirations should be subordinated. Yet history is full of examples where peace has been consciously sacrificed for attaining other goals, for preserving faith and principles, and for materialism and ideology.

Ever since relations between people assumed a political form, peace has been constantly balanced against other values such as independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security. And just as Cervantes’s famous hero Don Quixote who wanted peace and the triumph of good constantly engaged in armed conflict against injustice, so have people of the world in practice repeatedly sacrificed their peaceful lives for the sake of forcibly asserting other values and interests which were considered more important at the time.

Although concepts such as peace, security, and disarmament may be constantly placed side-by-side in political appeals and treaties and are therefore considered to be inseparably connected, their correlation in real life has become quite complex and ambiguous. Peaceful relations often fail

to guarantee security. Very often the path to security is visualized as through armaments, rather than disarmament.

Due to concrete historical developments following World War II, the problem of a possible nuclear confrontation between the US and USSR assumed a key position in the area of international security. Despite recognition of the importance of economic, political, diplomatic, and ideological means for strengthening and preserving security and independence, each side has used military force and the concept of nuclear deterrence as a fundamental basis for development of security policies.

In practice, national or state security was the sole determinant of security policy. Due to the continued stockpiling of weapons, the US and the USSR attained nuclear strategic parity by the late 1970s. Yet, as one of the great paradoxes of our times, both sides began to depend on the use of a high level of imposed threat as a way of preserving their national security. Until the 1980s the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD) was looked upon largely as a model of Soviet-American relations. It did not involve other countries, as they saw it.

This situation has changed considerably over the present decade. Information provided by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and data from computer modeling in the US and USSR regarding climatic, physical, and other global consequences of a possible massive nuclear strike, has made it quite clear that Mutual Assured Destruction has in fact become Assured Universal Destruction. (1,2) This means that a reciprocal nuclear exchange between the superpowers will not only destroy both countries, but will make the very existence of life on this planet problematic. Today world opinion is paying more attention to the security doctrines of the two sides, since the security of all other states has become hostage to the security plans of the US and USSR. As a consequence, the redefining of national and state security has become an imperative for all countries and prompted replacement of previous concepts by the new alternative approach of universal security.

Universal Security

It would be wrong to consider universal security as a totally new proposal, or a ready-made set of ideas or practical proposals. In fact the principles and ideas incorporated in universal security have been circulated and discussed over the past several decades by politicians, scholars, and concerned citizens. Other concepts such as “collective security,” “mutual security,” and “common security” have also been posed as alternative possibilities for national or state security. When the concept of universal security did take form in the 1980s, it did so as an amalgamation of the most important and viable of these previous proposals.

An important contribution to the emerging concept of universal security was made by the independent (nongovernmental) Commission on Disarmament and Security created by Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. He brought together public figures from seventeen countries of Europe, Asia, America, and Africa. As a result of the Commission's work the concept of common security for the 1980s was formulated. (3)

The Palme Commission analyzed the causes and failures of the system of collective security under the United Nations Charter. It emphasized that sociopolitical confrontation between the East and West after World War II actually blocked implementation of Articles 39 through 51 of the UN Charter. That portion of the Charter called for creation of an effective UN armed force contingent and other measures for achieving collective influence (primarily by the UN Security Council) on individual sovereign states. "Instead of actions aimed at maintaining collective security as discussed in 1945, priority was given to other functions of a more limited nature." (4) Lacking an effective reliable international means for maintaining security, states in the post-World War II era regressed to former procedures based on time-honored military methods, instead of political or legal means.

The main idea of common security on the world scene involves abandoning the principle of deterrence as a political and psychological state of relations between major nuclear powers. As pointed out in the Palme report: "States can no longer strive towards strengthening their security at another's expense. It is only possible to achieve it through joint effort." (5)

The reality of today's international politics demonstrates how security and even our chances for survival in the nuclear age are sacrificed daily for self-motivated sovereign political, ideological, and military decisions. Examples include conditions operant in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Iran-Iraq, and Africa. Yet, at the same time there has developed now a broadening strata of public and perceptive leaders who are coming to accept the imperative of a new standard of behavior. This standard demands that governments recognize that they exist in a nuclear and interdependent world. Despite ideological differences and political rivalry they must completely acknowledge the priority of universal security and survival over their political and ideological goals.

Principles of universal security obviously impose limits on an individual state's sovereignty to take unilateral political, military, or ideologic steps which might bring the world to the brink of a nuclear conflict. This is true even if such actions are consistent with the country's narrower internal political and ideological interests. In the last decade, a number of political leaders in the East and West have proposed and accepted certain principles codified in the concept of universal security. Among them are: recognition

of the impossibility of survival in an all-out nuclear war and that there can be no victor after a nuclear exchange. President Jimmy Carter, after signing the SALT II treaty in June 1979, stated that each side would, from that moment on, have to consider the subsequent presence of military parity. No longer could there ever be nuclear superiority or a victory in a nuclear war. (6)

Acceptance of Universal Security

Starting in the late 1970s, Soviet leadership repeatedly proclaimed its recognition of the impossibility of ever achieving a victory in a nuclear conflict, or of gaining nuclear superiority. The Reagan administration, after a number of confronting statements in 1981 through 1983, has since also officially confirmed this position. This was established in a joint statement at the 1985 Geneva Summit and demonstrated major progress towards revising our understanding of security.

In today's world of nuclear "overkill" it is reckless for the USSR or the US to resort to military means for resolving any conflict, whether of a political or ideological nature. This is true whether it be a local conflict or an all-out confrontation, and whether it involves use of conventional forces, since "little" wars now have the potential of escalating to a full-blown nuclear exchange. This is certainly the case in our present nuclear age where the bulk of nuclear capability is concentrated in the hands of two sides that have competing social systems and ideologies. This calls for unparalleled restraint and caution by both countries.

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The acceptance of universal security will also lead to a change in the concept of parity as a guarantee of security in a nuclear world. We have reached a limit where parity ceases to be a factor for military-political deterrence. In a nuclear interdependent world parity and the principle of equality and equal security have become obvious liabilities, when armaments are at present "overkill" levels. This leads to the conclusion that the only way to ensure one's security in today's world is an immediate and drastic reduction of military arsenals. The concept of "reasonable sufficiency" has been put forward as an answer to this problem of parity. For the Soviet Union this has meant that nuclear weapons be limited to the minimum necessary for security.

The Path toward Universal Security

No one country has a monopoly on providing effective concepts for creating a complete and all-embracing security. Present discussions in the Soviet Union are but one step in changing existing concepts of security under pressure posed by the present nuclear danger. There is still much work to be done. Furthermore, reform of Soviet foreign political practices and military doctrines, so as to bring them in line with contemporary concepts of security, will not be a simple or an easy matter. It is also obvious that universal security cannot be carried out unilaterally, or just by several countries - parallel joint actions by many countries will be needed.

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The actual scale of the nuclear danger (and consequently nuclear security) is not national, but global in scope. It would be particularly helpful if this new idea of universal security received broad discussion which could be facilitated by including it on the agenda of the UN General Assembly. This would provide for open discussion on this new proposal by all nations possessing nuclear weapons and all concerned states. By its very nature, the new concept of security is not amenable for use at the national or state level, but is applicable only internationally. It has been formulated in response to the new conditions we face in an interdependent world and is provided as an alternative to prevailing versions of national security concepts.

To obtain an advantage by inflicting damage on one’s enemy through a massive nuclear strike turns out to be as impossible in today’s world as ensuring security of any one single country - whether it participates in the conflict, or is neutral, since the consequences involve all countries on the globe, including the one that initiated the attack. Delivering a first strike (which could have been regarded as ensuring national security in previous stages of stockpiling of nuclear weapons) is proving to be a suicidal act, even if the other side does not retaliate. A “nuclear winter” with global climatic changes could ensue when as little as 5 to 10 percent of the nuclear weapons now present on the planet are exploded, even if only launched by one side.

In this decade the fear of nuclear winter has become more effective than fear of a retaliatory strike as the chief factor for deterrence. But faced with the possible destruction of all life on the planet, there is need for the complete rethinking of the meaning of deterrence. We are all being held

hostage to the continued stockpiling of nuclear weapons, their possible accidental use, terrorist activities, and the escalation of any conventional conflict to a full-blown nuclear exchange. These threats provide the most serious obstacle for developing political trust on the international scene. In turn, this leads to a vicious cycle which then results in a new spiral, or escalation, of the arms race. Control, or prediction, of any military or political outcome rapidly diminishes under these conditions. As a result, political leaders and scholars have long realized the existence of a threshold in the arms race where further development of armaments and their delivery systems would not lead to greater security, but make deterrence much more ineffective. We now have come to that threshold.

Taking the required steps towards arriving at a solution will not be simple. Deterrence has occupied a central position in policies promoting peace and security, primarily through the concept of a zero-sum game stratagem - benefit for one side automatically assures loss for the other. This concept is not only invalid in today's world, it is dangerous and must be surrendered, since it will inevitably lead to a nuclear exchange.

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It would also be an oversimplification to assume that adopting the principles of equality and equal security will automatically lead to cessation of efforts to gain military superiority. If one uses as a model the concept that greater security on one side immediately leads to a greater sense of insecurity on the other side, then any discrepancy in the levels of security is considered dangerous. Here equality is the main concern, no matter on what level. The model incorporates, as a legal right, that both sides may take corrective action to engage in a retaliatory buildup of weapons. This logic is inapplicable in the concept of not only equal, but, mutual, or universal security.

The new model of universal security gives priority to overall system security before considering the illusionary possibility of separately assigning security to its elements. The most important point is the recognition that reduction of an adversary's security (increasing a threat to him) under today's conditions results in reducing one's own security. Under these conditions the reduction of a threat to an adversary, over wide limits, does not necessarily make oneself more vulnerable, or provide tangible advantage to the other side. In other words, mutual security in the nuclear age is tied to a concept of “reasonable sufficiency” and rejects both the “equality” and zero-sum game models.

Required Change

New thinking calls for new action and policy particularly in dealing with military doctrines and the structure of existing armed forces. This implies that the principles of universal security be incorporated into international relations; that nations accept that there can be no victory, or defense, in a nuclear war; that instead of seeking equality of nuclear capability, they move to a reasonable sufficiency of arsenals.

Transition to a mode of universal security demands new attitudes towards political and ideological differences between powers. Demands of security not only concern matters of territorial integrity of sovereign states, but also require protection of existing social systems from outside interference. Changes in such systems must not be subject to forceful action from the outside, but are internal affairs of the respective states and amenable to change through their own internal conflicts and domestic movements. In practice, the foreign policies of the US and USSR should be redefined to accept these principles.

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One should not continue to assume that real security is unobtainable until all political and ideological contradictions between socialism and capitalism are resolved. This is old thinking. The principal task before us in our present nuclear, interdependent world is the development of universal security, irrespective of present and future incidents, or even profound contradictions between social systems. For this reason, one needs to distinguish between levels of social-system-to-system and state-to-state interactions. This needs to be viewed anew. Differences in social systems and ideologies should not become a source of friction between states. One should not attempt “to make another state better than it is.” In the present nuclear age, individual states – particularly the US and the USSR – should not feel they have the right, or use force, to define the outcome of competition between socialism and capitalism in the world community.

In the process of changing old security stereotypes, one needs to overcome the simplified and often inadequate understanding of goals and motivation of the social systems of the other side. Competition in the form of different cultural and social system models should not be perceived as a threat to each other’s national security. Promotion of security for socialist or capitalist countries should not require the alteration of the other social system. The principle goal for interaction and competition between these systems should be peaceful coexistence and provide for a maximal

development of each system's potential in the areas of social development, economics, and politics. The sides should not engage in forcibly changing, curtailing, or even eradicating the other system. This model is very far from the old Trotskyite call for world revolution. Unfortunately this newer model of Soviet goals is not well recognized in the West. The Soviet Union is striving to make it clear that it sees competition between capitalism and socialism proceeding along lines that exclude the use of military force, as a way of challenging the other side.

The process leading to a change in thinking, perceptions, and attitudes has just started. Both East and West are facing the necessity of rejecting many traditional dogmas in national strategy and security perceptions.

The security of each state and each social model can be achieved, but not at the expense of the other. This can only follow from a policy of cautious, civilized, coexistence which includes the cooperation of different states and social models in the framework of a self-aware world.

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