

Common Security 2022: For Our Common Survival

“International Security must rest on a commitment to joint survival rather than a threat of mutual destruction.”

These words, from 40 years ago, serve as a stark reminder that the survival of humanity is not a forgone conclusion. The continuation of human existence in the twenty-first century, on a planet of nearly eight billion people, is a colossal global mission. It is an endeavour that relies on a commitment to cooperation not annihilation.

In 1982, the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, led by the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, published the report, *Common Security: A Programme for Disarmament*. At this time, Cold War tensions and the frightening prospect of nuclear war dominated the international agenda. The report laid bare the horrendous consequences of nuclear conflict, and exposed the fallacy that nuclear deterrence provides security. A nuclear war cannot be won, but would be disastrous for all parties involved. The Commission developed the concept of common security: the idea that cooperation can provide the security that humans crave, where military competition and nuclear deterrence have failed. That ultimately, nations and populations can only feel safe when their counterparts feel safe.

When Olof Palme convened his commission, the world knew that it stood on the brink of catastrophic nuclear war. It is less well-known that scientists have now set the Doomsday Clock at 100 seconds to midnight for humanity. The world faces the existential threats of nuclear war and climate change. This is on top of a toxic mix of inequality, populism, extremism, nationalism, gender and racial violence, and a shrinking democratic space. The cost of militarism stands in stark contrast to the shortage of money to tackle other challenges. Now is the time to reconsider whether common security can help bring us back from the brink once again.

The challenges of our interdependent global society demand collaboration and partnership, not isolation and distrust. But the path to cooperation and peace needs to be updated for the twenty-first century, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. By identifying the new challenges facing humanity, a contemporary blueprint for survival can be established.

In the introduction to the 1982 report, Palme expressed doubt that disarmament would happen if it must wait for governments to act,

“It will only come about as the expression of the political will of people in many parts of the world. Its precondition is simply a constructive interplay between the people and those directly responsible for taking the momentous decisions about armaments and for conducting the complicated negotiations that must precede disarmament.”

The need for people to be the catalyst for change is more relevant than ever. Popular will and public action have spearheaded movements for change in the twenty-first century. Now is the time to draw on people power to bring about disarmament and peace.

The Common Security 2022 project will host nine flagship panel discussions over the coming year. Each conversation will focus on a different theme related to global peace and security. These online public debates will provide the basis for a new far-reaching report, to be published in 2022.

Peace and the new geopolitical realities

In the twenty-first century the threat of nuclear war remains undiminished. Massive investments in faster, more lethal nuclear weapons, coupled with significant nuclear tensions between nations, create a dangerous cocktail for conflict. But the global campaign for nuclear disarmament has lost its profile and public fear of nuclear war appears muted. Urgent issues for discussion include the failure of disarmament talks, frustrations over the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the role of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, test bans, and nuclear free zones.

Although significant geopolitical realignments have occurred since 1982, strategic competition and power struggles between nations continue unabated. Borders shift, superpowers fluctuate, and alliances wax and wane; but conflict and violence remain a constant. According to the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, the number of full-scale wars increased from 15 to 21 between 2019 and 2020.

The Palme Commission focused on Europe as the battleground for any conflict, with minimal attention paid to other regions. But the Global Peace Index 2020 identified Europe as the most peaceful region in the world, with the Middle East and North Africa at the other end of the spectrum. In an increasingly multipolar world, an urgent reassessment of global politics and conflicts is needed. As regional conflicts and emergencies spill over into the global arena, populations and nations cannot expect to isolate themselves from the rest of the world in order to live securely. Key to discussions should be the situation in Central Africa, West Asia (Iran and its neighbours), Israel and Palestine, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula.

The Palme Commission sought to empower the UN for the purposes of peace. Today, the UN's role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding is one of the most visible examples of international cooperation. But we need to explore what other forms of multilateralism should be encouraged or developed.

Emerging threats and opportunities

Technological advancement over the past 40 years has resulted in a plethora of new threats and challenges for modern society. Computerised warfare, cyber security, drones, the use of artificial intelligence, and the dangerous development

of chemical and biological weapons are some of the emerging issues. The Palme Commission cautioned against the militarisation of space, as a dangerous expansion of martial competition. This prediction appears prescient, with space becoming an increasingly contested environment. Clarification of international laws and a renewed emphasis on disarmament are issues that should be considered.

The interplay between peace and the climate emergency is crucial to future security. Climate-related risks have far-reaching implications for the health and existence of humanity and the planet. Although climate migration is fuelling tension, the activism and determination of the climate change movement has united populations and nations. The momentum for climate cooperation offers a unique opportunity for rallying collective action in the pursuit of global peace.

Economic and social inequality

The Palme Commission warned that economic inequality, poverty and deprivation were major threats to security, and that *“peace and prosperity are two sides of the same coin.”* 40 years later, rising income inequality has been blamed for increasingly polarised politics, and the ascendance of populism and nationalism. With political conflict often spiralling into violence and war, a conversation is needed about whether greater equality could be a recipe for peace.

Gender equality in the quest for peace and security was a relatively unexplored topic by the Palme Commission. However statistics show that when women are at the negotiating table, peace agreements are more likely to last 15 years or longer. But conversely, only 22% of peace agreements in 2019 contained gender equality provisions. The role of women in peace and security needs further scrutiny, and practical proposals developed.

The economic and social burden of military spending was a central focus of the Palme Commission. The fear that military expenditure diverts funds from social and environmental investment continues to be a concern. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, world military spending in 2020 rose to almost \$2 trillion, a 2.6% increase in real terms from 2019. As the world struggles with the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, questions around military spending are highly pertinent. Recovery from the pandemic could be assisted by investment in peace and development, rather than war and deterrence.

The way forward

“We see the need for a new beginning in the peaceful struggle against war and destruction.”

The Palme Commission’s desire to replace the idea of nuclear deterrence with a positive approach to security still stands. A means to making people and governments feel safe without the threat of weapons of mass destruction,

nuclear deterrence, military force, and violence. Common security as an alternative path to nuclear competition.

The threat of war and its consequences have not diminished over the years. But political will, people power, and responsible policies can lead to change. There is still time to be innovative and ambitious in reframing security and reimagining our world. Common Security 2022 is an opportunity to assess the contemporary global security landscape, identify current challenges and hazards, stimulate a public policy debate, and ultimately establish new paths to sustainable peace.