

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Briefing Paper No. 6

“The Challenge of Promoting a Culture of Peace in a Post-Iraq World”

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“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” (*Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO, 1945*)

Redefining Security

In the past, conventional security policy was based on the assumption that security problems were derived from the actions of other states. As such, it was typically believed that security threats should be solved militarily on a national basis. The conventional security approach has been about preserving state sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity. However, this approach has a number of shortcomings: it ignores the underlying reasons for conflict; it consumes resources and neglects the various forms of non-violent conflict resolution. As well, this statist and militarist approach to security may also induce insecurity in other states, not too mention engendering other hostilities.

The 1995 UN Conference on Social Development affirmed that real security can only be attained by reducing spending on arms and systematically redirecting those resources to meet critical human and environmental needs. It asserted that real defence is about making people stronger by meeting their basic human needs, and that security is not just about the absence of threats but about the presence of basic human needs such as food, water, shelter, access to education, and sanitation.

The definition of security is no longer limited to military might but extends to a more comprehensive definition encompassing economic strength, internal cohesion, food security, energy security, a clean environment, equality before law and good governance all form part of the emerging comprehensive security approach.

The Root Causes of a Culture of Violence

Fostering a new sense of global interdependence and a mindset of hope can only be achieved if the international community seriously addresses the root causes that underlie the culture of violence, which pervades the world. Some of these causes include: (i) the violence of economic and social deprivation; (ii) the flagrant asymmetries of wealth and opportunity within and between societies; (iii) colonialism, exploitation and domination; (iv) poverty and social injustices such as exclusion and discrimination; (v) the banalisation of violence in the media; (vi) trafficking in arms and drugs; and (vii) the denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Beyond the Absence of Threats to a Culture of Peace

The 2000 UN Declaration on a Culture of Peace affirms in its Preamble that peace is not only the absence of violence, war or conflict, but requires a positive, dynamic participatory process where dialogue is encouraged and conflicts are solved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation.” Article 1 of that Declaration defines a culture of peace as a “set of values, attitudes, traditions and modes of behaviour and ways of life” that promote the peaceful settlement of conflict, the quest for mutual understanding, and which enable individuals to live harmoniously with each other and the larger community of life. This language is also reflected in Principle 16 of the Earth Charter.

A culture of peace does not imply a society devoid of any form of conflict. Conflict itself is a core fact of social existence and indeed present in every type of social relationship. The culture of peace means that societies and their members deal with conflict in the spirit of cooperation, integration, transformation, and mutual adaptation, using the tools of collaborative and creative problem-solving, rather than resort to violence and war.

The goal of a culture of peace is therefore a world in which the rich diversity of cultures is cause for appreciation and cooperation, rather than a source of social despair, disintegration, violent conflict and war.

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