**CPG/CIPS 2024 Policy Conference**

**Common Security and Arms Control**

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I’ve subtitled my presentation with this question, which I hope is partly answered by the time I finish: ***Can we eliminate nuclear weapons while retaining our current competitive security arrangements?***

The Palme Commission in 1982 proposed a new security concept in its report “Common Security: A Programme for Disarmament.” It was stated briefly this way:*“All states, even the most powerful, are dependent in the end upon the good sense and restraint of other nations.* ***Even ideological and political opponents******have a shared interest in survival****.”*

Forty years later, the 2022 updated Common Security report “For Our Shared Future” distinguishes itself from the original with reference to what has changed in 4 decades; More attention, they said, should be given to technological change (including space and autonomous weapons, and hypersonic missiles); to climate change; to gender equality issues, and to broader involvement of civil society. While acknowledging these modest adjustments, the earlier 1982 program was the more significant – and breakthrough -- statement.

**To start, I want to make 4 points about common security.**

**1: Common security is not in itself a pacifist project**. While it inclines us towards the reduction of violence and to limits on use of force, because the guidance is international law, (bad news for some) therefore there is also enforcement. There is peacekeeping, there could also be a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), what many of us advocate for. The priority is prevention of war and violence through conflict mediation measures, such as diplomacy, the UN or other good offices, ending threatening postures, and pressing for arms reductions. Therefore, **it is also true to say** that the focus is on peaceful measures that reduce and undermine conflict. This is peace advocacy, if not pacifism.

**2: Common security is not a destination, but a process and a practice.** We do not need a fully-fledged common security framework in place to remove certain categories of weapons or to change provocative defence postures. The global systems we move through over time will inherently be imperfect, and there will be relapses and backsliding.

**3: The end of capitalism is not a prerequisite for common security**

An essential assumption of common security is that it can develop despite differing economic and political systems, democracies and dictatorships, even while reduction of global poverty is a goal. If we must wait for an agreeable “perfect future system” we will be waiting in vain — and more time will pass than we can afford to address our global crises. Things can move quickly, or slowly, but we will need to take sequential steps.

Common security is very much a child of the Cold War and was originally designed to reduce the risks of conflict and nuclear war between the US and Soviet Union. This is why with the end of the Cold War, the term, if not the practice of common security, seemed to disappear from diplomacy and (shame on us!) also the priorities of much of the peace movement. This is also why some ideas of the 1980s have resurfaced now, due to rising tensions. But the essential elements were never dependent on Cold War contention. Rather they are rational, arguably neo-realist[[1]](#footnote-1), timeless ideas pertaining to conflict resolution, preventing war -- including nuclear war -- and arms control and disarmament.

**4: Balance, stability and détente** **are not by themselves common security:**

This is a particularly important point because it disrupts a belief that nuclear deterrence can simply be replaced by conventional deterrence, and all will be well. Deterrence has the failing of freezing in place a status quo which we know as the “stable balance of power” but as well it does not contain an incentive for change. Imbalance can be worse than balance, of course, but the actual goal of deterrence, it might be argued, is to *perfect* the stability of the stalemate existing in competitive security, **and not to replace it**. For example, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), and spheres of influence even at the cost of turning a blind eye to dictatorships and global inequality – are relatively stable, but also dangerous sources of conflict.

Because science and technology inevitably march forward, systems and weapons will need **perpetual modernizing** by all sides. Older systems wear out and need replacement, and the new ones are superior to those of adversaries who will now also update. **Result:** **The classic arms race.** Should we outspend our enemies? Or do we allow for weapon reductions that enable the redistribution of funds and human resources elsewhere? And remember also that as leaders change, their replacements are not all going to be rational actors. Some will be thugs.

Deterrence theory can erroneously presuppose that failures won’t happen that could disrupt the stability. Nuclear (and conventional) deterrence therefore would only be modulated in a way to strengthen **and thus reinforce the security dilemma**.

**(The Security Dilemma)**

John Herz in 1950 first coined the term 'security dilemma' to identify how **even** **states with defensive motivations,** seeking only to enhance their own security**, inadvertently still end up in conflict due to mutual uncertainties about the intentions of the other.**

On the nuclear weapons front, the response to this “dilemma” of uncertainties however was not speedier abolition, but possible reductions and non-proliferation measures to put a lid on the nuclear club. The message is “nuclear weapons are safe in our (P5) hands, but not in yours.” That argument may not hold for states who are outside looking in. Just this month, Ukraine President Zelensky stated: "What choices do we have? Either Ukraine will have nuclear weapons, which will serve as protection, or it must be part of some kind of alliance." **Did he mean a *nuclear* alliance?**

Therefore, for all these reasons, even if nuclear deterrence were relatively stable, for a time, it cannot be a coherent, sustainable or sufficient basis for common security. Treaties and agreements are beneficial. Parity rather than lopsidedness may help. But in practice, as we’ve seen, that “balance of power”, stability, parity and détente are temporary, unstable and unsustainable, even if we acknowledge that being ***more* *stable is still better than being unstable.***

We are stuck with the reasonable expectation that nation states will still want to protect themselves with weapons and military capabilities**,** and ideally,(and this is a critical point) **if those resources are kept limited and non-threatening to other states**. Even to get to that modest, safer stage, however, we will need a transition strategy, with clear steps.

**So What Happened to the Post-Cold War Peace Dividend?**

It seems clear the complacency and “Western” hubris that followed the end of the Cold War led to disinterest in the ideas brought forward by 1980s common security advocates. Nuclear weapons were reduced but not eliminated, deterrence doctrines were adjusted but stayed with us. We had a brief peace dividend after 1989, but it was not sustained.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**How do we get to Common Security, Non-provocative and Non-offensive Defence**

As Sverre Lodgaard (former director of the Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO) argued early on, “the best way of pushing nuclear weapons back to rear positions and down to a minimum level may be to develop alternative means of defence.” N**on-provocative conventional defence** “is easier to achieve than complete disarmament, because the military will not be eliminated.” Moreover, the concept “does not *contradict* the celebrated [United Nations] goal of general and complete disarmament: **[S]ince the main merit of such a defence posture is that the threat function is eliminated, it will also pave the road for disarmament**.”

Egon Bahr argued that the doctrine of common security meant that “neither side can gain military advantage that could be put to use without unacceptable risks.” It has built-in restraint, if it is to work. By way of verifiable agreements, it can assure military stability and therefore also is an offer of confidence-building. But common security “cannot be substituted for that of deterrence in a single sweep.” It might instead start with the exchange of information and end with quantitative arms limitations and eventual cuts in the common interest. That is not to say unilateral steps aren’t welcome also. These, as confidence-building measures, can send the right messages that invoke matching reductions by others. A complication, however, is that confidence-building requires transparency, but security requires secrecy. There are therefore obstacles.

The International Pugwash Conferences were a key forum for East-West discussion of common security and alternative defence during the Cold War, and their workshop discussions were brought to the attention of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who was supportive. As Michael MccGwire said in 1996, in Finland at the 46th Pugwash Conference, Gorbachev was able to make inroads with his “new political thinking” and “crucial reworking of military doctrine” precisely because the USSR wasn’t a democracy, and because he therefore wasn’t at risk “of being outflanked by appeals to national pride.” (Here, we might compare Putin versus Gorbachev.) In 1987 Frank von Hippel (together with Randy Forsberg) were instrumental in encouraging Soviet academics to support non-offensive defence postures. Following their advocacy, Gorbachev would subsequently reduce Soviet troops in Eastern Europe and remove 500 short range (tactical) nuclear weapons. This would lead to the Convention on Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in 1990. Then: Mutual limitations on major armaments for NATO and the Warsaw Pact, placement of weapons not in service in permanent storage, and creation of systems to resolve compliance issues.

Sverre Lodgaard explained how a “switch” or “transarmament” towards non-provocative defence means that “those weapons having distinctly offensive characteristics must be identified and eliminated”, and then “existing forces will be reorganized and deployed in less provocative modes”. No easy project. He explained further that the new postures must be unambiguously non-provocative *overall* because“single elements may (unavoidably) have offensive connotations”. The challenge, as he knew, is to “design gradualist approaches” that “feed the ideas into the political process(es).”

In their book Non-offensive Defense for the 21st Century (1994), Bjorn Møller and Håkan Wiberg clarified that NOD eliminates reciprocal fears, rules out preventive and pre-emptive wars, allows for defensive strengthening during crisis without increasing the threat posture, and (unlike nuclear deterrence and MAD) allows for non-suicidal defence options that don’t self-deter. NOD’s **two core assumptions** are that we can distinguish offensive from defensive*formations and postures;*and also that *defence is generally inherently stronger than offence* because of specialization and the advantage of advance preparations.

**Disarmament is not primarily a legal or treaty question**

This point emphasizes that although law is important for *institutionalizing* disarmament, together with its verification and enforcement regimes, **disarmament is primarily a security and trust question.** This overall humanitarian and ethical framework, as outlined in the UN Charter, **contends** with the need for national and collective security. **For the UN Charter**, international cooperation relies on those “effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace…” The Charter also respects “domestic jurisdiction” of states except where enforcement measures under Chapter VII are authorized by the Security Council. This *balance* is not an end in itself; to succeed, it needs to be part of a process towards both disarmament and shared security. Similarly, arms control is not only agreeing to treaties -- but also restrictions, safer methods, and risk reduction. Abolition is something far more demanding and therefore often harder to do.

**But Was the Ottawa Treaty to ban antipersonnel landmines hard to do?**

To answer this question, we should distinguish strategic from peripheral weapons. Weapons that are either seen to have limited utility for strategic deterrence or in warfighting -- such as antipersonnel landmines, cluster munitions, or chemical and biological weapons -- have been removed from arsenals relatively quickly in many countries. That’s not arguing that their elimination is irrelevant. Their non-use has huge humanitarian benefits, and a measurable impact on casualty numbers, particularly those of civilians.

But it must be said that the challenges posed by nuclear weapons, cruise missiles, lethal autonomous weapons systems, space-based and unmanned aerial vehicles or drones, are far more complicated to deal with, because of their strategic importance. Let’s not forget too that the consequential 1996 [ICRC Report](https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0654.pdf) “*Anti-personnel Landmines: Friend or Foe?”* that fundamentally undermined the legitimacy of antipersonnel mines, didn’t argue mines had no military utility. Quite the contrary. But rather this: “The **limited** military utility of AP mines is **far outweighed** by the appalling humanitarian consequences of their use in actual conflicts.” As well, treaty regimes including the Ottawa Landmine Treaty, still face outliers (and poor countries) that are unwilling to give up their stockpiles.

Nuclear weapons (and missiles for their delivery) have been reduced in number. Treaties have been created, such as the NPT and TPNW, but no comprehensive elimination by key possessors has proceeded. The current rhetoric is, alas, in the opposite direction: modernization and increased inventory. China wants to triple its missile count from 500 to 1500, just to name one case. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is supported by 137 states (about half of whom are state parties), **but none that are key**. The Model Nuclear Weapons Convention is backburnered, although some nuclear weapon and nuclear umbrella states (China, India, Pakistan and North Korea, to name four) have tentatively supported it in the past.

And yet common security practice can still lead to disarmament successes; and unilateral efforts at disarmament can do the same. We don’t know if there exists a **definitive future common security in which complete and general disarmament** will reign, but that remains the admirable goal we aim for. The way the UN General Assembly defined General and Complete Disarmament at its First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 was as the **elimination** of all weapons of mass destruction, coupled with the “**balanced** **reduction** of armed forces and conventional armaments, based on the principle of **undiminished security** of the parties [and] with a view to promoting or enhancing **stability** **at a lower military level…”** But also, there was an imperative: “to halt and reverse the nuclear arms race until the total elimination of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems has been achieved” and a call for related “negotiations on the limitation of international transfer of conventional weapons…”

**In NATO terms**, arms control is about “**stability** at the **lowest balanced level** of forces and armaments consistent with …**the strategy of** **deterrence**.” The three key words there were: stability, balanced and deterrence! But there is no mention of *non-provocation.*

In contrast the 1982 Common Security (Palme) Report described the obstacle and its negation this way: “In the long run, no nation can base its security on the insecurity of others.  True security requires a cooperative effort, a partnership in the struggle against war.”

This disarmament-common security relationship is certainly a challenge, and one that takes leadership, and persistent political nerve. Perhaps, there’s a dearth of both, presently. Civil society has a recognized role in the transition, therefore. It is not for naught that the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 was awarded to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and its leader Jody Williams, but (probably unfairly) skipped over Lloyd Axworthy. Same as in 2017 to ICAN, the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons for achieving the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (and not also to Austrian diplomat Alexander Kmentt).

These, we can surmise, were significant acknowledgements of ***civil society*** participation and collaboration, even if formalizing the treaties obviously required governments, officials and politicians. To realize our goal(s) we must rely primarily on fact-based information, not just passion, and collate a comprehensive understanding of security, while also keeping our eyes on the prize of a more peaceful world. Most critical, we need to do a better job of twinning the objectives of disarmament and common security, if we hope to be successful in fulfilling either.

1. The most significant difference from classical realism, which places emphasis on human and domestic factors, is that neorealism emphasizes how the structure of the international system determines state behavior.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 1987, global military spending was US$1.73Trillion (in 2022$); by 1998 it had dipped to $1.14Trillion; at the end of 2023 it was back up to a record $2.44Trillion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)