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Michael von der Schulenburg – dona nobis pacem: What kind of world do we want to live in?

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It is time for those of us in NATO nations to admit that we are not the solution, we are the problem.

Michael von der Schulenburg, former UN Assistant Secretary-General worked for over 34 years for the United Nations, and shortly for the OSCE, in many countries in war or internal armed conflicts often involving fragile governments and armed non-state actors

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This article is based on a speech given at the “Never again war – lay down your arms” rally in front of the Brandenburg Gate on November 25, 2023

Today, we live in a world that is increasingly caught in the stranglehold of armed conflicts and wars. How will we get out of this quagmire and what kind of world do we want to live in?

According to the United Nations, 2022 was the year with the greatest number of the most intense and longest-lasting armed conflicts and wars in the world since the end of the Cold War – according to some sources, even since the end of the Second World War. This year the situation will be even worse and there are no signs that this may calm down any time soon. On the contrary. As the conflict of the USA with China over its claim for global supremacy continues to heat up, we could be facing even more dangerous times. Without a decisive political turnaround in global affairs, it is to be feared that the use of force and wars worldwide could once again threaten the very survival of humankind.

The use of force will not bring peace

The misconception that conflicts can only be resolved through the use of force, that we first have to win militarily or even deal a devastating blow to the other side in order to achieve a peace, has once again prevailed. The art of diplomacy

seems to have been discredited as a weakness and diplomatic efforts often go no further than aiming at ceasefires or even only a pause in the fighting. In none of the armed conflicts today are there any serious diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflicts underlying these wars.

Most conflicts have been smouldering for years, even decades before they ultimately explode into wars. Once war has broken out, both sides, often fuelled and supported by foreign states, seem to sink into an uncompromisingly deadly conflict. The foreign ministers of the states involved in or supporting one side in such conflicts now seem to have become advocates for military victories, backing the supply of arms and the continuation of wars rather than acting as diplomats in seeking negotiated solutions. The veto power granted to Permanent Members in the UN Security Council is rarely understood as a special responsibility to maintain peace, but to advance great power interests, even if this means drowning a world in violence.

What is deeply immoral is justified with seemingly moral arguments. This includes violence against civilians, mothers and children, bystanders and young people at music events, as well as the destruction of entire residential areas, hospitals and schools. We call this the right to self-defence. However, the problem with such an argument is that the other side will also invoke the right to self-defence. This creates a spiral of violence in which violence justifies violence. The obligation to break such a spiral of violence through efforts for peaceful solutions, to which we have committed ourselves in the UN Charter, is no longer to be heard of today.

What makes today's military conflicts particularly dangerous is the frightfully negligent use of nuclear weapons. In the Ukraine war, nuclear weapons play a strategic role for the first time in human history in a hot war. In the Israel-Palestine war, too, the use of nuclear weapons has already been threatened. It is to be hoped that it will remain "only" threats. However, we must not forget that the nuclear weapon is the weapon of ultimate, perhaps even final destruction, which will not distinguish between attacker and defender or between warring parties and bystanders. These threats are an expression of the madness of wanting to win at all costs and believing that peace can only be achieved by escalating violence.

Do we want to – indeed, can we – live in a world in which violence has become the overriding principle of conflict resolution?

An increase in arms will not bring security

Once again, we seek security in more and greatly advanced arms. Military budgets in the world have hence doubled since the end of the Cold War and are still growing.

The exponential development of weapons technology has meant that weapons systems today surpass everything we know from the Cold War era in terms of speed and of destructive power. This development includes the modernization of nuclear weapons, laser technologies, hypersonic missile systems, stealth technologies, unmanned cruise missiles and attack drones, robot wars, cyber wars, space wars and the use of artificial intelligence.

At the same time, all arms control agreements and confidence-building measures established during or immediately after the Cold War have either been terminated, were not renewed or have been suspended. These agreements provided a safety net to limit weapons systems and build confidence. The aim was to prevent the NATO and Warsaw Pact states, which were heavily armed with nuclear weapons, from inadvertently sliding into an all-out war.

Today, this loss of confidence-building measures is particularly dangerous, as modern weapons technology reduces considerably the reaction times to a possible attack. This creates uncertainty and mistrust among adversaries, thus risking accidental military responses that could easily develop into an all-out world war. These weapons systems will therefore not make us safer, but on the contrary has led to a world wandering at the precipice of its self-destruction. Due to the complexity and speed of modern weapons systems, they will increasingly be controlled by artificial intelligence. With this, humans will lose control over the decision between war and peace.

A world in which we hide behind ever more powerful weapons and increasingly cede decisions over wars to artificial intelligence cannot be the world we want to live in.

Peace must begin at home

Such a development would not have been possible if violence had not penetrated our minds and many of our media and think tanks had not become the drummers of wars. Our news today is characterized by demonisation, enemy images, black-and-white views, a belief in military victory, manipulated, and even false information.

We, in the West, like to point the finger at others. In our self-perception, only the others are to blame. They are the bad dictators, and we are the good

democrats who are once again forced to defend the true values of humanity, even if this means war. However, the reality is quite a different one:

With NATO, Western democracies have created for themselves a formidable instrument of military power in the world. Although NATO members account for barely more than 10% of the world's population, they control almost 60% of all global military spending. Its leading member, the USA, operates about 750 military bases worldwide. NATO countries are also globally the largest arms dealers; they are responsible for around 70% of the world's arms trade – weapons that make many of the wars only possible.

There is no other confederation of states in the world that even comes close to having a military alliance comparable to NATO. Such a concentration of military power in the hands of a few Northern states must lead to a conflict with the many countries of the “Global South” that represent the remaining 90% of the world's population – countries that find themselves often at the receiving end of Western military interventions.

According to a report that the US Congressional Research Service published last year, the US has militarily intervened with the cooperation of other NATO member states 251 times in other countries, virtually all of them countries in the “Global South”. This figure does not even include CIA operations or proxy wars. These military interventions are often justified by wanting to bring democracy to other countries. But to my knowledge, not even one of those interventions has been able to establish a democracy, leaving only destruction, chaos, impoverishment and immeasurable human suffering in their wake. There is no other state or confederation of states that is even remotely responsible for so many military interventions in other countries.

The renowned Brown University published this year a report about the cost of the war on terror and concluded that since 2002, this war has cost the lives of over 4.5 million people through its direct and indirect effects and has made 38 million people refugees. This means that this war must have cost the lives of at least 4.0 million civilians. Those killed were virtually all people from the “Global South”.

There is no other state or confederation of states that bears direct or indirect responsibility for so many civilian victims. If we want peace, we in the West must first abandon our absurd moral arrogance and sense of superiority.

Learning to live in peace

If we want to live in peace, we must free ourselves from the logic of violence and the stranglehold of wars and armed conflicts that we have fallen into. This

may even be a matter of survival, because our current weapons systems have reached a level of destruction that is too powerful for our small earth. They can no longer be used without running the risk of destroying all life on Earth. In particular, a war between major powers would amount to the collective suicide of humanity. And, as the war in Ukraine has just taught us, every local war has the potential to develop into a confrontation between great powers. There will always be conflicts, but we must do everything we can to resolve them diplomatically before they develop into wars.

Soon, we will be 10 billion people living on our planet, a planet that is not much more than a tiny grain of sand in the vast universe. Each of these people will be born with the same basic rights, dignity and inviolability of their own personality and the right to economic and social progress (UN Charter). However, this will also lead to conflicts – caused by the effects of climate change, persistent poverty, and the struggle for limited resources, for social justice, for water, for land and often only for the most basic necessities of life. But all such conflicts can be resolved if we manage to understand each other and work together despite all political, ideological, cultural, or religious differences. All we need for this is our understanding, compassion, and empathy – in other words, essential human qualities. Weapons would not help us here.

We need to stop demonizing others. We must stop believing that man is the enemy of man or worse, that great powers inevitably will end up in a rivalry that could lead to wars. We must learn to understand each other, to talk to each other, to listen to each other, to reach out to each other. This does not mean that we must have the same opinions or even the same interests. It just means paying respect to these differences and acting accordingly. We would then recognize a world in all its human diversity.

We would not need special funds to finance wars and we could use the enormous intellectual power that is now being used to develop ever more destructive weapons systems to build a more peaceful and just world. As these lines are being written, the COP28 climate conference that is taking place in Dubai reminds us of the enormous challenges for humankind for which we must use our energies and resources – wars will not help.

Perhaps nobody expressed before the UN Security Council as compassionately and convincingly the need to change our attitudes if we want to preserve peace as Ray McGovern (February 22, 2023) – formerly one of the highest-ranking officers at the CIA, an organization that is known for its bent to use of force to pursue its aims

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZyi4Bjnlg>).

If we want to build a world in which we, our children and grandchildren can live in peace, we must return to the ideals of the United Nations and its UN-Charter, both in words and spirit. The UN-Charter is today as relevant as when it was written 78 years ago. It addresses not only member states, but each and every one of us in its Preamble:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, ...