

On the relative cost of mediation and military intervention

Dietrich Fischer

In June 1999, I participated in a seminar on “violent conflict in the 21st century.” One of the speakers was an American officer who had just returned from the War over Kosovo. Someone asked, “could anything have been done to prevent the war over Kosovo?” He replied: “This is perhaps the most predicted war of this decade. Ever since Milosevic abrogated Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989, many people kept predicting that sooner or later this would lead to war. But we cannot respond to every warning. Every year, there are dozens of warnings of possible wars, and 90 percent of them never happen. We need to concentrate our attention to where we are really needed.” If it would cost about the same to prevent a war before it begins as to end it once it has erupted, that argument would make some sense. But war and war-prevention do not cost the same.

The negligible cost of war-prevention

During the 1980s, the main fear of a Balkan war focused on Romania, where 1.6 million ethnic Hungarians and over thirty other minorities lived in a population of 23 million ethnic Rumanians. Romania and Hungary were enemies in both World Wars, and both committed widespread atrocities and seized territory from each other. Mutual fear and distrust still ran deep. But Allen Kassoff and two colleagues from the Project on Ethnic Relations in Princeton were able to get together four senior Rumanian government officials and four minority representatives for talks. In two meetings of three days each in Switzerland and Romania, they helped them reach an agreement that gave the Hungarian minority the right to use their own language again in schools and local newspapers, in return for a promise not to seek secession. This effort may well have prevented another civil war like that in the former Yugoslavia.

By contrast, international peacekeeping operations to end a war once it has begun typically take not days or weeks, but years. United Nations troops have been stationed in Cyprus already for more than 30 years and are still needed. And it does not take only a few individuals, but tens of thousands of troops. 20,000 U.N. troops were not able to stop the fighting and massacres in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It took 60,000 NATO troops to impose a cease-fire, and even those troops have not been able to bring about reconciliation. That means it takes about 10,000 times as many people for time periods that last over 100 times as long than what it takes for mediation. The costs for a peacekeeping operation are therefore about one million

times as large as those for an effort at mediation. Instead of a few thousand dollars for a meeting place and some airplane tickets, a peacekeeping operation costs billions of dollars. Even worse, the 1991 Gulf War to expel Iraq from Kuwait cost US\$100 billion, not counting the destruction it caused. Most importantly, preventing a war before it happens can save many lives. From mediation to peacekeeping to war involves, at each step, at least an order of magnitude or more in increased cost.

Many other individuals and NGOs play a valuable role in helping mediate agreements between conflicting parties, but they now rarely receive any publicity. The media tend to report about cases where mediation fails and fighting breaks out, but they almost never report about cases where fighting has been avoided, and how this was achieved. The adage that “no news is good news” has been turned around into “good news is no news.” Better coverage of success stories could encourage others to help prevent war.

Here is another example that shows how inexpensive it can be to help prevent a war through skillful mediation, compared with ending a war once it has begun. In 1995, Johan Galtung from Norway, who is widely regarded as the founder of the academic

discipline of peace research, had an opportunity to meet with the then-newly elected President of Ecuador, Jamil Mahuad, before he took office. Since 1941, Ecuador and Peru had fought three border wars over a small, uninhabited strip of 500 square kilometers high in the Andes mountains, and they were about to engage in another round of war. The problem was that the peace treaty of Rio de Janeiro of 1941 specified that the border between them should be drawn along the watershed. But depending on weather conditions, the watershed is slightly shifting from year to year, and each country insisted that the true watershed in the treaty is the one closer to the other country. Galtung listened patiently to what President Mahuad had to say about Peru’s inflexibility, but he also listened carefully to what he did not say. He never mentioned that every square meter of territory must belong to one and only one country, as it was agreed to in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Mahuad assumed that this was self-evident and did not need to be said. So Galtung asked him if he had ever thought of making the disputed territory into a bi-national zone, jointly administered by both countries, with a natural park to attract tourism and bring revenue to both countries. The President said this was a very creative idea, but it was too creative: it would take at least 30 years to get used to such a novel concept, and then another 30 years to implement it. Still, he did propose it to Peru at the next round of peace negotiations, and to his surprise, Peru

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accepted it, with some minor modifications. This led to the peace treaty signed in Brasilia on 27 October 1998.

Galtung pointed out that this initiative cost only US\$250 for an extra stopover in Ecuador's capital city Quito, a night in a hotel, and a very lavish meal for the incoming president and his wife. This is negligible compared to the costs of a military intervention.

During the 1992 presidential elections in Yugoslavia, there was a peace candidate, Milan Panic, who ran against Slobodan Milosevic. But the state radio, television, and the press were controlled entirely by Milosevic and his cronies, and they decried Panic daily as a traitor and an American stooge, while Panic had no opportunity to defend himself. He asked the George H.W. Bush administration for half a million dollars to rent an independent radio station so that he could address the voters directly. That request was denied, and Milosevic won. In 1999, the United States launched hundreds of cruise missiles against Yugoslavia, each of which cost one million dollars. It just may be that half a million spent in 1992 to give Panic a chance could have avoided the war over Kosovo. At least it would have been worth trying.

Modest initiatives taken early can sometimes help avoid much greater costs later. Another example which shows this clearly is that Alexander Yakovlev, who became Gorbachev's key adviser on perestroika, glasnost, and democratization, was one of the first thirty Soviet students who came to study for a year in the United States with a Fulbright scholarship at Columbia University in New York in 1956-57. The few thousand dollars for that scholarship probably did a great deal more to help end the Cold War than the billions spent on weapons.

The need for a United Nations Institute for Mediation

The Secretary General of the United Nations has sometimes been able to help mediate disputes before they lead to war, but he (or she in the future) is only one person and is burdened with many other responsibilities. There are about 100 conflicts around the world between different countries or nationalities that could potentially erupt in violence. One person alone cannot possibly deal with all of them. The International Peace Academy, an organization affiliated with the U.N., now has the task of seeking to mediate conflicts before they erupt into war. But it has only 16 staff members, and only 3 of them professionals who can conduct mediation. This is not nearly enough. Many more people should be trained in conflict resolution and enabled to perform such tasks. It involves listening patiently to all parties' grievances, engaging them in constructive dialogues, and helping them find solutions that transcend the contradictions underlying the conflict and meet the basic needs of all parties.

In contrast, international organizations dealing with economic needs typically

have thousands of employees. The World Bank has about 11,000 professionals, and other agencies have comparable numbers. A total of three professionals at the International Peace Academy is totally inadequate. A United Nations Institute for Mediation (UNIMED) with about 2-3,000 professionals is urgently needed and would be an excellent investment. It could probably make a large portion of the millions of soldiers ready to fight wars available for peaceful tasks.

It is ironic that in many places owners of motor vehicles must bring them for inspection once a year to make sure that they meet safety standards, for otherwise they could cause a possibly fatal accident. But no regulatory body does any routine, standard survey of relations among nationalities to see if they are reasonably peaceful or in danger of exploding in violence, which would result in far more deaths than a traffic accident. People with experience in early warning signs of violent conflict, and knowledgeable in methods of peaceful conflict transformation, should regularly hold dialogues with various potential conflict parties and, where indicated, help them find peaceful solutions to a conflict along the lines the two examples above have indicated.¹ This costs far less than a military intervention after violence has erupted.

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A United Nations Security Insurance Agency

Greater efforts at mediation to prevent violent conflicts do not imply that peacekeeping should be abandoned. But it does mean that more resources should be put into war prevention. By analogy, building fireproof structures can save a great deal of firefighting and save lives, but this should not mean that we abandon firefighting. If mediation fails, an international peacekeeping force can play an important role in helping end the fighting.

Among others, Hazel Henderson and Alan F. Kay have proposed a way to reduce considerably world military spending, namely by creating a United Nations Security Insurance Agency (UNSI).² In return for payment of an annual insurance fee, UNSIA would offer member countries protection against aggression. The fee would be considerably less than the costs of maintaining armed forces for the countries' own defense. The countries most interested in such an offer would probably initially be small countries, which are hardly able to maintain military forces that can match potential adversaries. Because membership would be entirely voluntary, UNSIA would have a considerable advantage over the current situation where the U.N. Secretary General has to appeal to reluctant member nations to

contribute troops for peacekeeping operations. No country would be required to pay this insurance premium, but those who did would gain the benefit that anyone who threatened them would face a standing international peacekeeping force that would automatically be committed to the country's defense, and would be ready at a moment's notice. Such a swift and certain response should strongly dissuade would-be aggressors, and it might therefore be rare that it would actually have to be deployed. It should prove more effective than the current U.N. Security Council, where each of the five permanent members has a veto that can prevent a response to aggression. Even if the Security Council approves a peace enforcement operation, it is often long delayed until enough countries have pledged troops and funding to support it. In the meantime, people keep dying.

Countries that take extra precautions to avoid war, such as having procedures in place to resolve disputes through mediation or arbitration, could get insurance at a reduced rate, in the same way as homes that maintain a working fire extinguisher and are built with fireproof materials can obtain lower fire insurance rates.

As this agency develops a track record of success, more and more countries might wish to take advantage of that opportunity and entrust their security to an international peacekeeping force, at considerable savings. This idea exploits the concept of scale economies: it would be equally wasteful if all the home owners in a small town maintained individual fire engines, instead of combining their resources to fund one fire company that can be deployed wherever and whenever it is needed.

In addition to helping protect countries against aggression and maintaining cease-fires in civil wars, a standing U.N. Peacekeeping Force could also be deployed on short notice to help protect lives in case of natural or industrial disasters. It would have transport planes, helicopters, medical equipment, food, and emergency shelter available in adequate quantities. It could include specialists to direct relief operations in case of earthquakes, floods, accidents at nuclear power plants, poisonous chemical leaks, or other emergencies anywhere on earth. The United Nations Disaster Relief Organization now does not have its own standing force to respond to calls for help and depends largely on appeals to member governments and voluntary organizations to supply personnel and resources for disaster relief. That can introduce delays that can cost many lives. A U.N. Peacekeeping Force could also assist the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in providing temporary food and shelter to refugees from wars, political violence, ecological disasters, or famines. Some of the poorer countries can hardly afford to provide adequate help to refugees or victims of disasters.

A reduction in military expenditure, which would be made possible through preventive diplomacy and a U.N. Peacekeeping Force, could help reduce global military spending considerably. Although now dated, Leontief and Duchin's 1983

work is still valid: in it they showed that every region of the world could enjoy a higher rate of economic growth with lower military expenditure because more resources would be available for consumption and for investment in the civilian economy. Even a small fraction of world military spending could make an enormous difference for human welfare. In 1990, UNICEF estimated that it would take only an average of US\$1.50 to inoculate a child against the six major infectious diseases from which nearly 3 million children under age 5 die each year.³ The average number of children born in the whole world per year between 1990 and 1995 has been estimated to be 137,484,000.⁴ To inoculate every child would thus cost about US\$206 million per year, or less than 10 percent of the US\$2.1 billion cost of a single U.S. stealth bomber. If military expenditure is advocated with the argument that it can save lives, there are far more effective ways to save millions of lives at comparatively low costs.

An International Security Commission

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev noted that most heads of state are busy to respond every day to the latest crisis and do not find the time to reflect about long-term problems and their solutions.⁵ He therefore called for the creation of a commission of about 100 former heads of state, scientists, writers, and thinkers from around the world who could deliberate in depth about various dangers facing humanity and ways to avoid them. To support such a commission would cost a tiny fraction of the approximately US\$1 trillion spent annually for arms and for the millions of troops kept ready to fight wars, but it could do a great deal more to help avoid future catastrophes.

Systematic research into potential dangers facing humanity is urgently needed. Carl Sagan has pointed out that all the major threats to the survival of humanity – the greenhouse effect, the destruction of the ozone layer, and nuclear winter – have not been discovered by the military, which supposedly has the role of protecting us from dangers, but by scientists – and often by pure coincidence.⁶ For example, the potential danger from nuclear winter was discovered when one of the first space probes, Pioneer 10, circled Mars and observed a dust storm that blocked sunlight from reaching the surface of Mars and slightly cooled it. Sagan and his colleagues built an atmospheric model that could explain the cooling. By applying a similar model adjusted for conditions on earth to the consequences of a nuclear exchange, which would hurl large quantities dust and smoke into the upper atmosphere, they found that many of those not killed immediately by blast, heat, and radiation sickness, would die from a prolonged cold darkness, “nuclear winter,” which would freeze the earth surface and prevent crops from growing. Sagan wondered how many other potential dangers threatening the survival of humanity may still be unknown and called for a systematic investigation into such

dangers and ways to prevent them.

A number of voluntary organizations (e.g., TRANSCEND, a peace and development network; International Alert; Verification Technology Information Centre in London) have created international networks to detect early signs of conflict and warn the international community. They also seek to mediate disputes before they escalate. But voluntary efforts alone are not sufficient. Economic theory has long established that certain public goods are not provided in sufficient quantity unless they are publicly funded, out of taxes. Human security is definitely such a public good.

Gorbachev also proposed the creation of a “Comprehensive System of International Peace and Security.” The system would seek to redress threats not only from war, but also from hunger, poverty, pollution, and human rights violations. This important idea still has not received the attention it deserves.⁷ Governments tend to be so preoccupied with the latest emergency that they usually wait until a problem has reached crisis proportions before paying attention to it, according to the motto, “we will cross that bridge when we get to it.” Yet it would be far more effective to prevent wars through skillful mediation, instead of waiting until conflicts erupt in war and then sending troops. Waiting until problems are upon us before reacting to them, instead of seeking to anticipate and prevent them, is as if we were to drive a car with closed eyes, waiting until we hit an obstacle and then relying on an ambulance, instead of looking ahead and avoiding dangers.

A concluding remark

In the course of history, we have abolished a number of institutions that we now consider inhuman: cannibalism, ritual sacrifice, slavery, absolute monarchy, and most recently colonialism. It is likely that some day war will follow and will be considered as equally abhorrent as we consider cannibalism today.

Notes

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1. See, e.g., Galtung (2000, 2005).

2. Henderson and Kay (1995). Also see Brauer and Chatterji (1993).

3. UNICEF (1990).

4. United Nations (1994).

5. Gorbachev (1987).

6. Sagan (1983).

7. Elements of such a system are sketched in Fischer (1993).

For further reading

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