
Toward a Safer and More Humane World

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At this moment in history, our world appears beset with a paradox. Despite astounding creativity, strides in science and technology, and new ways of understanding our world and the human condition, we are unable to translate accomplishments into a new vision for society. On the one hand, we see truly impressive progress. On the other, we are confronted with utterly unconscionable failure to address some of the most pressing issues of our time. In spite of the apparent complexity of the task, there are measures that can be taken to begin addressing these absurd contradictions.

Repression and gross violations of human rights remain the hallmark of one third of the world's nations. Senseless, dehumanizing, and destructive conflicts dominate the human timeline. Almost half of our fellow human beings continue to survive on less than two dollars per day, around 900,000 people go to bed hungry every night, and millions die due to lack of access to medical care. These conditions lead to a deep sense of injustice, anger, and loss of hope. Furthermore, they create the most fertile ground for conflicts, extremism, and violence.

The global response remains shamefully erratic and subjective, predominantly driven by geopolitical interests, rather than by who is dying where. Despite colossal death tolls in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Darfur, and, more recently, Syria, the international community has done little more than wring its hands. These places are either deemed to be of low strategic value or are ignored because of

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conflicting interests that paralyze the United Nations Security Council. Forgotten amidst these conflicts are the millions of lives lost and ruined, which are simply labeled “collateral damage.”

The political detachment from this suffering is evident: the UN recently had great difficulty raising the equivalent of half of one percent of global military spending to support 52 million people in seventeen countries facing humanitarian crises. The overall official development assistance in 2013 was around USD 134 billion, less than 10 percent of the USD 1.7 trillion spent on armaments.

What do we make of all this? Are we condemned to repeat this cycle of violence, misery, and extreme inequality forever? I continue to believe that peace and equity are not chimeras. As individuals and nations, we must change our mindset and image of who we are within the global schema—we must change how we interact with partners around the world.

First, we must understand how connected we have become in all aspects of our lives; the city is now the planet. This connectivity is not limited to opportunities, but also to risks. When we consider the global challenges we face—terrorism, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, communicable diseases, cyber security, human trafficking, and illegal drugs—it is obvious that they are all threats without borders. Traditional notions of sovereignty and national security are constantly being challenged.

By their nature, these threats require multinational cooperation. No single country can overcome these threats on its own. This change in landscape should lead to a change in mindset. The core values we share—the sanctity of human life, respect for human dignity, and equity—must be respected everywhere; our compassion and solidarity must transcend borders, race,

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religion, and ethnicity. We have learned that no one is free unless everyone is free, and no one is secure until everyone is secure. We need to grasp the fact that, despite our different perspectives and priorities, we are becoming one human family gradually sharing the same set of core values. It is one “cake,” albeit with different icings.

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 Second, we must recognize the intimate connections between extreme inequality and insecurity that disfigure our world and that can, if neglected, have significant and violent implications. Inequity ultimately leads to insecurity, which cannot be resolved by

military power. Smart bombs cannot feed the hungry or overcome extremist ideologies. Tanks and missiles cannot fight disease or solve protracted conflicts. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a glaring example.

Third, we must not lose sight of the horrific danger we face by the continuing existence of nuclear weapons that, if not checked, could lead to the self-destruction of humanity. It is evident that because the technology is “out of the box” and some countries choose to rely on it, others will eventually seek to acquire them. Security cannot be based on a doctrine that “some are more equal than others.” It is imperative that no new countries acquire these weapons, or even worse that an extremist group should ever get ahold of them. To that end, it is absolutely vital that states with nuclear weapons move seriously toward nuclear disarmament. It borders on insanity that, a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, we still have more than 16,000 nuclear weapons in existence, 2,000 of them on alert status.

Fourth, we must reshape the current world order. International institutions are becoming increasingly dysfunctional and are sorely in need of reform. UN organizations continue to suffer from structural deficiencies, a lack of authority, and a dearth of resources. One result is a paralyzed system of collective security. The UN Security Council’s failure to take preventive measures or to provide adequate responses to humanitarian crises over the years has led to conflicts continuing

to fester, violence continuing to rage, and misery continuing to spread. Other international organizations in practically all fields of human activity, including development activities, are becoming highly polarized and increasingly paralyzed. We are steadily facing a crisis of governance—from governments that pursue short-term, parochial politics that fail to address

long-term global challenges and the need for cooperative policies, to international institutions bereft of the tools required to adequately address these challenges.

Finally, we need to shift the emphasis of the interactions between the North and South and the East and West from rivalry and competition to cooperation and complementarity. Constructing economic models that focus on achieving peace through prosperity, advancing science and technology for development, and supporting cultural values and institutions

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that respect dignity and promote democracy are all vital to achieve this shift. If we invest half as much creativity and resources into human dignity as we spend on weapons of war, our world will become more tolerant and secure.

The challenges we face are bigger than any single country, conflict, or issue. We can regain our morality and rationality by remembering a few simple facts. We are one human family, irrespective of our seeming differences. Every member of that family shares the same hopes and aspirations. And human solidarity, justice, and respect, rather than geopolitics, polarization, and violence, are the only sustainable ways to settle our differences. The American pragmatist William James said, “we are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep.” In order to bridge the paradoxes of our time, we must grasp that simple reality.*f*