

“Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Globalization Era”

By

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Introduction

Distinguished Rotarians,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is always a great pleasure to attend a Rotary function, though the ones I have attended in the past tended to be somewhat smaller. I would like to thank Rotary International, not only for inviting me to speak, but also for promoting friendship and understanding from the local level up to the international level. In particular, I would like to congratulate President Bhichai Rattakul for inspiring us to sow the seeds of love in a time when it seems love is needed more than ever.

President Bhichai, as most of you know, is a very kind man. It is therefore quite in character for him to presume I am knowledgeable enough to speak on peace and conflict resolution. As you will recall, during the Cold War some of the best minds were put to work on the subject. Yet they failed utterly in predicting how and when the Cold War would be resolved. When even the experts get it wrong, then it's doubly daunting for a non-expert. But I find it strangely comforting, because even if what I say falls far wide of the mark, I will still be in good company.

The challenges to peace today are infinitely more complex than those that shaped the world until just over a decade ago.

The Cold War era was defined by two superpowers with a single super-agenda that overshadowed – indeed overwhelmed – everything else. The globalization era, on the other hand, has seen an explosion in the number of actors – corporations, non-governmental organizations, pension funds, even individuals – that can affect peace and stability.

Whereas the Cold War had a constraining effect on such actors, globalization has had a liberating, empowering effect. Ever cheaper technology has allowed a growing number of actors to pursue a growing number of competing agendas, including taking on opponents with vastly superior resources. Cause and effect are becoming ever less linear, as developments in one area impinge on seemingly unrelated areas.

Does this growing complexity decrease or increase the risk of conflict? The answer seems to be mixed. On the one hand, we no longer live under the threat of global annihilation. Complex interdependence has made us more sensitive to the needs of others, because often our happiness depends on theirs. On the other hand, localized conflicts seem to have become more numerous, as long-buried or suppressed agendas re-emerge and clash with one another. Tensions between states, of course, remain an ever present source of conflict. But what is most interesting about the post-Cold War order are the new forces of friction that can disrupt peace and harmony within states as well as between them.

New Sources of Conflict

One potential source of conflict is the dilemma between growth versus sustainability. The triumph of capitalism unleashed in developing countries what Keynes called the market's "animal spirits." Such energy is of course central to the proper functioning of a free market economy.

Many emerging economies, however, lack the institutional structure and mechanisms to curb the excesses of a laissez-faire system. As a result, there is little to prevent local natural resources from being exploited to the brink of depletion in response to demand in the global market.

Differences over the exploitation of rainforests pit loggers and developers against native tribes and conservationists. With growing populations, competition over water resources is also a possible source of tension and conflict in the next few decades.

Although such conflict may have an international dimension, the potential for large-scale violence is limited, at least for the time being.

More problematic from the perspective of potential violence is a growing tendency towards ethnic, religious, racial, communal and other sectarian strife.

Such conflict is not an entirely new phenomenon. Artificially-imposed territorial boundaries and heightened feelings of ethnic and religious apartness can pave the way for fragmentation and sectarian violence. In Northern Ireland, in Myanmar (or Burma), in Sri Lanka, ethnic and religious minorities have long fought to break free of majority rule.

The removal of the overarching constraints of the Cold War and sudden economic collapse can also open a Pandora's box of long festering animosities, leading to mass violence, sometimes on a genocidal scale. We have seen horrific eruptions of sectarian violence that caught us by surprise – in the Balkans, in Rwanda, even in Indonesia in the wake of the Asian economic crisis.

Globalization means that conflict and instability in one country can have repercussions far beyond its borders. The international community therefore has a stake in preventing such outbreaks of sectarian violence.

But in most such cases, by the time violence breaks out, any role the international community plays can only be reactive, a Band-Aid solution for decades, or perhaps centuries, of hatred and animosity.

To address such cases, there is talk of “humanitarian intervention,” of the international community's responsibility to protect human rights wherever it is grossly and systematically violated. Such ideas are well-intentioned, but even if they were to gain wide support, it would not absolve us of failure to address the root causes in time.

As in so many things, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The capacity and willingness of states to prevent tensions from spiraling out of control is of the greatest importance. An ancient Hindu tale tells of how a single stray drop of honey sparked a chain of events that culminated in war between two kingdoms. As tensions

are part and parcel of human relations, the trick is in preventing tensions from reaching the tipping point where they would escalate into violent conflict.

Normally it is the state that performs this function. Yet in the post-Cold War world, some states lack that capacity, whether through circumstance, neglect or willfulness.

A key challenge for the international community will be capacity building for states. There will be those states that are newly emerged and in need of institutions to be built from the ground up, such as East Timor. Then there are those that already have institutions in place but which require adjustment as they make the transition towards liberal democracy (such as Eastern Europe and possibly post-war Iraq). And there will be those on the brink of failure where institutions exist but have broken down and no longer perform any meaningful function.

To perform this preventive function, the international community will have to ensure that its efforts are welcomed by such states, and resolve such sticky questions as financial burden sharing. The upside is that capacity building assistance is far less controversial and costly than emergency intervention.

The Growing Complexity of Conflict

Globalization has introduced not only new sources of conflict. The tools for waging conflict have also rapidly become much more sophisticated and affordable. Relatively weak actors can leverage technology to reduce asymmetries in power.

Some non-state actors may ignore international conventions and use unorthodox means against more powerful opponents. The most dramatic example of this is, of course, Osama bin Laden. But a far more inspiring example is Jody Williams, who used email to fight the antipathy of governments and succeeded in pushing through the global ban on landmines, earning herself a Nobel Peace Prize in the process.

The possibilities opened up by new technologies are not lost on traditional state actors, particularly those that are able to translate their economic might into military might. In a world still between equilibrium points, the vast resources at their command mean they are as capable as any other actor, if not more so, in determining the new rules of

the game. As international laws tend to be a step behind technology, powerful states may use new technologies to test the limits of international conventions.

Already, new classes of biological and chemical weapons are being developed that may contravene international conventions but are hard to detect or have dual use in civilian applications. Hi-tech non-lethal weapons are being developed that can be used in war as well as in more prosaic tasks such as crowd control. The threat of terrorism may ease the acceptance of such “humane” weapons, but the temptation for abuse will be high. Such technologies may help achieve peace with no loss of life, but it may be an Orwellian sort of peace in which are embedded the seeds of further conflict.

Conflict resolution

The proliferation of actors and agendas, the fragmentation of societies, the loosening of rules, the growing availability of sophisticated technology – these are ingredients that would seemingly make fertile ground for conflict. Yet conflict is not inevitable. Depending on one’s attitude, the very same conditions may also afford great opportunities for potential antagonists to attempt cooperation and dialogue, align agendas, resolve differences and find mutual accommodation.

We must never forget that the roots of conflict, and the way to its resolution, lies in human causes. Look more closely at almost any conflict in the world today, and you will see that it is not irrationality or wrong-headedness that lies at the root. Instead, you will find grievances, and it does not matter whether they are real or imagined. Perceptions of social injustice, denial of legitimate rights, mistreatment, and other grievances can breed frustrations that may one day erupt in violence. This is not to excuse the use of violence, but to suggest that it may be constructive and instructive, as the old saying goes, to walk a mile in the other’s shoes.

Technology has made it easier than ever for us to physically destroy our enemy, but in doing so there is a price to pay in terms of our humanity. The very act of trying to kill a cancer can also kill the patient. It would be small comfort to vanquish the enemy, only to find that the values we live by have been thoroughly eroded in the process.

The aftermath of the First World War suggests that it is not enough to resolve conflict by defeating one’s enemy. The conditions must also be created for a durable peace. It is a relatively simple matter to seek and destroy one’s enemy, but a much harder task to dissolve the bitterness that fomented the animosity in the first place. Tackling

symptoms or root causes alone is an incomplete solution. One must seek a balanced approach in addressing the two.

This is of course easier said than done. People are complicated animals, and professional politicians, who often have the greatest say on matters of peace and security, are a different breed altogether. Double standards and hidden agendas are so commonplace that it is not always easy to discern the true motivation of any policy, though one can make educated guesses.

In these times, it is even less likely that things are as they appear. Efforts to find common ground can easily get lost in a game of guess and double guess, cross and double cross. This can breed impatience with finding root causes, which in turn paves the way for unintended consequences later on. The Taliban was at first a creature of the CIA, created to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Saddam Hussein grew strong thanks to support from Washington, which used him as a counterweight against Iran. As circumstances changed, the US found itself in the ironic position of having to track down and destroy the monsters it had unwittingly created.

Some conflicts cannot always be solved through dialogue and accommodation. Where the two sides are so diametrically opposed that they are unable to engage each other for long in dialogue, much less negotiation. The participation of outsiders, either on an invited or volunteer basis, can complicate the problem as outside powers often have their own vested interests and agenda.

Ideally, then, a peace broker should not be a major power but one that is accepted by both sides as a neutral and disinterested party. Also, some international organization such as the United Nations or a regional body could play an effective role in facilitating the resolution of conflict.

But there are limits to what even a neutral and disinterested party could accomplish. Norway, rather than a major power, played a key intermediary role in the Sri Lanka peace plan and the Oslo Accord. Yet on the latter, it has not been entirely successful. The Israel-Palestinian issue has gone far beyond the reach of orthodox means and mechanisms for conflict resolution. In all these years, the problem has somehow resisted all human efforts to find a peaceful answer to the satisfaction of all concerned. Perhaps the “road map” approach with the backing of the permanent members of the UN Security Council and their wherewithal might prove to be the antidote for the two antagonists.

It is apparent that for all the experience, power, wealth, and technology at one's command, none of them can guarantee peace. Indeed, they may instead lead to overconfidence and prompt unnecessary wars. As Barbara Tuchman observed in her book *The March of Folly*, the power to command frequently causes failure to think. The methods of destruction may change, the political spin may be different, but it is still human desires and fears, more than human intellect, that drive conflict.

The only real recipe for lasting peace and effective conflict resolution lies in the human heart. Tolerance and compassion, virtues preached by all the great religions, are still the best prevention and the best cure.

Even if conflict is too far along to be prevented, patience and goodwill need to be cultivated. It may be difficult at first to allay age-old suspicions and build confidence, but it is essential for long-term peace and stability.

Although mindsets and habits are hard to change, they can and do change across generations. Problems that are insoluble now may no longer be so 20-30 years from now. The key is not to pass on the same hatreds and misconceptions to later generations.

The ultimate expression of tolerance and compassion is forgiveness. It may be hard to even consider forgiveness for such monstrous acts as the September 11 attacks. But the alternative is a never-ending cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals that saps the vitality of both parties as well as their future generations. An eye for an eye eventually makes the whole world blind. It is only through forgiveness that one can be set free from the anger and bitterness that plague those who have taken revenge on their enemies, only to find emptiness where they expected satisfaction.

In this respect, there may be a role for non-political national or international bodies to create better understanding of the various paths to peaceful conflict resolution. The proliferation of non-state actors makes this an inevitable trend. Already, think tanks and NGOs have become powerful policy advocates, often proposing creative solutions to trenchant problems. The establishment of the Rotary Centers for International Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution is an important development along this line.

Conclusion

Conflict has been a part of the human condition since the dawn of time. As humanity has evolved, so has conflict, to the point that Einstein remarked, “It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.”

I would suggest that we reclaim our humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, including those whose interests are incompatible with ours.

In conflictual situations, it is a common strategy to dehumanize the enemy so as to overcome the natural human aversion to killing. But by dehumanizing others, one also begins to dehumanize oneself, by turning off the moral compass that is our birthright.

To accept our enemies as fellow human beings, we need to understand the anger and frustration that drive them to what are ultimately acts of desperation. It may be easier to explain away their grievances as irrational, but doing so only denies the legitimacy of their position and leads to deadlock. Of course, there may be no perfect solution, but what we should seek are solutions that both sides can live with, rather than die from.

Mankind’s intellectual development, it seems, has served us so well that we forget that the most enduring ideas on human relations are those rooted in moral principles. Within my lifetime, I have seen men of intelligence and goodwill develop countless approaches and methods designed to maintain or build peace. From what I see, their combined brainpower and good intentions do not seem to have significantly reduced conflict in the world. We have tried the best ideas that recent centuries have to offer. Perhaps it is time for us to try the ideas that have lasted these past few thousand years.

Understanding, empathy, compassion, tolerance. These are the virtues that will see humanity through. These are the virtues embodied in the spirit of Rotary International. Let us continue to sow the seeds of love as urged by President Bhichai and start a chain reaction that fills the world with what it needs most.

Thank you.