

A Stronger Prescription for Security: Dialogue

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Sixty years after its founding, the United Nations remains the central and irreplaceable international organization responsible for maintaining world peace and security. The international order has evolved considerably since the end of World War II and the turbulent era of East-West rivalry. We now need a corresponding evolution of the UN to address the needs and challenges of today's increasingly interdependent world.

To advance a refashioned UN, the aspirations and concerns of its member states and the demands of the global populace—the true peoples of the UN—should be effectively addressed in a comprehensive, unbiased and transparent manner. This way, an overwhelming majority can claim and feel ownership over the process.

The Secretary-General's *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All* report is an important step in this regard, having diagnosed some of the diverse and interconnected threats afflicting the world community. However, by taking at face-value the predominantly publicized interpretations of the threats emanating from one dominant global perspective, the report has lost sight of a fundamental threat—namely, the propensity to resort to coercion and violence by state and non-state actors. It is not clear whether the prescriptions presented by the report are likely to enhance the capacity of the international community to address the very threats that have been identified.

The failure of diagnosis is nowhere more apparent than in the report's ambivalence toward the twin dangers of mutually-reinforcing phobias: growing animosity and conflict between cultures and civilizations; and the propensity to resort to violence by state and non-state actors. Ironically, while these were at the heart of the debate for UN reform after the invasion of Iraq, the report has misdiagnosed this dual threat by ignoring the clash of cultures on one hand and broadening the license to resort to force under Article 51 of the *UN Charter* on the other.

The increasing prospects of a clash of civilizations and cultures, spreading hatred and serving as a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism, have been widely recognized. Yet the report neglects this major and emerging security threat, overlooking the paradigm of "dialogue among civilizations," which has already been agreed upon by the UN General Assembly as the most efficient means to tackle the growing threat of clash.

At the same time, while there is unanimity that Article 51 should not be rewritten or reinterpreted, the report does just that, broadening the scope of self-defense to permit preemption. Such a reinterpretation fails the test of legality and prudence; providing a pseudo-legal excuse for unilateral preemptive action can only exacerbate the atmosphere of tension and crisis that has beleaguered the international community.

The report argues that "lawyers have long recognized that [Article 51] covers an imminent attack as well as one that has already happened." It is evident that from a purely legal perspective, nothing can be further from the letter or the spirit of the *Charter* or the opinion of independent jurists. The judgments of the International Court of Justice in various cases emphasize that measures in self-defense are legitimate only after an armed attack occurs. Article 51, in no way, covers imminent threats, and international law does not confer any legitimacy to the dangerous doctrine of preemption.

If this dangerous license is infused into UN principles, it will lead to greater resort to violence in the international arena by opening the way for major powers as well as regional bullies to wage wars against others under the pretext of self-defense. There already have been too many cases that resort to the justification of imminent threat as an excuse for aggression.

An attempt to broaden this license indicates a failure to recognize the root causes of the current international crisis—that is, as noted above, militarism and the propensity to resort to exclusion, coercion and violence. A more objective assessment of the present-day threats would have led the report to recognize that the lofty objectives of "larger freedom" would be better served through promotion of dialogue.

In the same vein, combating terrorism as a multifaceted global menace requires a global, inclusive and comprehensive approach. Terrorism can and must be destroyed first and foremost by reversing the logic of violence and coercion, and by changing the mentalities and perceptions that "might makes right."

These threats are further exacerbated by the continued existence of stockpiled weapons of mass destruction of the nuclear-weapons states, not to mention new types of nuclear weapons, as well as articulation of new doctrines for their use against non-nuclear threats. The report partially recognizes this threat but fails to prescribe any meaningful remedy. Instead, it suggests new discriminatory restrictions on access to peaceful nuclear technology. This neglects the fact that any greater reward for non-membership or further disruption of the balance between rights and obligations of Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) members under the non-proliferation regime will lead to its disintegration rather than the intended strengthening.

The current international political climate coupled with the deficiencies in *In Larger Freedom* regarding security threats make it imperative to question the feasibility and practicality (let alone legality or rationality) of the dominant interventionist paradigm. Doing so would make the UN truly responsive to the repeatedly articulated demand of the overwhelming majority of people across the globe, who have time and again shown their desire for compassion, dialogue and understanding instead of war, intervention and imposition.