



**Extract from the report:**

Spotlight on  
**Global Multilateralism**

Perspectives on the future  
of international cooperation  
in times of multiple crises

# Towards a New Agenda for Peace and Common Security

BY ANNA SUNDSTRÖM AND BJÖRN LINDH

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When the situation in the world is gloomy, we need initiatives that can provide hope for the future. At a time when the Cold War threatened to turn into a devastating nuclear war, the concept of “Common Security” was established by an international commission led by then Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. The commission concluded that in a nuclear war there are no winners. Both sides must realize that they have a common problem to deal with. The concept of Common Security was the guiding one when disarmament negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union eventually got under way.

In 2022, 40 years after the Palme Commission, the Olof Palme International Center, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and International Peace Bureau (IPB) took the initiative to form a new international commission that analysed how the concept of Common Security today can be a tool for a better world. The text below is based on the report *Common Security 2022*.<sup>1</sup>

## Common Security for a more secure world

The world stands at a crossroads. It is faced with a choice between an existence based on confrontation and aggression or one to be rooted in a transformative peace agenda and common security. In 2023, humanity faces the existential threats of nuclear war, climate change and increased poverty as well as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This is compounded by a toxic mix of inequality, extremism, nationalism, gender-based violence and shrinking democratic space. How humanity responds to these threats will decide our very survival.

2022 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Olof Palme’s Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues. The Commission presented its report in 1982, at the height of the Cold War, based on the

concept of Common Security – the idea that nations and populations can only feel safe when their counterparts feel safe.

The Common Security report comes at a time when the international system faces severe challenges. A devastating war is raging in Europe and unceasing conflicts continue to plague people in far too many places. We are witnessing a global crisis marked by the inability to stop global warming, environmental degradation, and a long list of conflicts where the international community has failed in its response.

Our common systems and structures – needed to provide security, combat poverty and inequality and prevent human suffering – are inadequate, and frequently ignored or violated. The future of humanity depends on us fixing the struggling global order. If we fail to repair our common systems, we will also fail in our fight against the climate crisis and future pandemics.

<sup>1</sup> Olaf Palme International Center (2022). The report also contains a presentation by the High Level Advisory Commission.

There is ongoing militarization in most parts of the world, with rapid increases in military spending accompanied by nuclear threats. But nuclear and military deterrence strategies have categorically failed to achieve peace and stability. It is time for a renewal of the global security system, based on Common Security principles.

### Common security risks today

Today human existence faces both old and new threats and challenges. There are also issues that were apparent 40 years ago but have become more pronounced in recent years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by a threat of nuclear weapons use, which is an alarming echo of Cold War rhetoric. The climate crisis is an enormous existential risk for humankind. Meanwhile, inequality and rising authoritarianism have a corrosive and insidious effect on global society.

**Challenges to multilateralism in a multipolar world:** In 1982, the world was largely divided into two camps, East and West (with the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement in between), but since the end of the Cold War new powers have come onto the world's stage with differentiated interests and alliances. Yet, despite these geopolitical realignments, strategic competition and power struggles between nations continue unabated. Borders have shifted and alliances have waxed and waned; but conflict and violence remain constant.

In the twenty-first century, populations and nations cannot expect to isolate themselves from the rest of the world in order to live securely. It is clear that global issues cannot be solved by individual nations, only by multilateral cooperation among them.

**Global warming and the climate crisis:** In addition to nuclear weapons, the world is facing a new existential threat in the form of the climate crisis. Climate-related risks have far-reaching implications for the health of humanity and the planet. If unaddressed, climate change will cast a major shadow over humanity's survival.

Climate change is already affecting the lives of people around the world. Global temperature rises are fuelling droughts and wildfires. Extreme weather, such as storms and floods, threaten people's lives and livelihoods and expose millions of people to acute food and water insecurity.

There are many other major environmental challenges that are linked to the climate crisis. Biodiversity and habitat loss, and the impoverishment of those who once were able to subsist on the land, are just some of the examples.

When environmental problems – such as lack of water – become too big, then the result is social unrest, conflict and war. There is an alarming overlap between ecological degradation and conflict.

**Inequality:** The Olof Palme Commission met between 1980 and 1982. During the 1980s and after, neoliberal globalization became the dominant economic model. Individualism and profit maximization, coupled with minimal investment in jobs, wages and social security, have left the world with a ticking time bomb of critical inequality.

Forty years later, rising income inequality is widely seen as the main cause of increasingly polarized politics, and the ascendance of populism and nationalism.

All too often, political conflict spirals into violence and war. Social unrest, exclusion and alienation also lead to violence outside of conflict areas, such as urban violence, the rise in power of organized crime and domestic violence. The presence of conflict also leads to an increased likelihood of terrorism.

The discrimination against and marginalization of different groups evident across the globe today are symptoms of an extremely unequal world; one that exacerbates the differences among us. Nearly half of the world's population – 3.4 billion people – survives on less than US\$ 5.50 a day. Meanwhile, women around the world earn 24 percent less income than men and own 50 percent less wealth. Global income inequality is increasing, not only within, but between and among nations.

**Authoritarian regimes – shrinking democratic space:**

The past two decades have seen a growing democracy gap, with a continual expansion of authoritarian rule and a decline in major democracies. Civic space, with respect for the right to assemble, organize and collectively bargain over terms of employment, is under threat. In 2020, the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen was down to levels last found around 1990, according to the V-Dem Institute.<sup>2</sup>

Shrinking democratic space and increasing tyranny is a threat to human security, frequently resulting in the use of force and aggression. Non-democratic states not only threaten regional and global peace, but also fail to provide safety or security for their own citizens.

Many people have not seen a dividend from democracy and feel left behind by society. This disconnect has led to a breakdown in trust between people and governments. With democracy on the back foot, systemic corruption, right-wing populism and extremism are filling the void in many countries. Recent history has shown that this situation leads to autocracy, aggression and competitive rivalry – rather than cooperation for collective progress.

**Militarization:** At the time of the original Palme Commission, nuclear weapons were clearly the most powerful lethal force. Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century the threat of nuclear war remains undiminished. There are more than 13,000 nuclear warheads in the world today – thousands of which are ready to be used in an instant and are far more powerful than those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Military expenditure continues to rise and to divert funds from social and environmental investment. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military spending has been rising since the 1990s. Total global military expenditure continued to grow in 2021, reaching an all-time high of US\$ 2.1 trillion.<sup>3</sup>

**A call to action**

Forty years on from the original Palme Commission, the challenges of our interdependent global society demand, more than ever, collaboration and partnership rather than isolation and distrust. Common Security is about human beings, not just nations. Now, in 2023, it is time to consider whether the concept of Common Security can help bring us back from the brink.

**“Trust is in short supply”**

*“... today’s collective security system is being tested like never before. Our world is riven by geopolitical divides, conflicts and instability. From military coups, to inter-state conflicts, invasions, and wars that stretch on year after year. Lingering differences between the world’s great powers — including at this Council — continue to limit our ability to collectively respond. Humanitarian assistance is stretched to the breaking point. Human rights and the rule of law are under assault. Trust is in short supply.”*

UN Secretary-General in August 2022 at a Security Council meeting on Promoting Common Security Through Dialogue and Cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

The need to move away from the idea of nuclear deterrence as a foundation of international security is more urgent than ever. The nuclear threats used by nations—implicitly or explicitly- reveal the flimsy basis upon which nuclear deterrence is supposed to work. Humanity will not survive a nuclear war, nor can we prepare for or mitigate the consequences of nuclear war. So, an alternative path must be found. A positive and cooperative approach to security must be developed, as a means to making people and governments feel secure. Common Security is the alternative to nuclear competition and the threat of mass destruction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that without international cooperation, a global crisis is very difficult to address. Incremental change is not sufficient to save humanity. Action at government level needs to be complemented by action at the

<sup>2</sup> V-Dem Institute (2022)

<sup>3</sup> SIPRI (2022)

<sup>4</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21421.doc.htm>

level of local communities. A new social contract must be established, and a new dialogue of peace should replace the narrative of militarization and competition.

Common Security requires action from not just governments but also from national parliaments and from civil society – including from civil society organizations (CSOs), social justice and peace movements, faith communities, women’s and youth movements and trade unions. In addition, the corporate sector has a responsibility to respect human rights and to contribute to human security, as stipulated by the UN’s Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

There is an urgent need for institutions and laws that engage and involve citizens and not only policy- and decision-makers, in cross-border discussions, fairer trade negotiations, climate solutions, reducing inequality and peace and confidence building. Civil society must act as a watchdog, a motivating force, and a counterweight to political posturing. Furthermore, CSOs must play an active role in advocacy work and raising awareness.

The threat of war and its consequences have not diminished over the years. But political will, people power and a collective attitude can lead to change. There is still time to be innovative and ambitious in reframing security and reimagining our world.

## Recommendations

The Common Security 2022 recommendations are indications, or steps forward, in the process of removing the threat of nuclear annihilation and turning around the ‘super tanker’ of war and conflict. They are practical steps, but also set out a vision for a better, safer world. They aim to motivate public opinion and have a positive impact on policy- and decision-makers about what is necessary and achievable. It is for others to take these proposals forward – in particular the UN with a broader engagement of civil society rather than just of governments.

A selection of recommendations is presented here.<sup>5</sup>

### Strengthen the global architecture for peace

- Encourage regional bodies, such as the African Union, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), to develop frameworks that incorporate the principles of Common Security, and to build structures that can mediate and build confidence between antagonistic sides. Deter the creation of new military alliances and reassess existing military alliances – using cooperation based on common security as an alternative.
- Establish or renew the global and regional peace architecture, building on the model of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Hold a Helsinki II process in 2025 – 50 years after the first Helsinki agreement laid the foundations for the OSCE and proposed that human rights and freedom of expression should be the foundation of peace.
- Integrate climate-related security risks into United Nations conflict-prevention strategies. Commit to the sharing of green technologies, the redistribution of military resources for tackling the climate threat and the promotion of alternative solutions to environmental problems. Ensure justice for those nations most affected by climate change – through reparations, population relocation and support for climate-resistant infrastructure.
- Reform the UN to give more power and authority to the General Assembly – particularly on security matters – to avoid individual Member States paralyzing the whole UN common security system.

<sup>5</sup> The full list of recommendations can be found in Olaf Palme Center et al. (2022).

**A new peace dividend – disarmament and development**

- Convene a special UN General Assembly for disarmament in 2023/2024 to set a global commitment to reduce military expenditure by 2 percent per year. Set a global ambition to abolish nuclear weapons to free-up more than US\$ 72 billion annually.
- Use the reduction in military spending to generate a ‘global peace dividend’ to fund the UN Sustainable Development Goals, UN peacebuilding and a just transition to climate friendly jobs. Establish a UN ‘just conversion’ institution and aim to create 575 million new jobs by 2030 – through converting jobs and technology in the weapons industry into environmental and health innovation, and vaccines and treatments.
- Invest in human security by creating a New Social Contract that tackles inequality. Forge such a contract by implementing the 2019 Centenary Declaration of the ILO ensuring that all people benefit from the changing world of work;<sup>6</sup> holding a World Social Summit in 2025; setting-up a Global Social Protection Fund; creating a universal floor of workers’ rights; establishing a multilateral binding treaty that imposes human rights due diligence on companies across supply chains, and regularize more than one billion informal and platform jobs.

**Revitalized nuclear arms control and disarmament**

- Reinstatement of arms control treaties, particularly regarding nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, for example, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). As a first step, a moratorium on a deployment of the INF land-based systems in Europe should be introduced. Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) must urgently develop and present concrete, time-bound plans of how they intend to implement their obligation to implement nuclear disarmament. Ensure that the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban-Treaty (CTBT) enters into legal force.

- States are encouraged to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Nuclear-armed states should engage with the treaty and send observers to the meeting of States Parties.
- Resume with urgency nuclear arms reductions, with a view to achieving the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction.
- All nuclear-weapon states must establish a firm ‘no first use’ policy.
- Revisit the idea of establishing nuclear-weapon-free-zones, particularly in the Middle East/West Asia, Northeast Asia, and in Europe.

**New military technologies and outer space weapons**

- Ban cyberattacks on nuclear command and control systems, accompanied by a disentanglement of conventional and nuclear weapons command and control systems.
- Prohibit autonomous weapons systems, to ensure that humans keep control over weapons and armed conflict.
- Strengthen the Outer Space Treaty and establish a new culture of responsible space governance to prevent further militarisation of the domain.
- Limit hypersonic missiles and create a timeframe for banning these weapons.

<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization (2019)

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