How to abolish war
Michael Renner
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As we come to the conclusion of the most war-ravaged century in human history—in which three times as many people fell victim to war than in all the wars of the preceding nineteen centuries combined—there are eerie parallels with the world of 100 years ago. At the end of the last century, the predominant mood in Europe was one of enormous optimism, supported by a sense of the inevitability of human progress driven by rapid technological and economical advances. The fact that war among the major powers had been absent for about three decades also seemed reason for confidence. And liberal economists further shored up this sanguine outlook, claiming that intensified international trade and finance would preclude war.

But other contemporaries grew apprehensive as the military expenditures of the six leading European powers tripled and the size of their armies doubled between 1880 and 1914. Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, was deeply pessimistic, but he nevertheless banked on an idea that foreshadowed the nuclear deterrence school of thought: that the destructive power of new armaments was so immense as to render future warfare unthinkable.

Nobel was a close friend of Bertha von Suttner, a leading pacifist of the time who encouraged him to devote his wealth to the cause of peace and who became a Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 1905. Von Suttner argued passionately for the establishment of an organization like the United Nations, for the creation of what we now call peacekeeping forces, and for a “European Confederation of States.” She marshaled a mixture of realism—the ability to comprehend the consequences of the trends of her time—and vision—the ability to see clearly what must be done—that embodied hope for a better future.

Von Suttner and other pacifists persuaded Czar Nicholas II of Russia, who was worried about the “crushing burden” of the “armed peace of our days,” to convene the First Hague International Peace Conference in the Netherlands in 1899. This event brought together government representatives from twenty-six nations—a large proportion of the sovereign states that existed then. It was the first conference ever called to seek ways to reduce the likelihood of war rather than to distribute its spoils.

But although the 1899 conference and a follow-up gathering in 1907 succeeded in codifying some rules for conducting war, they failed to make significant headway toward preventing conflict. An arbitration court was set up, but its use remained entirely voluntary. A Russian proposal for a five-year moratorium on arms purchases was rejected, and an opportunity to ban aerial warfare was missed. (At that time, aerial warfare consisted of the discharge of projectiles and explosives from balloons; warplanes made their debut later during the Italian-Turkish war of 1911.)

The steady buildup of arms in Europe intensified after the
end of the nineteenth century. But even when fighting broke out in August 1914, virtually everyone assumed that this war would be short, just as the Franco-Prussian War nearly half a century earlier had been. Still hopeful, they believed that the soldiers would be home by Christmas. Few imagined that they were on the verge of the most devastating war in history—or that it would be followed by an even larger global conflict less than three decades later.

Today, the knowledge of utter devastation wreaked by two lengthy world wars and the threat of total annihilation in a nuclear holocaust have shattered many illusions about the "glory" of war that were strongly held a century ago. The promise of a more peaceful future is once again clouded by uncertainties ahead, just as it was at the time of the Hague Peace Conference. Will the new century be as violent as the old, the most destructive age ever? Or will humanity finally summon the ability to tame the beast of war?

Having witnessed the astronomical scale of human conflict, we find ourselves facing a most unusual situation: the absence of any big-power confrontation. The leading nations of Europe, where so many wars of the past originated, today enjoy cordial relations. The world as a whole is moving rapidly toward ever-increasing economic integration, giving rise to the hope—much like that of a century ago—that economic interest will trump belligerence. And we have made halting progress toward laws governing war (the so-called humanitarian laws), arms control, peacekeeping, and institutions to help govern international relations.

Yet dangers lurk today as yesterday. The Gulf War of 1991 was an early reminder that the end of the Cold War did not signal permanent peace. And while there have been relatively few interstate wars since then, deadly internal conflicts are common, as seen most recently in the Balkans. These conflicts are primarily fought with small-caliber arms and other relatively unsophisticated weapons. But because there is no distinct battlefield, fighters range over large areas, often targeting civilian populations for killings, terror, and expulsions. Such wars visit enormous devastation upon affected territories.

Many of today's wars are the product of accumulating social, economic, demographic, and environmental pressures. In this, too, there is a similarity to the situation of a century ago: in 1914, the inescapable stresses created by population growth and the strains of rapid urbanization and industrialization were channeled into an unquestioning patriotism, which underpinned the ardor that swept Europe into war. Today, such stress factors more often lead to internal conflicts than to wars of state against state. But far from being limited in their impact, internal wars may trigger the collapse of entire societies, destabilize neighboring countries through massive outflows of refugees, and prompt foreign intervention. Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo may only be harbingers of conflicts to come.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, we thus face a choice. Will we be overwhelmed by an endless string of internal wars capable of devastating entire countries and perhaps even re-igniting interstate confrontations, or will we build the foundations for a lasting peace? Will we seize the opportunity offered by the absence of big-power rivalries and retain control of our destinies? Or will we let unanticipated events such as the Sarajevo assassination in 1914 determine the future of peace and war, allowing the logic of military imperatives to dictate political considerations?

Governments still devote far less energy and enthusiasm to the task of conflict prevention and peace building than to war preparation and war-making. Existing international institutions—foremost among them, the U.N.—are too weak to prevent war. Humanity is ill-equipped, then, at this millennial moment, to handle either a resurgence of interstate war, should it happen, or an unending series of internal wars.

The challenge is twofold. One is to fortify the nascent infrastructure of peace—promoting disarmament, building conflict-prevention networks, advancing human rights law, and strengthening peacekeeping capacities. Of particular urgency is the need to reduce the abundance of arms of virtually all calibers—a lingering legacy of the twentieth century. As long as weapons are readily available, there will always be a temptation to rely on them to settle disputes rather than to engage in the arduous task of negotiating and arbitrating conflicting needs and interests.

The second challenge is to understand and address the underlying causes of today's conflicts, including poverty, social inequality, ethnic tensions, population growth, and environmental degradation. These pressures appear to be accelerating in many societies even as governance structures falter. Left unaddressed, it is likely that they will heighten polarization and instability, possibly leading to widespread violent conflict.

One hundred years after the first Hague conference, the Hague Appeal for Peace this past May brought together hundreds of peace, human rights, environmental, and other grass-
roots and advocacy groups, as well as thousands of citizen activists to develop a twenty-first-century agenda for peace and justice. Its mission was to address the unfinished business of its predecessor: to seek the prevention and resolution of violent conflict, far-reaching disarmament, the further development of international humanitarian and human rights law, and the promotion of a worldwide culture of peace. It also signaled a new era: this time around, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—not governments—were meeting to set an agenda for peace in the new century.

The 1999 Hague gathering provides evidence that growing numbers of people reject the notion that went almost unchallenged in Bertha von Suttner’s day—that “war,” as German general von Moltke said, “is an element in God’s order.” By now it is clear that war is neither holy nor inevitable. Under the right circumstances—with policies that defuse rather than aggravate conflicts—war can be abolished.

A key task in developing peace and security policies in the twenty-first century will be to establish effective restraints based on three principles. These principles contrast sharply with the approaches underlying past and present policies: disarmament (as opposed to arms control), universal constraints on arms (as opposed to nonproliferation), and war prevention (as opposed to regulating warfare).

Although the world has pulled back from the nuclear brink, disarmament is needed as never before. There are still few internationally accepted norms to curb the production, possession, or trade of arms. Several decades of arms control efforts have yielded mostly weak numerical limits on the numbers of certain weapons that states may deploy, and no limits at all on many other kinds of arms. The list of weapons that have actually been outlawed since 1899—when the Hague International Peace Conference decided to ban expanding, or so-called dum dum, bullets—is extremely short compared to the list of unregulated weapons. Although the use of chemical weapons was banned in 1925 (a norm violated several times), nearly another seventy years passed before the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention outlawed their production and possession. Only in 1995 was the sale and use of so-called blinding-laser weapons banned, and a treaty prohibiting anti-personnel landmines, signed in 1997, came into force just this year (and remains unsigned by the United States).

Denuclearization—the establishment of a timetable to phase out and eventually eliminate all nuclear arms—is now what we need to turn our attention to. The nuclear “haves” not only insist that they will retain their arsenals indefinitely, they continue to pursue modernization programs and their existing arsenals remain on hairtrigger alert. But the stakes are rising: India and Pakistan have joined the “nuclear club,” and it is overly optimistic to assume that others will not eventually be tempted to reevaluate their policies and to acquire nuclear weapons as well. Even if no government is contemplating starting a nuclear war intentionally, other dangers lurk, among them accidental launchings of missiles and theft of nuclear weapons or related materials and technology by terrorists or non-nuclear states.

In light of today’s dominant types of conflicts, an equally urgent task is to adopt restraints on the conventional arms trade. Huge amounts of weapons of all calibers have been dispersed all over the planet. Among the most worrisome aspects of this buildup is the widespread proliferation of small arms—the weapon of choice in today’s internal fighting.

One measure long demanded by human rights organizations and other groups is a binding code of conduct to ensure that, at the very least, weapons are not exported to govern-
ments that fail to hold free elections, that trample human rights or engage in armed aggression. A voluntary code of conduct was adopted by the European Union in June 1998, but it remains to be seen whether the region's governments will live by it or ignore it when the code proves inconvenient. Although the establishment of such codes remains a crucial step toward peace, in the next century we will need to aim for an even more ambitious goal: establishing a normative presumption against trading arms altogether so that such transfers are no longer seen as routine commercial transactions but, rather, as highly unusual events.

It is also time to rethink the utility of large standing military forces and to advance the norm that possession of an offensively armed military is unacceptable. Countries that face no obvious external adversaries may want to cut their militaries radically and refocus remaining forces on purely defensive tasks; indeed, some may want to reconsider whether they need an army at all, joining twentieth-century pioneers Costa Rica, Haiti, and Panama in abolishing their standing armed forces. Unilateral measures by individual countries could create some badly needed momentum, but far-reaching progress would likely depend on a more systematic, multilateral approach. An NGO initiative, "Global Action to Prevent War," has proposed a four-phase process over twenty to forty years to achieve major reductions in armies and their armaments. Following extensive consultations among nongovernmental experts, it was formally launched at the Hague Appeal for Peace conference in May.

The second general principle on which to base peace and security policy concerns universality of norms. That is, in order to be just and effective, constraints on armaments need to apply to all states equally. This contrasts with the nonproliferation policies that are currently in vogue in Western nations—the idea of allowing a select (and self-appointed) group of countries to hold on to certain kinds of weapons denied to all other states. Nuclear arsenals are the most prominent example. The Non-Proliferation Treaty prohibits the acquisition of nuclear arms by nations that don't now possess them—the vast majority of the world's countries. Yet the nuclear weapons states have shown little inclination toward fulfilling their part of the bargain and beginning serious negotiations for nuclear abolition. The advanced nations are also working hard to establish a monopoly on sophisticated arms technologies (although this goal is often contradicted by their active non-nuclear export entrepreneurship). The upshot is a kind of global security apartheid system.

This kind of lopsided approach to security is not only unacceptable from the perspective of universality, it is also unworkable in the long run. As long as one country or group of countries has access to a weapon, others will be tempted to acquire it as well. No matter what the true utility of the weapon in question may be, the very fact that one government prizes its possession signals to others that it must have direct military value, heighten a country's influence, or provide some other, less tangible advantage. This may be a fool's game, but it is one that states have played for centuries. At best, pursuing such policies into the future is an enormous waste of resources; at worst, it could spawn new arms races and trigger regional or global insecurities.

The third principle on which to base peace and security policy—preventing war—also requires dramatic change. At the 1899 Hague conference, governments expressed their "desire to diminish the evils of war so far as military necessities permit"—a desire that remained unfulfilled. Although war laws could be made more stringent, the past 100 years have demonstrated that there is an inherent limit to how effective they can be. Rather than trying in vain to make war a "chivalrous" affair, it is far more fruitful to focus on preventing violent conflict. Yet while government leaders give occasional lip service to conflict prevention, far too little is being done to make it happen. For instance, in 1997 the newly established U.N. Trust Fund for Preventive Action Against Conflicts received soaring rhetoric but scant funds.

Much could be accomplished by building an early conflict warning network, establishing permanent dispute arbitration centers in every region of the world, giving more backing to preventive diplomacy, and establishing a corps of skilled and experienced individuals to serve as roving mediators on behalf of the international community. Conflict prevention is not an exact science, to be sure; instead, it resembles a trial-and-error process. On the one hand, there will be cases when early warning of impending violent conflict turns out to be a false alarm. On the other hand, though, the international community would do well to have some redundancy built into the conflict-prevention apparatus so that a variety of efforts aimed at warding off mass violence can be launched. Preventing the eruption of disputes into full-scale hostilities is by no means an easy task, but its difficulties pale beside those of ending fighting once extensive bloodshed has occurred.

Of course, conflict prevention through mediation won't always work, so additional tools are needed. In particular, peacekeeping missions will need to be refashioned so that they can embody the true meaning of the word peacekeeping instead of serving as last-minute fire brigades. In the course of the last
few years, we have come to associate peacekeeping with hopeless efforts—too few people equipped too poorly and dispatched too late, unable to keep a peace that scarcely exists on the ground. What is needed is the creation of a well-trained, permanent force under U.N. auspices for preventive deployments. It would be dispatched in response to clear signs of imminent violent dispute, either along national borders or even within countries. Such an intervention should not be seen as an end in itself but, rather, be designed to provide space for mediation efforts.

In a fast-paced world that prefers lightning-quick action with decisive outcomes, there is aversion to the typically open-ended commitments that prevention and mediation require and the compromises and nuances without which conflict resolution is unlikely to succeed. Political leaders are tempted to assume that military strikes—such as those against Serbia intended to change its policy on Kosovo—offer a quick, clear-cut alternative. But this is a questionable proposition. Even where this policy has been executed in the most straightforward manner—trying to force Iraq’s Saddam Hussein to come clean on his weapons of mass destruction programs, for instance—the result is ambiguous at best. Bombing raids now preclude international monitoring of Iraqi sites suspected of harboring prohibited weapons programs. In Kosovo as well, bombing may have punished Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic (or, more likely, Serbia’s civilian population), but it is unlikely to halt all Serb “ethnic cleansing,” let alone bring about an arrangement that will allow Serbs and Kosovars to live together peacefully. Without patient and early commitment, conflicts cannot be resolved.

Far-reaching disarmament, universally applied constraints on armaments, and vigorous conflict-prevention efforts will go a long way toward addressing the more traditional aspects of a peace policy. But to be successful, these steps will need to be linked with a broader human security agenda. Conflict prevention is not only about positioning peacekeepers between would-be attackers and their intended victims (though a few successful operations of that kind could have a salutary effect) but more fundamentally about recognizing and ameliorating the underlying pressures that lead to violent disputes in the first place.

At the core, the shift toward prevention calls for policies that are geared to strengthening the fabric of society and improving its governance. Central to such a policy are goals like fair distribution of wealth and balancing of the interests of different population groups, adequate job creation, poverty eradication, and the preservation or restoration of ecosystems. These are urgent requirements in a world in which the simultaneous presence of tremendous economic growth and widespread inequity is driving environmental destruction, breeding explosive social conditions, and fueling ethnic antagonisms.

Governments will need to adopt policies better able to stem the degradation of watersheds and arable lands, to conserve and protect critical natural systems, and to pursue climate stabilization policies. Key to success also are measures to boost the efficiency with which energy, materials, and water are used. In developing countries where a large share of the population depends directly on the integrity and stability of ecosystems, the benefits would not only be environmental but would also carry over into the social and political realms by helping to avoid the dislocations and distributive conflicts that now go hand in hand with wholesale environmental destruction. But industrial countries’ policies are critical as well, since they consume the bulk of the world’s resources and are thus, directly or indirectly, responsible for the preponderance of unsustainable mining, logging, metal smelting, fishing, and fossil fuel burning.

It is equally important that governments become more serious about fulfilling pledges to eradicate poverty, promote full employment, and reduce massive social inequality. In an age in which capital-intensive technology and planetary-wide economies of scale combine to limit the potential for job creation even as the ranks of job-seekers keep swelling, a fundamental reassessment of employment policies is overdue. This concerns questions such as the choice of appropriate technology, the need to tax energy and resource consumption rather than labor, and the design of fiscal and subsidy policies. Budgetary priorities need reexamining as well; as long as massive resources con-
global market forces—to another—protectionism—but, rather, underscores the need for a more selective approach, recognizing that market demands sometimes clash with the imperatives of sound social policy.

In the orthodox view, the current litmus test of governmental policy is how swiftly it proceeds with deregulation and privatization and how much it facilitates trade and capital flows. The result may well be a boosted gross national product, but these goals have been pushed far too single-mindedly. From a human security perspective, what counts is whether the general well-being of the population is served without overexploiting nature, leaving certain communities behind, or undermining local culture, customs, and norms. Global economic integration doesn’t always lead to adverse outcomes, but it is time to require something that might be described as social and environmental impact statements of globalization. Global economic integration won’t turn into a “race to the bottom” if strong environmental and social standards can be developed; establishing high common-denominator norms on the global level will be one of the major challenges in coming years.

Seen basically as protections against state oppression, human rights need to be understood also as tools to protect the economically and socially weak from the depredations of the strong. Human rights, broadly understood, are of growing importance in a globalizing world, as decision-making processes affect larger and larger numbers of individuals and communities in more and more profound ways. The world’s political and corporate elites have been far more interested, and effective, in creating a global market structure than they have been in establishing three essential conditions that are critical to preventing globalization from becoming a continuous source of contention: making the most powerful market players more accountable; preparing the ground on which a global human community, not just a global marketplace, can flourish; and setting up sufficiently strong international institutions that can help advance global norms and safeguard the interests of the global community.

The international institutions vested with the greatest degree of authority and power—the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization among them—not only lack transparency and accountability in their decision-making but sometimes devote themselves to the pursuit of economic growth even at the direct expense of social, environmental, and human rights considerations. Grassroots activists have been working hard to change the way these institutions operate, but more reform is still necessary.

Considerable expectations for achieving and safeguarding the global community are being pinned on the U.N., whose various departments and agencies are involved in many activities crucial to improving the welfare of people. Yet the U.N. receives scant resources and commands little political power. Half a century after its founding, the organization that was set up to prevent recurring war is increasingly in danger of being emasculated, particularly by the United States’ reluctance to pay its dues to the organization. Because the entire U.N. system—headquarters, specialized agencies, and peacekeeping operations—is owed about $3.6 billion in outstanding dues from member states, it has languished in financial crisis for several years now. In the new century, governments will need to provide full and generous funding to the U.N. if they want it to be a more effective voice for peace than it has been to date.

To that end, reform is as essential as new money. The U.N. Security Council, for instance, is increasingly anachronistic in its composition and central workings—particularly the veto power retained by the five permanent members. But although discussions have been held for years and there is no shortage of good reform proposals, there is no consensus on the specifics. The permanent members are highly reluctant to relinquish or water down any of their privileges, especially their veto power. If they succeed in blocking timely change, they will further increase worldwide resentment of outdated privileges. Since the council relies on the willing cooperation of the world’s nations, a rejection of reform may, over time, compromise its authority and effectiveness.

Because security policy will increasingly need to move beyond military issues in the next century and concern itself with the social, economic, demographic, and environmental pressures that are the root of most conflicts.

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MAKING THIS THE LAST CENTURY OF WAR

liement are) and a forum of civil society that includes representatives of labor, environmental groups, and others.

Impatient with the failure of governments to promote conflict prevention and peace building, NGOs—or civil society organizations, as they are increasingly called—are playing a more and more assertive role on the local, national, and international levels. And in an age in which peace and security concerns are focused more on internal than interstate matters, it is only sensible that civil society should be an active participant.

Recent years have seen the emergence of working coalitions that, on an issue-by-issue basis, bring together NGOs with like-minded governments. The anti-personnel landmines campaign is the outstanding example of this phenomenon. With the support of countries like Canada, South Africa, Belgium, and Norway, the campaign succeeded in putting landmines on the global agenda, hammering out an international treaty banning these devices, and bringing the agreement into force at a speed far faster than any other arms treaty in history.

Although the landmines campaign was in many ways unique, its stunning success naturally prompted hopes that it could be replicated in other areas. Similar themes reverberate in the efforts to establish an International Criminal Court, the gathering campaign to counter small-arms proliferation, and the Middle Powers Initiative (an endeavor to encourage nuclear-weapons states to commit to practical steps toward the elimination of their atomic arsenals). Whether their eventual outcome, these efforts are helping to revolutionize the process of international policymaking by infusing it with human rights, humanitarian, and human-development concerns to a far greater extent than has been the case to date.

Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy has been a particularly vocal proponent of this new “pulpit diplomacy,” which regards NGO activists as a vanguard of change; opens traditionally quiet (and often secretive and slow-moving) diplomacy to far greater scrutiny and mobilizes public opinion; and frequently takes the initiative from the big powers, putting them into the unaccustomed position of having to play catch-up. Soft power, as it is also called, is based on the notion that human security, not state security, should be the organizing principle of peace policy; it regards military force as having declining utility; and it emphasizes the power of ideas and the promulgation of new norms over the power of weapons.

NGO input may well be crucial to establishing human security. A century ago, states were in their prime. But already citizen activists like Bertha von Suttner were beginning to stir and “intrude” into what was then considered the preserve of statecraft. Although pacifists succeeded in convincing governments to convene the 1899 Hague conference, as outsiders they had little influence over its outcome. Since then, the situation has changed dramatically. Today, NGO representatives are frequent participants at intergovernmental gatherings. The 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace conference went even further: it was an attempt to set the agenda for twenty-first-century peacemaking at which government and U.N. representatives were welcome guests but not the initiators.

Notwithstanding valiant efforts to the contrary, the twentieth century was the century of warfare. The twenty-first will need to be the century of demilitarization and conflict prevention. As South African Archbishop and Nobel Prize recipient Desmond Tutu pointed out this past March, slavery once seemed like an immutable reality and yet it was abolished. “Why not war? Indeed, we have no choice.”

Michael Renner holds degrees in international relations and political science from the Universities of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Konstanz, Germany. He is a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C. This article is adapted from Worldwatch Paper 146: Ending Violent Conflict.

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