

The Path to Peace: The Role of the UN and UPF in Achieving Peace in Europe and the Middle-East

Keith Best
May 5, 2023



When we look around the world we see war in Europe and the potential for use of nuclear weapons, missiles flying in the South China Seas endangering Japan and Taiwan and where we are today being directly threatened by China and the DPRK, in recognition of which the Washington Declaration pact was signed only a few days ago; war in Yemen and now in Sudan and further dangerous incidents in Israel-Palestine, let alone tension in other dispute areas; this,

coupled with a retreat from globalisation into narrow nationalism, shortening of supply lines with consequent cost increases and issues over the security of energy, fertiliser and vital foodstuffs let alone their vulnerability to cyber-attacks it is unsurprising that there is such widespread despair and sense of powerlessness. It is an especial challenge for an organisation that calls itself the Universal Peace Federation. What beneficial impact can we have, what influence and where? What could constitute a breakthrough to lead to more pacific times.

First, we need to recognise the power of the collective ideas of global civil society and an organisation such as UPF which has chapters around the world. President Eisenhower, on 31 August 1959 in a broadcast discussion, stated "I like to believe that people, in the long run, are going to do more to promote peace than our governments. Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it." President [Ronald Reagan](#) said "Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means."

So, we must start with the rule of law. The world has moved on since the last global conflict: we now have the International Criminal Court encapsulating the worst crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes and now the crime of aggression. The problem is not the absence of international law but how to enforce it.

Yet having an international system of justice and even justice backed by international jurisdiction of courts and enforceability through sanctions is not enough as it deals with events after they have occurred.

For the only international organisation we have, the United Nations, we need an improved early warning system so that potential conflict can be identified before it begins. Many organisations and international NGOs such as the World Federalist Movement which I was honoured to Chair for several decades have called for a UN system of early warning of disputes.

Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile and currently High Commissioner for Human Rights, on 24 February 2020 wrote: "Effective prevention requires the early identification of risks that allow for preventive or mitigatory measures to be designed and implicated. This applies to the prevention of human rights violations as well as to the prevention of wider conflict or crisis. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is working to develop its early warning capacity because it believes that human rights-based analysis has clear added value for the United Nations' early warning and prevention objectives across all pillars of the Organization."

If an early warning system can be devised for climate change, which it was last year, then it should be available for the prevention of conflict. The Early Warnings For All Initiative (EW4All) was formally launched by the UN Secretary-General in November 2022 at the COP27 meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh. The Initiative calls for the whole world to be covered by an early warning system by the end of 2027.

Advances are being made. The UN Office to the African Union's Political Affairs Division is working towards deepening the UN-AU strategic partnership in conflict prevention and mediation. This involves joint UN-AU efforts to achieve a shared understanding of the root causes and drivers of violent conflicts in Africa, in order to promote harmonized approaches to preventing conflicts before they occur, mitigating ongoing conflicts, and building the peace in the aftermath of conflicts.

The abstract of a paper called UN Early Warning for Preventing Conflict from International Peacekeeping (Volume 18 of 2011) points out that "Despite repeated calls for a coordinated UN early warning system for preventing conflict, early warning is currently performed piecemeal by seven UN bodies and one ad hoc initiative." Even without a comprehensive system the UN could improve its ability to analyse and absorb early warning information already in the system by reforming the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and strengthening existing early warning and assessment capacities.

Another paper entitled Improving Conflict Early Warning Systems for United Nations Peacekeeping (from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) states "the UN has cited that the lack of robust conflict early warning systems is a constraint to effectively protecting civilians. Specifically, the weaknesses in the UN's current early warning system are its subjective and unsystematic nature and its inability to make conflict predictions across the entire country." Much of the current system relies on UN Joint Mission Analysis Centres and Joint Operations Centres but these analyse only incidence of actual rather than potential conflict.

To set out fully the inadequacies of the current system of information gathering through Community Liaison Assistants and other mechanisms and to sketch out a preferred system, on which there is no shortage of academic suggestion, is beyond the scope of my few remarks today save to make the argument.

It is particularly sad when, post conflict, there is almost universal realisation that the symptoms were evident if only they had been heeded - the benefit of hindsight may be comforting for those who possess it but it does not save lives. We all know from history that the seeds of a subsequent conflict are often sown in its predecessor - an unfair peace, a half-finished agenda, a supposed military solution when only a political one will suffice.

We must ensure that appropriate UN missions, both interstate and intrastate, are in every part of the world where there is tension and capacity for conflict, especially in Europe and the Middle-East. They should be there as of right and not at the behest or whim of the host government as at present. Moreover, those missions must work with all available sources of information including local NGOs, local authorities and others such as the UPF network.

Whether or not we can move to a better system of anticipating conflict before it bursts into reality will depend very much on the sentiment within the UN and especially the Security Council for a desire for change.

Reform of the UN Security Council is long overdue. It has ultimate responsibility under Chapter VII of the Charter to determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression and to make recommendations, yet repeatedly we see that duty compromised by the use or threatened use of the veto by one or other of the P5 members.

Professor Jennifer Trahan, a leading lawyer at New York University Center for Global Affairs, has written about the incompatibility of the use of the veto with the provisions of the Charter itself.

Now, a group of influential states has attacked the use of the veto. At the seventy-sixth session of its plenary on 26 April 2022 the General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution aimed at holding the five permanent Council members accountable for their use of veto. The Assembly decided that its President shall convene a formal meeting within 10 working days of the casting of a veto by one or more permanent

members of the Council and hold a debate on the situation. Further, the Assembly invited the Council to submit a special report on the use of the particular veto to the Assembly at least 72 hours before the relevant discussion takes place. It was tabled by Lichtenstein and co-sponsored by 83 Member States, including three permanent Council members - France, United Kingdom and the United States. The United Kingdom is proud not to have vetoed a resolution since 1989. It is too early to say if this new provision will have the desired effect.

Peace involves compromise but also principle and sometimes the two seem incompatible. While it is true that leaving two combatants each with a sense of some victory and achievement is likely to provide the basis for a more lasting settlement there are some actions, so egregious, such as naked aggression, which cannot be allowed to succeed unless we are to repeat the terrible escalation of the Anschluss, Sudetenland and Poland and yet again unleash the horror of unspeakable evil. A clear breach of international law must be recognised for what it is for otherwise we shall live in anarchy and substitute the force of law with the law of force.

Compromise comes from dialogue - including with those with whom we disagree and wish to criticise, rightly, on their record on human rights or attitude towards their neighbours as well as to their citizens and observance of the rule of law. On many occasions we have to swallow hard and establish discussion despite this, because, without knowing your opponent's position you cannot assess the strengths and weaknesses of your own - a concept drilled into me as a legal advocate. Indeed, as Churchill famously remarked "if Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference of the Devil in the House of Commons."

If ever there was a need for dialogue it is in the Middle-East, especially in Israel-Palestine. Many have tried to facilitate this but, so far, materially failed. Not only those in direct conflict but their supporters on both sides must recognise the need for compromise. With Iran and Russia also involved in that region we have a different problem in that so long as there is aggression and support for terrorism there is little ground for dialogue. Yet it must come, even if it is done out of the public gaze.

We should be careful, therefore, while not hiding legitimate indignation at abuse, not to imperil the chance of essential discussion. That is why, despite the sabre rattling and outright commission of international crimes we should still speak with China and Russia to see if there are common ways forward.

In my own home country, the so-called Troubles in Northern Ireland dominated much of my lifetime and, when I visited recently, I saw the legacy enshrined in memorials of the fallen in Free Derry Corner and the existing walled division between Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast. Much of the resentment remains. The ending came about in the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement through compromise, an understanding that the bullet and the bomb do not provide lasting settlements and a war weariness that is so debilitating. It was the result of secret talks for years when, publicly, the attitude of the British Government was that there could be no negotiation with terrorists. It may sometimes be difficult to stomach but we need to remember that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter: Churchill's famous maxim "Jaw Jaw is better than War War."

I hope that UPF internationally and regionally will support these practical, positive initiatives, sentiments and suggestions. Peace is a fragile flower which must be nurtured constantly. We must never cease to strive to create that other country described by the poet whose ways are those of gentleness and all her paths are peace.

Keith Best
Chair UPF(UK)