

Opinion



UN Secretary-General António Guterres, pictured Jan. 20, 2018, recently said, 'The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war,' and in one short sentence, opened the door to a new understanding of what constitutes human security. *Photograph of the Kremlin*

Warring parties must lay down weapons to fight bigger battle against COVID-19

UN Secretary-General António Guterres's plea to 'silence the guns' would create corridors for life-saving aid and open windows for diplomacy in the war-torn zones in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and the central areas of Africa.



Douglas Roche

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EDMONTON—"The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war." In one short sentence, UN Secretary-General António Guterres opened the door to a new understanding of what constitutes human security. Will governments seize the opportunity provided by the immense crisis of COVID-19 to finally adopt a global agenda for peace?

In an extraordinary move on March 23, Guterres urged warring parties around the world to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against COVID-19—the common enemy now threatening all of humanity. He called for an immediate global ceasefire everywhere: "It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives."

His plea to "silence the guns" would create corridors for life-saving aid and open windows for diplomacy in the war-torn zones in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and the central areas of Africa.

But the full meaning of Guterres's appeal is much bigger than only suspending existing wars. It is a wakeup call to governments everywhere that war does not solve existing problems, that the huge expenditures going into armaments divert money desperately needed for health supplies, that a bloated militarism is impotent against the new killers in a globalized world.

All the armies in the world can't stop COVID-19. It's a dark and scary moment when a bunch of microbes brings humanity to its knees. We've come to a turning point in world history. The old ways of building security—bigger and better weapons—are completely irrelevant now.

So what do we do when a virus blatantly crosses borders and ignores strategic weapons systems? More of the same thinking that deceived people into believing that as long as we had big guns we would be safe won't do. We have to overhaul our thinking.

"Big thinking" is not just a bromide. It's now essential for survival. We have to build a system to provide common security. In

the midst of the Cold War four decades ago, an all-star international panel led by Swedish prime minister Olof Palme established the principle that, in the age of weapons of mass destruction, no nation by itself can find security. Nations can only find security in cooperation and not at one another's expense. Common security, Palme argued, requires an end to arms competitions, national restraint, and a spirit of collective responsibility and mutual confidence.

Over the following years, the idea of common security broadened out beyond military measures to include new streams of cooperation in economic and social development and protection of the environment.

Suddenly, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union imploded. The Cold War ended. In 1992, the UN secretary-general at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote a stunning document, *Agenda for Peace*, incorporating the ideas of common security into practical programs for peacebuilding, preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping.

But instead of overhauling the global security system to provide common security for everyone, governments lumbered on and threw the peace dividend they had in their hands out the window. The Western countries expanded NATO up to Russia's borders. Russia invaded Crimea. Arms expenditures shot up. Governments squandered a magnificent opportunity to build a world of peace. The culture of war was too strong and the moment was lost.

Three decades ago, the great historian Barbara Tuchman and author of *The March of Folly* was right when she wrote: "Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in assessing a situation in terms of pre-

conceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs."

Now, in the current crisis, Guterres is telling us that continuation of the "folly" of war is jeopardizing the security for all—the rich as well as the marginalized. The Trump administration's call for \$46-billion more for nuclear weapons when the country can't even provide enough masks for health workers in treating COVID-19 is obscene beyond words.

And what about Canada? The government plans to increase defence spending to \$32-billion by 2027. Why? To appease U.S. Donald President Trump's gargantuan military appetite driving NATO states to spend two percent of their GDP on weaponry and all that goes with it. We can beat COVID-19 by spending money on health and development measures, not arms.

Far better to cut Canada's planned defence spending by 10 per cent and put an extra \$2-billion to \$3-billion into the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the 17-point program centring around huge improvements in maternal health, water systems and sustainable agriculture. But we can't get there with a continuation of "ordinary" planning. We need truly bold thinking to beat back the threat posed to common security by COVID-19.

The Canadian government wants to show what it could do on the Security Council. Switching political thinking from the culture of war to a culture of peace would be worthy of the greatest health challenge Canada has faced in the past hundred years.

Douglas Roche, a former MP, Senator and Canadian ambassador for disarmament, is the author of *Hope Not Fear: Building Peace in a Fractured World*.
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