

Guterres' new agenda for peace ignored by most big media

It is sad that the UN chief cannot be heard over the clatter of ongoing war. The pressure to send more arms to Ukraine is warping public culture into thinking that more militarism is the best way to peace. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres published his 'New Agenda for Peace' on July 20, laying out a route for stronger world co-operation. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

OPINION | BY DOUGLAS ROCHE | July 31, 2023

EDMONTON—When UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres published his “New Agenda for Peace” on July 20, laying out a route for stronger world co-operation to avoid future wars, I searched the mainline media for the next 24 hours to see what kind of coverage he received. I came up with a big zero.

The principal news shows of CBC, CTV, and Global had nothing. The *New York Times* and *The Globe and Mail* had nothing. My hometown newspaper, *The Edmonton Journal*, had nothing. I’m not saying there was no news story somewhere in the general media, but it is safe to say the media was not seized of Guterres’ new plan for peace.

The sad truth is that the secretary-general of the United Nations cannot be heard today over the constant clatter of ongoing war. The pressure to send more arms to Ukraine is warping public culture into thinking that more militarism is the best way to peace. Guterres thinks otherwise. Here are highlights of his 12 recommendations for action:

1. Eliminate nuclear weapons and, until they are eliminated, commit never to use them;
2. Boost preventive diplomacy in an era of divisions. Use UN good offices even when states are at war or do not recognize each other;
3. Develop national prevention strategies to address the different drivers and enablers of violence, and conflict in societies;
4. Accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to address the underlying causes of violence and insecurity;
5. Introduce concrete measures to secure women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation at all levels of decision-making on peace and security, including via gender parity in national government cabinets and parliaments;

6. Recognize climate, peace, and security as a political priority, and strengthen connections between multilateral bodies to ensure that climate action and peace-building reinforce each other;
7. Reverse the negative impact of unconstrained military spending, and focus on the profound negative societal effects of public resources diverted to military activity rather than sustainable development and gender equality;
8. Strengthen peace operations and partnerships; they are an essential part of the diplomatic toolbox of the Charter of the United Nations;
9. The increasing fragmentation of many conflicts and the proliferation of non-state armed groups have increased the need for multinational peace enforcement, and counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations;
10. Support the African Union and subregional peace operations;
11. Conclude, by 2026, a legally binding instrument to prohibit lethal autonomous weapon systems; and
12. Make urgent progress in the intergovernmental negotiations on the reform of the Security Council to make it more just and representative.

Is this comprehensive plan by the head of the chief organization legally charged with maintaining peace and security in the world not worth reporting?

Give me a break. The media is so fixated on the singularity of making war that they cannot deal with the complexity of building peace in a multi-polar world. Guterres accompanied his agenda with stark warnings: “This new era is already marked by the highest level of geopolitical tensions and major power competition in decades.” “Concerns about the possibility of nuclear war have re-emerged.” “New potential domains of conflict and weapons of war are creating new ways in which humanity can annihilate itself.”

In short, Guterres is saying that the dangers of further risks of humanity’s annihilation are now so great that only a burst of cooperation among nations will get the world back on track towards peace. It’s not so much the UN itself that can bring peace, rather that nations must step up and re-engage using the UN’s help.

That message has at least been heard by Global Affairs Canada, which welcomed Guterres’ agenda, especially the emphasis on prevention, disarmament and peace-building, and insistence on norms and principles of human rights and inclusion, which are at the heart of the UN Charter. Global Affairs pointed out that Canada has already contributed \$70-million to the UN Peace-building Fund over a three-year period. A government spokesman said tepidly, “We look forward to working with the UN to continue to refine the approach and advance our common goal of pursuing international peace and security.”

That's not exactly an energizing endorsement. Yet Canada is doing more to build peace than is generally appreciated. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau co-chairs with Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados the Sustainable Development Goals Advocates group, which promotes fighting climate change, protecting nature, and empowering women and girls around the world. These themes are a part of the secretary-general's huge agenda. The day after his new document was released, Guterres met with Trudeau in New York. If Trudeau really wants to hold the line on NATO's obsessive demands to increase military spending to 2 per cent of GDP, he should push his government to wake up and grasp the magnitude of the diplomacy now required for peace. This won't be easy — especially if no one has heard of the “New Agenda for Peace.”

Former Senator Douglas Roche's new book, Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World, will be published in the fall.

Roche requested Global Affairs Canada to comment on “A New Agenda for Peace,” asking, “In what way does the government express its support of the document? “

Global Affairs Canada responded: “Canada welcomes the UN secretary general's policy brief on The New Agenda for Peace. We are pleased to see an emphasis on prevention, disarmament, and peacebuilding, all while committing to uphold the norms and principles of human rights and inclusion, which are at the heart of the UN Charter. Canada has supported these themes tangibly, most notably through its contribution of \$70-million to the UN Peacebuilding Fund for 2021-2024. We look forward to working with the UN to continue to refine the approach and advance our common goal of pursuing international peace and security.”