

Towards a More Secure Future through Effective Multilateralism Based on Facts, Science and Knowledge

*Hacia un futuro más seguro mediante
un multilateralismo eficaz basado
en hechos, ciencia y conocimiento*

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Abstract

Making the right choices requires political will and leadership, based on the best available knowledge. The today challenges are interlocking, and their consequences do not respect borders or alliances. To meet the future challenges, science and expertise are indispensable, and the successful cooperation needs be underpinned by reliable and non-partisan information and analysis. To the author, it is important to reach a common and empirical consensus on facts, science, and knowledge, and see them as a public good, since they provide valuable common ground for discussion, facilitate the inform of effective solutions, as well as they give early warning of emerging challenges and imminent dangers.



Resumen

Tomar decisiones correctas requiere voluntad política y liderazgo basados en lo mejores conocimientos disponibles. Los retos de la actualidad están interrelacionados y sus consecuencias no respetan fronteras ni alianzas. Para hacer frente a los retos del futuro la ciencia y la experiencia son indispensables, y el éxito de la cooperación debe sustentarse en información y análisis fiables y no partidistas. Para el autor es importante alcanzar un consenso común y empírico sobre los hechos, la ciencia y el conocimiento, y verlos como un bien público, toda vez que proporcionan un valioso terreno común para el debate, facilitan la aportación de soluciones eficaces, además de advertir con anticipación los retos emergentes y los peligros inminentes.



Keywords

Effective multilateralism, facts, science, knowledge, crisis of the biosphere, national security, common security, cooperation



Palabras clave

Multilateralismo eficaz, hechos, ciencia, conocimiento, crisis de la biosfera, seguridad nacional, seguridad común, cooperación

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Stefan Löfven

As world leaders gather in New York for the opening of the 77th session of the U.N. General Assembly, the security horizon is undoubtedly dark. From the geopolitical shockwaves of the war in Ukraine, to military spending, nutrition and food security, to our stewardship of the planet, far too many key indicators are heading in a dangerous direction.

We can, and must, turn them around. In the words of U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres in his 2021 report *Our Common Agenda*, “the choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown, or a breakthrough to a greener, better, safer future”.¹

Making the right choices requires political will and leadership, based on the best available knowledge. That last aspect is SIPRI’s stock in trade.

* This article was published on September 19, 2022 on the website of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), at <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2022/towards-more-secure-future-through-effective-multilateralism-based-facts-science-and-knowledge>. The Matias Romero Institute thanks SIPRI and the author for their kind assistance in reproducing it in the RMPE in both its original language and in Spanish.

¹ United Nations, *Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General*, New York, United Nations, 2021, p. 3, at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

A “watershed moment”

The theme for the 77th U.N. General Assembly session is “A watershed moment: transformative solutions to interlocking challenges”. Evidence of these interlocking challenges is everywhere: the floods in Pakistan, war and insecurity afflicting every region of the world, the erosion of arms control and stagnation in disarmament, rising hunger,² the economic and political turmoil that has followed the COVID-19 pandemic, and the list goes on.

These interlocking challenges share some common features. Their consequences, and often their drivers, do not respect borders or alliances. They are characterized by uncertainty and volatility. They tend to cut across traditional policy domains.

This has a clear implication: the only realistic path towards a “greener, better, safer future” on this planet lies through cooperation. Countries, societies and sectors must work together to meet global challenges, put aside tensions and political polarization, and restore their faith in institutions and the rules-based international order.

Earlier in 2022, Secretary-General Guterres invited me to become co-Chair of his High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism,³ alongside Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former president of Liberia. The Advisory Board’s task is to come up with concrete suggestions for how to improve cooperation at the multilateral level, how we can ensure it is fit to meet the challenges of an unpredictable future and the urgently needed transition to more sustainable, peaceful societies. To accomplish this mission, we will rely heavily on science and expertise.

² Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing Food and Agricultural Policies to Make Healthy Diets more Affordable*, Rome, FAO, 2022, at <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

³ See web page at <https://highleveladvisoryboard.org>

Addressing the crisis of the biosphere

SIPRI's *Environment of Peace*⁴ report explores the most dangerous sets of interlocking challenges we face: the complex and unpredictable ways that climate change and other environmental crises are intertwining with more human-centred aspects of security. Besides providing policy insights, the *Environment of Peace* report documents the indirect pathways⁵ linking climate change impacts and insecurity, and the interactions between climate, conflict and food security,⁶ thus continuing SIPRI's contributions to working out how U.N. peace operations must adapt to climate change.

The biosphere crisis can only be successfully addressed through co-operation. Countries need to share green technologies and innovative solutions. They need to agree on fair ways to share vital natural resources and settle disputes peacefully. There must be give and take; action in one society to mitigate impacts on another.

Countries also need to agree on fair ways to distribute the burdens, costs and benefits of a green transition. From South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa to Indigenous communities around the world, those most vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis of the biosphere are often those least responsible for causing it—something illustrated starkly most recently by the devastating floods in Pakistan. There is a clear moral case for wealthier, industrialized countries to meet their climate finance commitments and to compensate the most affected countries for loss and damage. But there is also a strong security case for doing so. Localized insecurity can quickly spread.

⁴ Richard Black et al., *Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk*, Solna, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), May 2022, at <https://doi.org/10.55163/LCLS7037> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

⁵ See Malin Mobjörk, Florian Krampe and Kheira Tarif, *Pathways of Climate Insecurity: Guidance for Policymakers*, Solna, SIPRI, November 2020, at <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-policy-briefs/pathways-climate-insecurity-guidance-policymakers> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

⁶ "Food, Peace and Security", in SIPRI, at <https://sipri.org/research/peace-and-development/sustainable-peace/food-peace-and-security> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

From national security to common security

A logical response to such threats to their shared interests would be for countries to put differences aside and pull together. Instead, they have, by and large, followed a path of division and militarization. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that was clear. SIPRI data shows large increases in global military expenditure in the recent years,⁷ as well as in arms imports⁸ to Europe, East Asia and Oceania.

All of the nuclear-armed states are modernizing or expanding their arsenals.⁹ At the same time, we are also seeing rapid and radical developments in weapon systems, technologies and even ways of executing a conflict. A new, expensive and risky arms race is well under way. There is an urgent need to breathe new life into nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

Disappointingly, the recent 10th Review Conference of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) ended without agreement on the way forward.¹⁰ However, there were signs of hope. The conference produced much to build on in the next five-year review cycle. Notably, all of the five NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) agree on the necessity of measures to reduce strategic risks.

⁷ SIPRI, "World Military Expenditure Passes \$2 Trillion for First Time," press release, April 25, 2022, at <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

⁸ SIPRI, "Global Arms Trade Falls Slightly, but Imports to Europe, East Asia and Oceania Rise," press release, March 14, 2022, at <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/global-arms-trade-falls-slightly-imports-europe-east-asia-and-oceania-rise> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

⁹ SIPRI, "Global Nuclear Arsenals Are Expected to Grow as States Continue to Modernize—New SIPRI Yearbook Out Now," press release, June 13, 2022, at <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/global-nuclear-arsenals-are-expected-grow-states-continue-modernize-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

¹⁰ Wilfred Wan and Tytti Erästö, "Looking beyond the NPT: Next Steps in Arms Control and Disarmament," in SIPRI, September 6, 2022, at <https://sipri.org/commentary/essay/2022/looking-beyond-npt-next-steps-arms-control-and-disarmament> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

These will be important steps. However, what is needed most of all is a shift away from the pursuit of security through military capability to investing in peace and common security. Once again, cooperation will be key.

How evidence underpins cooperation

Successful cooperation needs to be underpinned by reliable, non-partisan information and analysis. As Secretary-General Guterres declares in *Our Common Agenda*: “Now is the time to end the ‘infodemic’ plaguing our world by defending a common, empirically backed consensus around facts, science and knowledge”.¹¹

The Secretary-General correctly characterizes “facts, science and knowledge” as a public good that it is in everyone’s interest to protect. They provide valuable common ground for discussion—even when trust between the parties is lacking. They inform effective solutions. They make it possible to verify that others are following rules and living up to commitments. They give early warning of emerging challenges and imminent dangers.

The *Environment of Peace* report highlights the fact that risks and uncertainty lie not just in the external challenges we face, but also in the actions taken to address them in the transition towards sustainability. This transition needs to happen at unprecedented scale and speed, using novel solutions in an environment of uncertainty. There will inevitably be setbacks, unintended, unanticipated consequences of well-intentioned policies. There will also be resistance, parties who need convincing that the benefits justify the costs.

To keep the transition just and peaceful will demand communication, cooperation, trust and agility to deal with unexpected risks and change course quickly to avert them. For this, we will need to produce and disseminate even more reliable and verified information. SIPRI will continue to be a resource in this regard.

¹¹ United Nations, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Opportunities for change

The U.N. General Assembly has a highly ambitious agenda for transformative change. The landmark Summit of the Future, scheduled for September 2024, has been billed as “the moment to agree on concrete solutions to challenges that have emerged or grown since 2015”.¹² The COP27¹³—the 27th Conference of the Parties to the 1992 U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change—in November 2022, and the much-postponed 15th Conference of the Parties of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity¹⁴ in December 2022 are other important opportunities to reduce future security risks at the multilateral level.

However important intergovernmental forums like this are, the task of tackling our interconnected challenges is continuous and society-wide. Solutions need to come at the multilateral, national and subnational levels. And they need to engage a broad range of stakeholders, from youth to Indigenous Peoples to the private sector. Reliable information and expertise must be available to guide all of this.

I am both proud and daunted to be picking up the mantle of Chair of the SIPRI Governing Board as we confront these difficult challenges ahead. SIPRI’s core mission as a source of freely available, reliable evidence, fair-minded analysis and balanced assessment of options, as a convenor of dialogues, and as a provider of support to the formulation and implementation of international agreements and instruments remains as important as ever.

¹² “‘Twin Summits’ to Pave Way for Sustainable, Equitable, Inclusive Future,” in DG Knowledge Hub, August 10, 2022, at <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/twin-summits-to-pave-way-for-sustainable-equitable-inclusive-future/> (date consulted: February 28, 2023).

¹³ See the Conference’s web page at <https://cop27.org/#/>

¹⁴ See the Conference’s web page at <https://www.cbd.int/conferences/2021-2022>