

Transforming global governance: Crafting sustainable peace through Global South perspectives

By Ibrahim Khan

This essay examines the need for long-term peacekeeping to protect future generations, drawing on early twentieth-century critiques of international legal and political infrastructure, from parts of the world now commonly referred to as the Global South. It highlights foundational flaws in international organisations and legal structures that perpetuate global inequalities and conflicts. Arguing that sustainable peace requires addressing such structural inequalities and power imbalances, this essay proposes comprehensive reforms to the UN Security Council so as to encourage more representative decision-making. It also emphasises the importance of grassroots movements and disarmament efforts in achieving lasting peace. By bridging historical critiques with contemporary challenges, this analysis offers a framework for transforming global governance to create a more peaceful world for future generations.

Keywords: *Global South; positive peace; UN Security Council reform; structural inequalities; disarmament*

Introduction

The world is in crisis today. Conflicts in Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, the Congo and elsewhere threaten populations and the infrastructures that support them. War is relentless, continuing despite popular movements, diplomatic efforts, and international courts aiming to bring it to an end. The costs of these ongoing wars are tragically high, as more instances of horrific violence come to light day by day. As United Nations (hereafter, UN) officials reported in March 2024, the number of children killed in Gaza over the four months prior to that date was greater than the number of children killed in conflicts worldwide over the past four years (United Nations 2024). The high intensity of modern warfare, enabled by large bombs and weapons which destroy life and the conditions that sustain it, threatens to destroy peace and justice for generations to come. We must urgently address this situation.

A young person born in the last decade or two would only ever have known a world at war. Throughout their life, this person would have heard of foreign invasions, emerging threats of nuclear strikes and nuclear proliferation, the rise of autonomous weapons, and intensifying superpower conflict. And these are just a few of the indicators of an increasingly unstable world. Reversing these trends is not easy. Yet this is a necessary step if we wish to ensure that future generations are not consumed by war and can inherit life-sustaining conditions. Right now, war costs countless lives each year and leads to an even a greater number of devastating injuries. It diverts large amounts of resources into the manufacturing of weapons and defence systems, at a time when the world urgently requires investment into climate change, public health, crumbling infrastructure, education access, poverty and hunger, and various other urgent crises. If the world continues along its current trajectory each of these unfolding crises will be left to develop unchecked, and war will continue to devastate populations

on a large scale. A world marked by war is a world marked by every kind of harm, injustice, and neglect.

A young person born in the last decade or two would only ever have known a world at war. Throughout their life, this person would have heard of foreign invasions, emerging threats of nuclear strikes and nuclear proliferation, the rise of autonomous weapons, and intensifying superpower conflict. And these are just a few of the indicators of an increasingly unstable world.

How, then, do we build a world that is not marked by war, and where violence is not commonplace? This question was posed repeatedly throughout the twentieth century: at the end of the First World War, and then again at the end of the Second World War. In each instance, diplomats, international lawyers, public officials, and popular leaders decided to develop an international organisation that would structure and maintain peace. In its time, the League of Nations (hereafter, ‘the League’; founded in January 1920) was unprecedented in its scope and ambition. Yet it had serious flaws in how it regulated peace, including a lack of enforcement mechanisms, entanglement with European imperial interests, and a weak organisational structure. When the Second World War started, it was widely agreed that the League had failed in its mission to maintain global peace, and that an alternative organisation should take its place. When the United Nations was later founded in 1945, many of the design failures of the League were addressed, in the hope that that would allow the new organisation to maintain peace more effectively. Thus, it was ensured that prominent countries such as the United States were included as members. Indeed, official statehood was tied to membership of this new international body. Furthermore, the right to enter international conflict was limited to situations of self-defence or cases authorised by the UN Security Council. This constraint sought to prevent states from going to war after arbitration failed, as the League had permitted.

In theory, this new organisation, which structures our understanding of the laws of peace and conflict to this day, had strong mechanisms in place to ensure that peace would be the norm for future generations. The foundational Charter of the United Nations opened with the following promise to protect future generations: “We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind [...]” (United Nations 1945). However, almost immediately after the new organisation’s founding, the world lurched into war once again: the Cold War framed most of international history in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather than heralding a world free from war, this new era retained many elements of the early twentieth century, as fighting continued undeterred around the globe. This crisis continues unabated today, as our generation continues to be consumed by war. This lack of peace threatens to destroy any

possibility of stability and justice for years to come. Therefore, just as the architects of the United Nations imagined a bold new organisation that would establish sustainable peace, we too must be ambitious in our imaginations. We must try to understand the challenges which face our current structures and develop strategies for addressing them. This does not necessarily mean that we must replace the UN. From a practical perspective, we should think about what substantive changes can be made to the UN and other existing international organisations, to help them succeed in their goal of maintaining peace. But we must be ambitious in these changes. It is important that we recognise that many challenges we face today are deeply embedded in the structure of our current organisations. Only by overcoming such engrained shortcomings can these organisations truly fulfil the role for which they were ostensibly designed. Thus, while it is important to remain practical, it is also important to push the limits of what is possible, for that is the only way to acquire peace.

The foundational Charter of the United Nations opened with the following promise to protect future generations: “We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind”.

Unlike in the case of the League of Nations, the problems facing the current international system are not immediately obvious. War is illegal under international law, other than in cases of self-defence and UN Security Council authorisation – a rule from which no UN member state is exempt. What, then, can the international community do to help bring about peace, if its highest organs and principles cannot – in their current form – prevent war?

Exploring often forgotten insights from parts of the world now commonly referred to as the Global South is one helpful avenue for diagnosing the challenges in the structure of international political and legal organisations today. Operating in the margins of dominant narratives, Global South voices have for decades developed extensive critiques of the design and function of the international legal and political apparatus. Recovering the critiques of such thinkers can thus give us invaluable insight into bringing about a sustainable peace for future generations which redresses global inequality and other root causes of conflict. Indeed, just as the contributions of thinkers from the Global South are often excluded from literature reviews or forgotten in debate, so too have the interests of the Global South been neglected in the arrangement of global power, as a few major powers continue to dominate international peacekeeping structures such as the UN Security Council.

The first section of this paper thus uses primary archival sources to recover some of these critiques. In particular, the paper focuses on early twentieth-century critiques of international organisations by thinkers from the Global South, such as the Bengali poet and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Indian civil servant N.B. Bonarjee (1901–?), and Indian jurist Radhabinod Pal (1886–1967). These thinkers all highlighted how the League or the UN created new problems in the distribution of global power through the ways they prioritised certain interventions to bring about peace. This section also considers the theme of international tribunals and courts, by revisiting early critiques of these bodies from the perspective of the Global South. Finally, this section considers debates in the UN General Assembly between

the 1940s and 1970s about the definition of aggression in international law. These debates help us shine light on some of the challenges present in developing a sustainable peace.

The second section then moves from diagnosis and analysis to prescription. It asks the following questions: What can we learn from the experience of the Global South when developing specific policy proposals? What changes should be made to the international legal and political apparatus to bring about meaningful, sustainable peace? This second section offers specific policy proposals for the international level, but also national and local levels. Though ambitious, they are achievable with sufficient effort and willpower. This essay pays particular attention to the UN Security Council, as an institution which embodies many of the systemic issues identified by thinkers from the Global South. The Council’s structure, with its permanent members and veto power, reflects historical power imbalances and often perpetuates rather than resolves global conflicts. By using the Security Council as a case study, this article discusses broader issues within the international legal and political infrastructure and proposes concrete reforms that address both specific institutional failings and overarching concerns raised by Global South perspectives. Thus, this essay seeks to bridge the gap between historical critiques and contemporary challenges, arguing that early critiques from the Global South remain remarkably relevant to our current geopolitical landscape. By integrating these perspectives into an analysis of present-day institutions, we can develop a comprehensive framework for reform that addresses the root causes of global instability and injustice.

Operating in the margins of dominant narratives, Global South voices have for decades developed extensive critiques of the design and function of the international legal and political apparatus. Recovering the critiques of such thinkers can give us invaluable insight into bringing about a sustainable peace for future generations. Indeed, just as the contributions of thinkers from the Global South are often forgotten in debate, so too have the interests of the Global South been neglected in the arrangement of global power, as a few major powers continue to dominate international peacekeeping structures such as the UN Security Council.

This essay thus adopts an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines historical analysis, political theory, and comparative analysis. It draws on archival research and primary texts from key Global South figures to recover early critiques of the League of Nations and the United Nations, situating these perspectives within their historical contexts. Through the lens of political theory, the essay then applies these historical critiques to contemporary power imbalances in international governance systems, connecting them to theoretical conceptions of peace such as Johan Galtung’s distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ peace (see Galtung 1976). A comparative approach enables an examination of how these critiques have developed over time, highlighting both continuity and change in the Global South’s engagement with global governance. This interdisciplinary framework – historical, theoretical, and comparative – facilitates a robust analysis of systemic flaws in international organisations. By bridging historical insights with contemporary challenges, this methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of persistent issues in global governance and informs the development of innovative solutions for achieving sustainable peace.

Ultimately, I contend that building sustainable peace requires

more than piecemeal adjustments to existing structures. Instead, we must embrace transformative changes that reorient the international legal and political infrastructure towards equality, justice, and cooperation. Only through such fundamental reforms can we hope to create a world where peace is not just an aspiration but a lasting reality for future generations. The stakes cannot be overstated. If we manage to reform the international system in this way, we can hope that our generation might one day experience peace, and that peace will become the established norm for future generations.

Insights from the Global South: lessons for building peace

Rabindranath Tagore and moving beyond a 'non-war situation'

In 1916, in the middle of the First World War, the Bengali poet and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore arrived in the United States for a lecture tour. Tagore, who had been active in the peace movement in the years prior to 1916, viewed the war as a logical outcome of the “self-interest” and “overgrown materialism” that he attributed to unchecked capitalism and nationalism (Tagore 1916: 6). Interviewed upon his arrival in New York, Tagore argued that as long as disparate groups were driven by their own self-interest and not by the interests of humanity on the whole, “peace [would be] but temporary and other clashes [were] bound to come” (Tagore 1916: 6). He suggested that for peace to truly arise, “a new readjustment of things is necessary, a new age, when the idea of nationalism will be discarded, when colonies, the storm centres of the world, will be discarded” (Tagore 1916: 6). As Tagore scholar Kalyan Kundu puts it, peace was not merely a “non-war situation” for Tagore (Kundu 2010: 83). A simple end to active hostilities was insufficient for truly achieving peace. In a certain sense, Tagore’s ideas on peace anticipated Johan Galtung’s well-known categorisation of peace as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. In Galtung’s framework, ‘negative peace’ refers to the absence of direct violence or armed conflict, representing a temporary and often fragile state where immediate hostilities have ceased but underlying issues may persist. In contrast, ‘positive peace’ denotes the presence of social justice, equality, and harmony, addressing the root causes of conflict such as poverty, discrimination, and structural violence. Positive peace aims for sustainable, long-term peace by fostering conditions that promote wellbeing and fairness within society (see Galtung 1976). Tagore’s insights into the reasons for ongoing war relate closely to – and crucially pre-date – Galtung’s conceptualisation of positive peace. Tagore emphasised that peace must not be reduced to the absence of conflict and defined in such narrow terms that were bound to lead to a resurgence of conflict.

Instead, Tagore viewed spirituality, and a morality grounded in ideals of love and truth, as pillars that humanity had to maintain, so as to create a universal humanism that could overcome war. In his address some years later to the World Peace Congress, Tagore suggested that peace could come about only if the average citizen of a powerful nation would “extricate himself from the obvious anomaly of wishing for peace whilst sharing in the spoils of war” (quoted in Quayum 2017: 9). In other words, he argued powerful nations ostensibly sought peace but remained invested in an unequal and hierarchical world constructed by war, of which they were the beneficiaries. There was no notion of universal brotherhood that would overcome such divisions, or that would motivate individuals and peoples to strive for unity and equality.

It was on these grounds that Tagore was critical of the League of Nations. Writing in April 1921, soon after the founding of the League, Tagore questioned whether peace could be brought about through such an organisation: “The West is desiring the restoration of peace through a League of Powers. But can Powers find their equilibrium in themselves?” (1921: 490). Peace would only be achieved if major powers also paid attention to the concerns of the weak, “for the weak are as great a danger for the strong, as quicksands for an elephant.” Tagore was sceptical that any attention would be given to his concern about global inequality: “I know I am crying in the wilderness, when I raise my voice of warning; and while the West is busy in its organisation for building its machine-made peace, it will still continue to nourish, with its iniquities, underground forces of earthquake in the vast bosom of the Eastern Continent” (1921: 491). Tagore recognised that this superficial, “machine-made” peace was a result of powerful nations preferring their safety over any kind of meaningful repair: “So long as the Powers build a League on the foundation of their desire for safety, and for securest enjoyment of gains – for consolidation of past injustice, for putting off reparation of wrongs, while their fingers still wriggle for grabbing and still reek of blood – rifts will appear in their union, and conflicts in future will take greater force and magnitude” (1921: 491).

N.B. Bonarjee and curtailing national sovereignty

Many of Tagore’s contemporaries had their own concerns about the League. For example, Oxford-trained Indian civil servant N.B. Bonarjee presented two rival theories of international relations in an article in *The Indian Review*. The first, which Bonarjee traced back to the Dutch diplomat and jurist Hugo Grotius, was rooted in international law and aimed to expand the reach of law and morality so that they would govern all international affairs; this approach culminated in the founding of the League of Nations. The second theory, which Bonarjee attributed to Niccolò Machiavelli, aimed to curtail law and expand the complete power of the state, seeing it as the source of all morality. This idea of absolute sovereignty, Bonarjee argued, manifested in fascist thought, which, at the time of his writing, was rising across Europe. Bonarjee observed the growing fascist presence in Germany and Italy with alarm, and he refuted optimistic Western analysts who viewed the League as a harbinger of global peace. On the contrary, Bonarjee asserted, “the present state of International politics cannot be regarded in so optimistic a light” (1927: 157). Bonarjee worried that the continued presence of both the theory and practice of absolute state sovereignty – now in the form of fascism – would ultimately lead to conflict. Even while Britain and France and other nations embraced the first theory of international relations by joining the League and espousing internationalism, the second theory of international relations was rearing its ugly head. Support for the absolute power of the state and extreme nationalism was growing in Europe through the popularity of writers such as Heinrich von Treitschke, the nineteenth-century ardent nationalist who advocated for a German empire. But even while Bonarjee presented two competing, timeless ideas of international relations and suggested that their mutual presence risked another world war, he also questioned the hard distinction between the two. He wrote that if we considered fascism not from the perspective of its domestic policy, but rather “as a factor in International Relations”, and examine the “foreign policy of Fascism [that] flows directly from the doctrine of Machiavelli and his heirs and successors”, then perhaps the difference between these two

theories was not so clear-cut (Bonarjee 1927: 155). The fascist approach to international relations entailed three principles, Bonarjee said, drawing on Treitschke's writings. First, the "idealization of power means the idealization of war." Powerful nations had to keep expanding; if a nation did not constantly expand, it would die. In this sense, nationalism had an outward-looking component: it encouraged a nation's continuous expansion. Second, the fascist approach meant a rejection of expansive notions of international law or global governance. In Treitschke's words, a "state cannot renounce its sovereignty," which meant that a state could not enter into any agreement that permanently curtailed its power. And third, this approach included a repudiation of the ideal of "international brotherhood" (Bonarjee 1927: 155). If one state pursued power, all other states would be forced to do the same, even if only for the sake of self-preservation. The idea of working for the good of humanity at large was nonsensical and impractical, according to this theory. This was the dangerous world of competition over power and the constant threat of war that fascist theory recognised and advocated. However, as Bonarjee pointed out, this was not a world built only by German nationalists, but one also built by British and French nationalists and the various liberal powers that now composed the League, and allegedly supported the first theory of international relations. Treitschke was not alone in subscribing to the view that "colonial expansion [was] essential for national power"; other European nations and empires did the same (Bonarjee 1927: 155). In fact, Treitschke triumphantly pointed to Great Britain and its expansionist empire as proof of his theories surrounding empire and nationalism.

Bonarjee's analysis highlighted a critical paradox within the functioning of the League of Nations: while purportedly established to foster peace and international cooperation, it simultaneously upheld a system that prioritised national sovereignty, particularly for powerful European states with imperial legacies.

Joseph Chamberlain, to consider just one example from England, argued in 1899 that the "future of the world lay with great empires. The watchword of the state must be colonies; sea power, and always more sea power for the sake of expansion" (Bonarjee 1927: 155). This was not merely a theoretical matter for European empires, Bonarjee pointed out. This expansionist policy could be seen "in the partition of the African Continent between England, France, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, and Italy in the later 19th and early part of the 20th centuries" (Bonarjee 1927: 155-156). Because the major League powers were broadly implicated in this foreign policy, the League's effectiveness was limited. The League of Nations was "but an organ of National Governments: and these in turn merely reflect the spirit of the nations concerned [...] only if there be present a will to work it, can its machinery as an organization of international peace function" (1927: 157). Given the rise of fascism in Europe and the continued investment of various League members in imperialism, Bonarjee was sceptical that the League could ever serve as a barrier against war. In short, Bonarjee's analysis highlighted a critical paradox within the functioning of the League of Nations: while purportedly established to foster peace and international cooperation, it simultaneously upheld a system that prioritised national sovereignty, particularly for powerful European states with imperial legacies. Bonarjee argued that this tension between international law and state sovereignty undermined the League's capacity to prevent conflict. His critique underscores a key theme of this paper: early

twentieth-century thinkers from the Global South recognised that the entrenched notion of absolute state sovereignty, especially in the context of deep inequalities and imperial legacies, created a form of structural inequality that made achieving genuine peace extremely challenging.

Radhabinod Pal, the international community, and the possibility of peace

Alongside Bonarjee's insights into the functioning of international organisations, thinkers from the Global South also offered important critiques of the functioning of international courts and tribunals. One case that diverged from the dominant view of contemporary international jurisprudence was Judge Radhabinod Pal's dissent during the Tokyo Trials after the Second World War, which tried military leaders of the Japanese empire for crimes against peace. Most significantly, Pal argued that no true international community existed. Both prosecutors and judges had argued that Japan's actions during the war must be considered aggressive, as they undermined an international community, understood either as a natural inclination of people towards solidarity and togetherness, or as established by a series of treaties that Japan had been a part of prior to its invasion of Manchuria. For Pal, however, the notion of an international community was an unfounded assumption in these arguments that, once challenged, changed how this line of reasoning could be made. Pal argued that international treaties meant that Japan was a part of international *society* in a broad sense, but that was different from there being a *community*. Here Pal drew on legal academic Georg Schwarzenberger in distinguishing between a community and a society. A community depends on "the solidarity of its members, a cohesive force without which the community cannot exist", such as church or family (Pal 1955: 5). A society, in contrast, is a group of entities that have diverging interests, brought together by necessity, their larger affinity serving to manage their conflicting interests. For a community, law only formalises "customary behaviour, which would be observed even without its existence." For a society, on the other hand, the purpose of law is to "make limited co-operation possible." In Pal's view, "the international association of the present day is at best only a society" (Pal 1955: 6). Instead of a truly international community, there was only a "partial community of interests" that did not reflect the will of every state. This was no accident, but instead was the aim and function of modern international law, which was "developed as a means for regulating external contacts rather than as an expression of the life of a true society" (Pal 1953: 48). For Pal, a society of this sort would necessarily be unequal given the varying levels of power of its members and the contradictory goals they would pursue. There was no external power that had binding power over the various states, and there was no international body that could force states to submit to arbitration in times of conflict. Thus, despite all efforts to institutionalise international solidarity, Pal concluded that the international order was still defined by the sovereignty of nation-states. Although Pal acknowledged that there had been an increase in internationalist sentiment since the Second World War, he noted that there was a difference between sentiment and reality. "This [change] is yet to happen," he wrote, and the current state of "international organisation [...] still does not indicate any sign of abrogation of the doctrine of national sovereignty in the near future" (Pal 1955: 14). Ultimately, Pal hoped that the norm of national sovereignty would be weakened so as to create a true international community based upon global solidarity and shared interests.

One immediate consequence of Pal's assessment that no meaningful international community existed was that international law was diminished in its scope and applicability. Just as the idea of society was vaguely defined and inherently unequal, similarly any international law that emerged to govern such a society might loosely coordinate agreements in a narrow sense, but would ultimately remain aspirational. It would also remain reflective of an international hierarchy skewed towards the interests of a few major powers in the Global North. This meant that international criminal law was impossible to apply in any meaningful way.

On this basis, Pal argued that it was not possible to draw up a coherent theory international criminal responsibility for war, because criminal law required a high level of maturation of the legal system: "the conception of criminal responsibility in international life can arise only when that life itself reaches a certain stage in its development" (Pal 1955: 7). Pal argued that in such a loose sense of law, none of the various theories in criminal law justifying punishment could apply.

In the various proposals for international order that had emerged since the end of the war, there had not been any that tried to bring about what Pal considered to be real peace. None of these proposals addressed the underlying conditions that led to war in the first place, such as the stark inequalities between nations that arose from exploitative historic or current interactions, unfair international rules that newly independent states might never have agreed to, economic coercion, and other forms of indirect hostilities.

The other major challenge that the absence of international community posed for international criminal law was that it made peace impossible to define. For it to be conceivable to introduce criminal responsibility for disturbing the peace, Pal argued that peace must exist in the first place. We must be able to say that international life is already "established on some peaceful basis," the infringement of which constitutes a crime (Pal 1955: 7). Yet Pal vehemently disagreed with the idea that the contemporary international order was characterised by peace in any meaningful sense. Peace in that international order "is only a negative concept [...] a negation of war, or an assurance of the *status quo*." The world was not truly at peace: "The basis of international relations is still the competitive struggle of states, a struggle for the solution of which there is still no judge, no executor, no standard of decision. There are still dominated and enslaved nations, and there is no provision anywhere in the system for any peaceful readjustment without struggle. It is left to the nations themselves to see to the readjustment" (Pal 1955: 12). Pal, like Tagore, contested the idea of peace as a lack of active fighting, pointing to the fact that political and economic domination continued to shape international affairs.

For Pal, the only kind of peace that was possible to define in the absence of an international community was very reductive. This was a negative peace characterised by a lack of active, ongoing armed hostilities. But this was not "real international peace" for Pal (1953: 57). In the various proposals for international order that had emerged since the end of the war, there had not been any that tried to bring about what Pal considered to be real peace. None of these proposals addressed the underlying conditions that led to war in the first place, such as the stark inequalities between nations that arose from exploitative historic or current interactions, unfair international rules that newly independent states

might never have agreed to, economic coercion, and other forms of indirect hostilities. International peace also required reduced forms of sovereignty that allowed for a true international community to develop, and for international law to take precedence over the whims of individual states. Pal warned that these structural changes relating to sovereignty and the development of international community had to be brought about politically through the mutual agreement of states; these were not changes that an international court would be able to undertake on its own.

Defining aggression at the United Nations

Shortly after the UN was founded, it became apparent that the implementation of the veto power of the five permanent members would hinder any attempts of the UN Security Council to effectively maintain peace. At that point, the UN General Assembly asserted responsibility of collective security in its landmark 'Uniting for Peace' resolution, claiming the right to recommend "collective measures, including in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression" (UN General Assembly 1950).

One area where this investment of the General Assembly in matters of war and peace manifested was in debates over the definition of 'aggression'. The notion of aggression, frequently used in international law to assign blame in the outbreak of a war, had a long history, predating the First World War but becoming especially significant in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the crime of aggression was prosecuted by an international court for the first time. In the Nuremberg Trials, the court stated that initiating a war of aggression "is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole" (International Military Tribunal 1946). Aggression thus appeared as a central concept in emerging international criminal jurisprudence, yet it had no commonly accepted definition.

While historically debates over the definition of aggression tended to be limited to Western states, after the Second World War and the beginnings of decolonisation, newly independent states in the Global South joined the conversation. They put forth unprecedentedly expansive accounts of aggression. For them, aggression was not limited to armed attack, but extended to economic aggression, ideological aggression, and other forms of indirect aggression. In the 1952 UN General Assembly debate, representatives of Afghanistan, Cuba, and Iran emphasised that economic pressure in the context of inequality led to the same result as any other form of aggression: "to force the victim to yield to the aggressor's will" (United Nations 1952). During the 1953 Special Committee proceedings on the topic, the Bolivian delegate maintained that economic aggression violated the political independence of states and their sovereign equality, and it could lead to consequences such as civil war and famine. Drafts of proposed definitions of aggression were updated to reflect the desire of Asian and Latin American states to "include acts of economic, ideological and indirect aggression" (United Nations 1954).

As we can see from these developments, Global South states were concerned that reductive definitions of aggression, that were limited to active armed hostility, did not capture the various reasons for why war would break out. For this reason, delegates from the Global South attempted to push definitions in the General Assembly that included these expanded definitions of war and peace. Global South thinkers emphasised what Galtung would later label as 'positive peace', focusing on the stark inequalities and indirect

forms of exploitation that exist in the world and that formed a major cause of the outbreak of wars. Yet they went a step beyond Galtung, emphasising that understanding historical injustice was crucial dealing with the structural inequalities at play.

While historically debates over the definition of aggression were limited to Western states, after the Second World War, newly independent states in the Global South joined the conversation. They put forth unprecedentedly expansive accounts of aggression. For them, aggression was not limited to armed attack, but extended to economic aggression, ideological aggression, and other forms of indirect aggression.

Addressing global power imbalances

The critique of international peace efforts offered by thinkers from the Global South, spanning from the interwar period to the post-1945 era, presented a coherent and consistent theme: peace could not be achieved without addressing the underlying inequalities and power imbalances entrenched in the global system. From Tagore's critique that nationalism and capitalism fuelled war and imperialism, to the Global South's efforts to expand the definition of aggression within the United Nations, there was a consistent recognition that peace could not merely be the absence of armed conflict – what Galtung would later term, negative peace, instead, true peace required confronting structural inequalities, imperial legacies, and economic coercion that perpetuate global instability. Central to these critiques was the idea that international institutions often reflected and perpetuated existing power imbalances. Tagore's warnings about the “machine-made peace” of the League of Nations and Pal's dissent at the Tokyo Trials highlighted how international organisations tended to consolidate the gains of powerful nations while neglecting the concerns of weaker states. These thinkers consistently emphasised that genuine peace could not be realised in a system that allowed the powerful to maintain their dominance while offering only superficial measures of peace. A key theme underlying these critiques was the role of sovereignty in perpetuating conflict and inequality. Global South thinkers recognised that the absolute sovereignty of nation-states – particularly when wielded by powerful countries in an unequal world – was an obstacle to genuine peace and justice. In this context, they advocated for the weakening of national sovereignty, which they believed should be superseded by the power and decisions of collective decision-making bodies and international organisations. This would, they argued, create the conditions necessary for a more just and sustainable peace.

Prescriptions

The critiques offered by thinkers from the Global South provide a valuable framework for addressing the persistent challenges in our current international system, and for developing strategies for lasting peace. Their insights highlight several key issues: the need to address underlying inequalities and power imbalances, the problem of state sovereignty as an obstacle to genuine international cooperation, and the necessity of expanding our understanding of war and peace. Drawing on these perspectives, we can formulate a series of prescriptions and policies aimed at transforming global governance to better serve future generations. These recommendations range from structural reforms of international organisations to grassroots movements, aimed at creating a more equitable, just, and ultimately peaceful world order. While some of these proposals may seem ambitious, they represent necessary

steps towards addressing the systemic issues that have perpetuated conflict and instability across generations.

Consistency and equality in international organisations

One important step is the need for great powers and for international organisations to maintain consistency and avoid hypocrisy. As critiques from Global South thinkers indicate, the failure to address these issues can severely undermine the credibility and legitimacy of these institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council. When powerful nations engage in double standards – for example, by condemning certain acts of aggression while excusing or ignoring similar actions by their allies – they not only erode trust but also perpetuate injustice and instability. Consistency in applying international laws and principles is essential to ensure that all nations, regardless of their power or influence, are held to the same standards. This uniformity fosters a sense of fairness and equality, which is fundamental for the establishment of genuine peace. Hypocrisy, on the other hand, fuels resentment, perpetuates conflicts, and delegitimises the very institutions designed to maintain global order. Therefore, in today's interconnected and complex world, where the actions of one nation can have far-reaching impacts, it is important for international organisations and their member states to operate transparently and equitably. This commitment to integrity strengthens the ability of international organisations to maintain credibility in mediating conflicts and promoting lasting peace.

UN Security Council Reform

A major area of improvement that many nations in the Global South have highlighted in recent years is UN Security Council reform. As a recent report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace indicates, Global South nations have pushed for reforms that focus on increasing both the representativeness and the effectiveness of the Security Council (Patrick / Adebajo / Dayal et al. 2023). Key demands include expanding the Council's membership to be more representative, particularly by adding permanent seats for African and Latin American countries, and by limiting or reforming the veto power of the five permanent members. Others have suggested creating new categories of membership, such as semi-permanent seats, to allow for broader participation. This has been a demand of the ‘Uniting for Consensus’ group, which opposes the expansion of veto power through new permanent members, arguing this would increase the paralysis at the Security Council further. Instead, they call for longer-term seats that are eligible for re-election. This would give prominent states without permanent membership a meaningful way to engage with matters of international security, and also ensure that each of the world's major blocs is represented (Yinanç 2023: 56-57).

In addition, there have been calls to improve transparency and accountability at the Council, to redefine international peace and security to encompass issues like climate change and economic inequality, and to enhance the role of regional organisations from the Global South in council deliberations. For example, the UN has worked with the Economic Community of West African States regarding conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali, and with the African Union in Burundi and Darfur. Previous failures to act by the Security Council, however, have led to a situation whereby regional organisations are likely to act first and then report to the Security Council later (Adebajo 2023: 41). To regain trust and effectiveness, the Security Council must demonstrate clear, unified, and prompt action in coordination

with regional organisations. Collectively, these reforms seek to make the Security Council more democratic, inclusive, and better equipped to address contemporary challenges of war and peace. The veto power of the five permanent members has proven to be an especially significant cause of diplomatic standstills, as these members have the power to block otherwise popular motions. To address the persistent gridlock that has rendered the UN Security Council ineffective, it is essential to abolish the veto power and reconsider the notion of permanent membership. The current structure prevents timely and decisive action in the face of global crises. This veto power enables these five nations to block resolutions that may conflict with their interests, even when such resolutions are crucial for maintaining international peace and security. Removing the veto power would democratise decision-making within the Security Council, ensuring that no single country can unilaterally prevent collective action. In light of recent conflicts, there has been renewed attention paid to the paralysing effect of the veto power, both in the Global South and in the West. For example, Michael Ambühl, Nora Meier, and Daniel Thürer (2023) have recently suggested an expanded Security Council of ten member states, but of whom three member states would have to come together to block a resolution.

To address the persistent gridlock that has rendered the UN Security Council ineffective, it is essential to abolish the veto power and reconsider the notion of permanent membership. The current structure prevents timely and decisive action in the face of global crises.

In practical terms, a structural change of this kind would require an amendment to the UN Charter, which can be initiated by a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly and ratified by two-thirds of the member states, including all five permanent members. Although challenging, this process is necessary to foster a more equitable and effective international order. The reformed Security Council should comprise a diverse and rotating membership, representing various regions and ensuring that all voices are heard. This non-hierarchical structure would prevent dominance by any single nation or group of nations.

Decisions within this new framework could be made by a majority vote, requiring a substantial consensus before any intervention were authorised. Such a system would promote more balanced and inclusive decision-making and better reflect the collective will of the international community rather than the interests of a few powerful states. This change is critical to revitalising the Security Council's role in maintaining peace, enabling it to respond more swiftly and effectively to global threats. Ultimately, this would foster a more just and stable world order.

This reformed structure of the Security Council could also significantly enhance the international community's ability to address civil wars, which are among the most prevalent and devastating forms of violence today. Civil wars often lead to prolonged suffering, displacement, and instability, not just within affected countries but also in neighbouring regions. Under the current system, international intervention in civil wars is frequently impeded by the veto power, allowing geopolitical interests to overshadow humanitarian needs. By eliminating the veto and implementing a majority voting system, the reformed Security Council would be better equipped to take timely and decisive action to mediate and resolve internal conflicts. Moreover, the inclusive and non-hierarchical nature of this reformed body would enable it to approach

civil wars with a nuanced understanding of local contexts, fostering more effective and sustainable solutions. This would not only help in ending immediate hostilities but also in addressing the root causes of civil conflict, thereby contributing to long-term peace and stability.

Codifying the UN General Assembly's peacekeeping role

Until the UN Security Council is reformed, we must rely on the intervention of the UN General Assembly – a more democratically organised and representative body than the Security Council. There is strong precedent for this kind of intervention. Since the 'Uniting for Peace' resolution of 1950, the UN General Assembly has stepped in on occasions where the Security Council has faced gridlock and has been unable to come to some kind of resolution or action to bring about peace. This role of the General Assembly has been especially important in recent months, as the crises in Ukraine and Gaza have faced impossible odds in the Security Council (with Russia blocking action regarding the former, the United States regarding the latter). As a result, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution ES-11/1, which condemns the Russian aggression against Ukraine and demands an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces, and Resolution ES-10/22, which calls for an immediate ceasefire and end to hostilities in Israel and Gaza. Many of these proposals at the General Assembly have been spearheaded by nations in the Global South, highlighting the continuing role that such nations have held in trying to bring about genuine peace since the days of the League.

These recent actions underscore the General Assembly's capacity to represent global consensus and moral authority in cases when the Security Council is deadlocked. The frequency and gravity of such interventions also highlight an urgent need to formally expand and codify the General Assembly's peacekeeping powers. Until comprehensive reform democratises the Security Council and eliminates the paralysing effect of the veto power, the international community must fully leverage the General Assembly's potential. This could include mechanisms for swift emergency sessions, enhanced enforcement capabilities for Assembly resolutions, and greater coordination between the Assembly and regional organisations. Empowering the General Assembly in this manner would not only provide a more representative forum for addressing global crises but would also incentivise reform within the Security Council itself, ultimately strengthening the UN's overall capacity to maintain international peace and security.

Renewed movement for disarmament

Fourth, a renewed movement for disarmament is essential for fostering a safer and more peaceful world. This movement must encompass both formal treaties and grassroots efforts to challenge the pervasive influence of the arms industry. Treaties play a crucial role in establishing legal frameworks and commitments to reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear arsenals and other weapons of mass destruction. However, these efforts must be complemented by popular movements that raise awareness and mobilise public opinion against the proliferation of arms. Such movements can exert pressure on governments to adopt and adhere to disarmament agreements, while also advocating for the redirection of resources from military expenditures to vital areas such as education, healthcare, and sustainable development. By discouraging the arms industry and reducing the demand for weapons, these movements can help dismantle the economic incentives that drive militarisation. Similarly, popular movements must pressure

governments to adhere to existing laws – such as the Leahy Law – prohibiting arm transfers to units responsible for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. A comprehensive approach to disarmament, integrating both top-down and bottom-up strategies, is crucial for creating the conditions necessary for lasting peace and security for future generations.

Strengthening global institutions and multifaceted approaches to peacebuilding

As we have seen, then, increasing harmony between nations and developing the real conditions of peace requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both immediate conflicts and the underlying causes of discord. True peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, equality, and mutual respect among nations. This can be achieved through sustained diplomatic efforts, fostering dialogue and understanding, and promoting economic and social cooperation. Nations must work together to reduce inequalities and address global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and human rights abuses. Strengthening international institutions to ensure fair representation and equitable decision-making processes is also crucial. Educational and cultural exchange programs can play a significant role in building bridges between diverse communities, fostering mutual respect and understanding. By addressing structural issues and fostering a culture of collaboration and solidarity, the international community can create an environment where peace is not just a temporary respite from conflict but a stable and enduring reality.

Strengthening the international legal and political infrastructure as a whole is imperative to prevent wars and sustain global peace. Crucially, as early twentieth-century thinkers from the Global South have argued, strengthening the international system necessitates a reconsideration of state sovereignty. This involves reducing the absolute sovereignty of individual states in favour of a more collective approach to global governance – a demand that was central to Global South critiques in the early days of international organisations such as the League of Nations and the UN and has proven to be prescient. Furthermore, bolstering the international justice system to hold violators accountable is crucial for deterring aggression and promoting the rule of law. By fostering greater transparency, reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies, and ensuring equitable representation of all member states, international organisations can gain the legitimacy and authority needed to act decisively. A strengthened international framework, built on principles of fairness, justice, and collective security, with a more nuanced understanding of sovereignty, is essential for creating a world where the threat of war is significantly diminished and where lasting peace can thrive.

Strengthening the international legal and political infrastructure as a whole is imperative to prevent wars and sustain global peace. Crucially, as early twentieth-century thinkers from the Global South have argued, strengthening the international system necessitates a reconsideration of state sovereignty.

Conclusion

The pursuit of long-term peace for future generations necessitates bold and transformative changes in our international system. Drawing on the insights of early twentieth-century thinkers from the Global South, we see the critical importance of addressing the structural inequalities and inconsistencies that have historically undermined efforts to maintain global peace. The current

challenges faced by international organisations highlight the need for reform to ensure these bodies operate with integrity, fairness, and effectiveness. For example, removing the veto power and restructuring the United Nations Security Council to include a more diverse and equitable representation can prevent the gridlock that hinders timely and decisive action. These changes, coupled with a non-hierarchical decision-making process, would enhance the UN's ability to respond to both international and civil conflicts. Moreover, reviving movements for disarmament and promoting harmony between nations are crucial steps toward creating the real conditions for peace. By integrating treaties with grassroots campaigns that challenge the arms industry, we can reduce the global proliferation of weapons and redirect resources toward human development. Strengthening the international legal and political infrastructure, through enhanced cooperation, robust enforcement mechanisms, and a commitment to justice, will provide the foundation needed to prevent wars and sustain peace. As we address these structural issues and foster a culture of collaboration and solidarity, we create an environment where peace is not just the absence of conflict but a stable and enduring reality. Ultimately, the responsibility of building a peaceful future rests with us. By learning from past failures and embracing the wisdom of diverse perspectives, particularly those from the Global South, we can develop a more inclusive and resilient international system. This system, grounded in justice and equality, can ensure that future generations inherit a world where peace is not an elusive dream but a tangible reality. The stakes are high, and the path ahead is challenging, but with collective effort and unwavering commitment, we can create a legacy of peace that will benefit humanity for generations to come.

Ultimately, the responsibility of building a peaceful future rests with us. By learning from past failures and embracing the wisdom of diverse perspectives we can develop a more inclusive and resilient international system. This system, grounded in justice and equality, can ensure that future generations inherit a world where peace is not an elusive dream but a tangible reality.

References

- Adebajo, Adekeye (2023): Nigeria. In: Patrick, Stewart / Adebajo, Adekeye / Dayal, Anjali et al. (eds.): UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Ambühl, Michael / Meier, Nora / Thürer, Daniel (14 Jun. 2023): Eine Reform des UN-Sicherheitsrats ist möglich. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/staat-und-recht/eine-reform-des-un-sicherheitsrats-ist-moeglich-18963691.html>. Viewed 10 October 2024.
- Bonarjee, N. B. (1927): Fascism and International Politics. In: The Indian Review, 28 (3), 153-157.
- Galtung, Johan (1976): Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking and Peacebuilding. In: Galtung, Johan (ed.): Essays in Peace Research. Vol. 2. Copenhagen: Ejlers, 282-304.

International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg) Judgment (1946): Nuremberg Trial Proceedings. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/09-30-46.asp>. Viewed 8 October 2024.

Kundu, Kalyan (2010): Rabindranath Tagore and World Peace. In: *Asiatic*, 4 (1), 77-86.

Pal, Radhabinod (1955): *Crimes in International Relations*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press.

Pal, Radhabinod (1953): *International Military Tribunal for the Far East: Dissident Judgment of Justice R. B. Pal*. Calcutta: Sanjal & Co.

Quayum, Mohammad A. (2017): War, Violence and Rabindranath Tagore's Quest for World Peace. In: *Transnational Literature*, 9 (2), 1-14.

Tagore, Rabindranath (1921): A Cry for Peace. In: *The Modern Review*, 29 (4), 490-491.

Tagore, Rabindranath (29 Nov. 1916): India Will be Free. In: *The New York Times*, 6.

United Nations (2024): Gaza: Number of Children Killed Higher than from Four Years of World Conflict. In: *United Nations News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147512>. Viewed 10 October 2024.

United Nations (1954): Report of the Special Committee on the Question of Defining Aggression. In: *General Assembly Official Records*. Ninth Session, Supplement No. 11 (A/2638).

United Nations (1952): The Question of Defining Aggression. In: *Yearbook of the United Nations*. United Nations Department of Global Communications, 784-791.

United Nations General Assembly (1950): Resolution 377 (V). Report of the Fifth General Assembly. <https://documents.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/059/75/pdf/nr005975.pdf>. Viewed 11 October 2024.

United Nations (1945): Preamble. In: *Charter of the United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble>. Viewed 9 October 2024.

Yinanç, Barçin (2023): Türkiye. In: Patrick, Stewart / Adebajo, Adekeye / Dayal, Anjali et al. (eds.): *UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



At the time of writing Ibrahim Khan was a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Chicago. He has research interests in international law, anticolonial legal and political thought, and global intellectual history.

Email: ibrahimkhan@uchicago.edu