



Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

Paul Rogers

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Summary

This is the final briefing in a series which began in 2003. The briefing looks back to a 2012 briefing, which assessed the state of global security in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It then looks forward to the decade ahead by taking into consideration the key events and trends from the past ten years. While noting that there are, and will likely continue to be, several onerous challenges facing the world in the next decade, the briefing also offers some grounds for hope.

Introduction

As this is the last briefing in the series it is appropriate to take a longer view. Early in the 2010s, ORG published a special briefing, *Chances for Peace in the Second Decade – What is Going Wrong and What We Must Do*. This present briefing looks back on what that earlier assessment concluded and looks forward to the new decade, taking into consideration the history of the one just ended.

The 2010s

The issues that were identified in the 2012 briefing will be familiar to ORG readers, with the interaction of two trends central to the analysis. The first was the long-term failure to deliver economic justice, leading to a still-divided world in spite of the [best efforts of the UN](#) and others to set targets for improvement. The levels of abject poverty were decreasing, but the gap was growing between a relatively marginalised majority and a minority that was consistently benefitting on a huge scale. At the same time, the marginalised majority was

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far more aware of this because of welcome improvements in education and communications, , such as the internet, over several decades.

On its own, the global socio-economic divide was an affront to justice and could well risk a decline into an era of “revolts from the margins”, but what exacerbated the risk was the increasing evidence of environmental limits to growth. This had long been recognised, both in relation to the potential for competition and conflict over basic resources - such as food and water - and even more so the ever-growing problem of climate change deteriorating into climate breakdown.

The 2012 briefing pointed to the interaction of the two factors mentioned above, the economic and environmental trends, and the risk of a bitterly divided and limited world. Moreover, that divided world could usher in an era of even greater military action to quell revolts and ensure the survival of the status quo. An attitude of “liddism”- keeping the lid on dissent rather than addressing the underlying problems - may have been seen as the appropriate way forward but would ultimately be self-defeating in the long run.

The briefing argued that the 2010s were seen as the decade in which policies had to change . But it also noted that there were responses to the predicaments that could contribute to a much more sustainable and peaceful world. In pointing to positive signs, the briefing highlighted the many initiatives to respond to the risk of climate breakdown, both at the community level but also with the progressive policies of some governments. In spite of the failure of the COP 15 climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, the early improvements in the use of renewable energy resources showed the potential for rapid decarbonisation . In particular, there were positive indications of technological progress in wind and solar power that promised even more substantial cuts in

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costs in the near future. Climate change denial was a very active industry, with transnational corporations and fossil carbon-rich countries determined to maintain the status quo. But there was growing evidence that energy trends, most notably an increasing shift to the use of renewables, might at last be against them.

On the need for a more just economic system, it was acknowledged that progress had been slow with neoliberalism, an approach that required heavy losers as well as big winners, still largely dominant. Good work was going on but there was much more to be done before there was even a prospect of change at state and global levels. Though it did not provide the wake up it should have done for many, the 2008 credit crunch had provided further evidence that neoliberal economics were not fit for purpose. Similarly, the military-industrial complex was both intact and powerful, with the analysis of alternatives still in its early stages. The briefing concluded with a suggestion of hope, with the realisation of the nature of the human predicament becoming clearer while acknowledging the need of individuals, communities and think tanks to do much more.

Into the 2020s

Nearly a decade later, where do we stand? It is a mixed message but there are certainly some signs of hope. However, it is also a time when the immediate and long-term impact of the shocking world-wide COVID-19 pandemic is serving as a huge complication.

Four failed wars. We can start with the issue of security, making three points in the process. One is that current military approaches should be recognised for what they are – four grim failures. The war on terror started off with the

termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the dispersal of the al-Qaida movement. Nearly twenty years later the Taliban are at the centre of peace talks, control much of rural Afghanistan and will likely end up with a major role in the governance of the country that could become dominant. While reduced in impact, al-Qaida is still present in Afghanistan and has links with paramilitary groups right across the Sahel region of the Sahara.

In Iraq the invasion and occupation in 2003 appeared to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime, but it also started a series of bitter conflicts that lasted eight years, saw hundreds of thousands of people killed and maimed, and millions of people displaced. The instability also gave rise to an even more brutal offshoot of al-Qaida in Iraq, ISIS. In Libya in 2011 a six-month air war resulted in the termination of the Gaddafi regime, but the aftermath saw a period of intense instability that continues, as well as dispersing armaments, munitions and paramilitaries across the Sahel and beyond. The current conflict in Libya has taken on a different character to the one which started nearly ten years ago. Several international actors are now backing various sides in the conflict and many armed factions compete for control of land and resources. Civilians populations in Libya have suffered heavily as a consequence of the conflict.

Finally, the intense but largely unreported four-year air and drone war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2018 appeared on the surface to be a highly successful example of remote warfare. Well over 60,000 ISIS supporters were killed and the much-vaunted Caliphate terminated with hardly any coalition casualties and little political or public accountability. Indeed few people outside the military had much idea of what was even going on. It seemed a great success but ISIS is still entrenched in both countries, is active

across the Sahel and in Afghanistan and continues to spread its messages, ready for further opportunities as they emerge.

Meanwhile military budgets across the world are either **stable or rising**. The UK has cut its foreign aid and diverted the savings into the military, while seeking a return to a global Britain that relies on military power to impress. Despite the economic shock suffered to Britain's finances from the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently a 16-billion-pound increase in defense spending.

There is good work and progress being made on thinking through alternatives, not least with the Rethinking Security group in the UK and similar groups in many other countries. These organisations produce sound ideas for new approaches that recognise the futility of militarism in a constrained world. They will, though, be more effective if the existing system, that military-industrial complex is systematically held to account. While a starting point to do this is the failed wars, it has to be far more sustained at a time when the great majority of security thinking is still part of the complex. There are few resources available for critical analysis of the many failures and of the need for alternatives.

Environment The 2012 briefing did point to reasons for optimism and it is here that the past few years have been so significant. There have been many problems. The fossil carbon establishment – corporations, countries, think tanks and interest groups – all continued to argue for carbon-based economies. These calls were aided by leaders including Putin and Trump who were either disinterested in acting or even adamantly denying of the problem. Against this, though, have been three impressive developments. Technological change has been remarkable, with more and more renewable resources now

exploitable at below the grid parity costs of fossil carbon. A revolution in energy storage and distribution is now feasible as are huge improvements in the efficiency of energy use, especially in space heating and transport.

The second change has been the growing awareness that climate change is for the “now”, not the future, exemplified by record high temperatures, melting polar sea ice and sheets, loss of glaciers and more extreme weather events, the latter being early signs of climate breakdown. All this is backed up by many improvements in climate science and a willingness of climate scientists to be blunter in what they really think rather than be content with consensus achieved partly by deference to outdated political views.

The final change is the huge boost in campaigning and activism, whether it be a young Swedish student tapping into a youth perception there to be enhanced, through to nonviolent campaigns involving large numbers of people across the world. The speed of this change really has been unexpected and while it may have been side-lined by the pandemic, that is well-nigh certain to prove a temporary phenomenon.

Economy and COVID-19 The forty-year experiment with economic neoliberalism has concentrated on shrinking central government, a wholesale enhancing of the private sector through relinquishing nationalised control, limiting labour relations most commonly by restricting trade unions, cuts in public spending and enhancing a tax system that benefits monetary success. All of this has been accompanied by minimal regulation of financial transactions and limited control of offshore tax havens, tax avoidance and even illegal tax evasion. It is an experiment that has allowed economic growth while enhancing deep socio-economic divisions and is also a system that has shown itself to be fundamentally unsuited to supporting leaderships responding to COVID-19.

This has been seen most clearly in the poor responses of some countries, the United States and UK being obvious examples. Before COVID-19 these two states were regarded as the best equipped to handle a pandemic based on their biosecurity approaches but have turned out to be among the worst. Instead of taking early if difficult actions to stem the spread of the virus they prioritised economic activity, a continual process of too little, too late, with disastrous consequences.

More generally, as with environment and security, there is plenty of new economic thinking to be found, and increasingly effective critiques of the current system. Furthermore, what has become clear is that when it comes to an issue like COVID-19, there is no alternative to government actions that directly contradict the neoliberal model. The private sector cannot handle it, just as it cannot respond effectively to the onset of climate breakdown. There are occasions where the market may be highly significant, as in energy grid parity speeding up the transition to renewables, but the market functions far too slowly, making political action aided by public insistence essential.

The immediate issue is that the pandemic will greatly increase marginalisation as the world enters its worst recession for many years, making hardship, resentment and anger much more likely. Policies have to change, and rapidly. Traditional approaches to controlling dissent, by attempting to put a lid on it, will not work meaning that there is even more case for arguing strongly for new thinking about security and the economy. Indeed, a starting point is to see that economic and health well-being are core requirements for genuine security for all.

Conclusion

The prospects for the decade before COVID-19 pandemic were mixed, with some good progress on responding to the over-arching challenge of climate breakdown but much further to go on environmental and economic issues. The COVID-19 pandemic intensifies the more immediate challenge of responding to the combined health and economic crisis. There is a huge amount of work to do in contributing in however small a way we can to a more positive way forward. Biden's victory earlier in the month may be welcome, but it is just one step. The next decade will be difficult in many ways but it will steadily become obvious that preventing climate breakdown and reversing marginalisation require cooperation not competition. There isn't an alternative and if we can respond to COVID-19 more effectively we will be engaged in a very valuable rehearsal for those much greater challenges to come.

Personal note

This is the last in a series of briefings for ORG that started seventeen years ago, and I would like to thank the many people who have made it possible, including those who have all too often had to edit raw copy into something more readable. It really has been a privilege to have this opportunity to contribute. While ORG is sadly finishing as an independent organisation, much of its work is continuing in other groups and it has, almost from the start, made a practice of enabling offshoots to grow. Apart from its many other contributions towards a safer world over nearly forty years that is no mean achievement.

Image credit: Marion Dross/Flickr.

About the author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in International Security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '**Monthly Global Security Briefings**' are available from our website. His book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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