

# Human Security Policy and Human Needs Theory

Karin Utas Carlsson, Sweden June 6th, 2020

The purpose of this article is to highlight the thoughts of peace researcher John W. Burton put forward towards the end of the last century. He is seen as the father of Human Needs Theory, a way of thinking behind the concept of human security, increasingly in focus in today's debate. This is a line of thought very different from the established defence and foreign policy, based on Power politics. I strongly believe that the world would be less violent and a much better place for most of us if we used more constructive ways of conflict resolution including promoting peace. As we will see, Human Needs Theory provides a theoretical framework for achieving this. There are other theories as well, many of them compatible with Human Needs Theory.

Let us compare the established way of thinking with the new one presented by Burton. When deciding security and defence policies it is rational to reflect over what different types of threats human beings need to be protected against in the world today. There have been enormous changes over the past decades, or, going further back, the last century, and on the whole human security has not increased. World politics have not led to peace, nor to equality, justice or harmony with the environment. The word peace is commonly interpreted as the absence of war, but in order to see the goal and work for peace it is better to define it in positive terms, what peace might consist of, such as fulfilling the human need of security and the use of violence reduced to a minimum. Nonviolent means of conflict resolution are used, such as diplomacy, constructive negotiations, preventing the escalation of conflicts to destructive levels.

*Old-fashioned defence policies are built on deterrence.* One of Burton's basic ideas is that deterrence simply does not work in the long run, neither at the local nor the global level when basic human needs are at stake, i.e. when basic human needs are threatened and cannot be satisfied. Wars kill more people than ever before. We need to radically change our way of thinking, or face perpetual wars, ever increasing global military expenditure and a never-ending flow of refugees. Last year (2019) global military spending was \$1 917 billion, an increase of 3,6% over the previous year, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ([www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)), an enormous sum, difficult to apprehend. All these resources could instead be used to improve social conditions and fulfil human needs.

## Threats to people and the environment

The two most serious threats facing the world today are climate change and the risk of nuclear war. *Climate change* will lead to an increase in the temperature on earth above 3 degrees centigrade if we do not make radical changes in society and our way of life. The seriousness of this threat is beginning to be understood, not least by young people, whose involvement is a source of great hope. They refer to science, and indeed the information provided by the IPCC, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is available to all. Environmental objectives are formulated and conferences held world-wide. Sadly, the results do not match the profound changes that are called for. The emissions are still increasing.

*Nuclear war* could happen by mistake or be launched intentionally. Both the US and Russia have claimed their right of first use. Either power might use its nuclear weapons, now modernised to be smaller in size and more easily launched. The threshold for using them has thus been lowered. The more tension builds up between the now nine nuclear states, the greater the risk

of nuclear war. There is a strong world-wide movement in favour of abolishing nuclear arms altogether. The Nobel Peace Prize 2017 was awarded to ICAN, The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Recently ICAN estimated the global expenditure on nuclear weapons in 2019 as \$72,9 billion or \$138 699 *per minute* ([www.icanw.org](http://www.icanw.org)). The organisation was awarded the prize for having facilitated the passing of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in July 2017. 122 nations voted in its favour, as did Sweden. At least 50 nations need to ratify it for it to become a legally binding UN convention. So far 37 nations have done so. Thus a further 13 are needed to ratify. Sweden should be one of them. Our government has not even signed, I am ashamed to say, a necessary step before ratification by Parliament.

Sweden's military defence and security policies today are not designed to defend human beings and the environment from the above-mentioned threats, nor from pandemics, as proved by the advance of the COVID-19. I hope that the experience gained from the virus will lead to self-reflection and change. While recognising the terrible costs to individuals and the damage to the economy, we must seize the opportunity offered to transform society in a way that will serve us and the planet on a long-term basis, reducing threats of military intervention and meeting challenges of climate change.

On-going wars and military exercises produce gigantic emissions that are not included in reports monitoring emission objectives. The military have a traffic lane all of their own! Between 2001 and 2017, the years for which data is available, beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan, the US military has emitted 1.2 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases. In 2017, for instance, the Pentagon's emissions were higher than those of the whole of Sweden, the equivalent of more than double the current number of private cars on the road in the US. The US Department of Defense is the largest single producer of greenhouse gases in the world. (Crawford, 2019)

Military security and defence policies of today are directed against an enemy power. They are translated into interminable war exercises, their scenarios invariably presenting the imagined threat as coming from the east. We are persuaded that Russia is the enemy, a strategy far removed from the way conflict resolution should and could be conducted (see below). Apart from increasing tension, in our case in the Baltic region, these exercises and the orientation towards a military response in handling conflicts cost enormous sums of money. It could better be used for the transformation of society, tackling climate change and providing social welfare.

What would Russia gain from attacking Sweden? The danger facing Sweden today lies in NATO's threat to Russia, Sweden being considered a steppingstone in a possible war between these powers. Either party might want to deploy nuclear missiles in neighbouring countries to threaten the other. A war is a terrible thing to happen, so why does Sweden take the risk of allying itself with NATO, the driving force behind the escalation of military activity? NATO's military expenditure is 12 times that of Russia. It is understandable that Russia feels threatened and respond by way of huge war exercises alongside diplomatic protests. Russia too believes in security by deterrence. It also thinks in terms of being more powerful than the opponent (see below). This mind set leads to perpetual escalation of military build-up. And as we all know, violence breeds violence, a saying only too true.

Contrary to the promise to Gorbachev in 1990 before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO has moved forward its positions right up to the Russian western border in the Baltic States and Poland as well as to most of the other eastern European states not bordering on Russia but earlier within the Soviet sphere of interest. Now all are members of the alliance. The Ukraine and Georgia have Host Country agreements with NATO, the Ukraine since 2004, a step towards membership feared by Russia. This is the main reason behind the annexation of the Crimea in 2014. When Russia found itself in a situation where the Ukraine – after the Maidan events – had drawn closer to the EU and NATO, Russia risked losing its marine base in the Crimea leased from the Ukraine. Unfortunately, Swedish media have provided little information on this background. They have by and large taken a pro-western attitude, describing Russia as generally aggressive and a threat to all its neighbours. The Swedish government has followed suit. As we will see below, creating an enemy image is a vital step in conflict escalation. The demonising of an adversary often takes place early on in the process, providing a basis for hostilities.

The tension in our part of the world further increased when the Swedish Parliament in 2016 voted for the Host Country Agreement with NATO, interpreted by Russia as a further threat. The fact that Finland also signed a Host Country Agreement with NATO aggravated the situation. Swedish right-wing parties now advocate full NATO membership - we are already eminent partners. Sweden is, for instance, a member of StratCom, NATO's communication centre (read propaganda) in Riga. Our close cooperation with NATO increases the risk of the country becoming involved in a conflict, which could lead to war, and in the worst scenario, a nuclear war. We have everything to gain from improving relations and increasing cooperation with Russia.

Sweden needs to take non-alignment seriously, instead of siding with one power against the other (see for instance [www.alliansfriheten.se](http://www.alliansfriheten.se)). This does not necessarily exclude a Swedish military defence force. I myself, see greater opportunities in nonviolent defence methods. These, however, need special training, based on knowledge of how conflicts arise and how they can be resolved. A main strategy is to avoid using threats and coercion in a clash of interests. This message lies at the heart of John Burton's Human Needs theory, mentioned earlier. I will therefore return to Burton and examine the theory a little closer.

### **Human beings have basic material and immaterial needs**

The Australian peace researcher and former diplomat John W. Burton first wrote about the similarities between conflicts at the local and the global level in the 1960s. Later he constructed *Human Needs Theory* [building on the writings of Abraham Maslow but without the hierarchy (steps) of needs]. Human Needs Theory was the subject of a conference in Berlin in 1978 with the well-known peace researcher Johan Galtung as coordinator. A conference with the same theme took place ten years later. Burton was the editor of an anthology on the subject that followed in 1990, *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*. In the same year he published his best-known book *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*, inventing the word 'provention' by joining the two words 'promote' and 'prevent', *promoting* whatever people need, while *preventing* destructive development of conflicts.

Examples of immaterial needs are security/safety, esteem, love/friendship, belonging, understanding, meaning and autonomy/freedom. What is especially interesting about these

needs is that the more you give, the more you get – at least in the long run. The cake can be made to grow. In this lies the foundation of so-called win-win negotiation. Material needs are different. Here the cake cannot be increased. Money and territory are limited, as is time. It is generally a question of the fair distribution of resources and of negotiating compromises.

### **Comparison between two ways of thinking**

How you think affects the approach that is crucial in handling conflicts. Here follows the outline of a new way of thinking about how to reduce tension and resolve conflicts with a resilient outcome. I will compare the new constructive way of thinking to the old way that forms the basis of power politics as practised in the past and still today. For further reading see <https://www.laraforfred.se/forskning/nytt-sakerhetsbegrepp>. There are links to Burton's table of comparison between the two ways of thinking, also the more comprehensive comparison in my dissertation (pp106-109) which can be downloaded from [www.tradet.org](http://www.tradet.org). There I refer to more researchers and practitioners, such as M. K. Gandhi and G. Sharp (Utas Carlsson, 1999).

The new way of thinking, avoiding threats, deterrence and coercion, would lead to a very different world if applied to the global/macro level of security policy. It would mean a true paradigm shift, that we need so badly. In my dissertation I hopefully called it *the emerging paradigm*, thinking I saw many signs in world politics of constructive conflict resolution. Since then I have sadly become more disillusioned with international politics. One day, however, I believe the new way of thinking will not only be an *emerging* phenomenon, appear here and there, but be the commonly accepted line of thought. Burton called the power paradigm Set A and the alternative way of thinking Set B. I will use the same structure.

Already *how we view conflicts* differs in the two ways of thinking. In the power paradigm conflict is viewed as something negative that should be avoided, while in the new one conflict is looked upon as something that is needed for growth and development. The way the conflict is handled is crucial for the outcome. In this way of thinking conflict in itself is not a bad thing, needing to be eliminated as in the power paradigm.

*The unit of analysis* differs. In the power paradigm (Set A) structures and institutions (for instance nations or regions) are the appropriate units of analysis when explaining political phenomena. In Set B individuals and identity groups are the units of analysis. Basic needs of the individual are in focus. Conflicts at the micro (local) and macro (global) levels have many things in common according to Set B. They are handled in accordance with the same principles. This is very different from the power paradigm where conflicts in security politics (global level) are regarded as very different and also handled differently from conflicts between individuals and in small groups (local level). As we all know deterrence is at the centre of security thinking.

*Reasons for the conflict* are looked upon in different ways. In the power paradigm human aggressiveness and scarcity of resources are seen as the reason behind a conflict. The state, group, or individual is aggressive and struggles for power. Set B, however, regards threat against basic human needs as the problem. This is crucial as to how the conflict/the problem is handled.

*Focus*. In the power paradigm positions are stated. (We want/demand this, we do not want that...) Declared issues are those on which settlement is sought, sometimes as a compromise. The new way of tackling the issues focuses on seeking underlying needs, values and concerns

through analysis which is performed together with the other party. It will lead to formulation of options reducing tension. This way of handling conflict is well known in behavioural sciences.

*The aim* in the power paradigm is to win the conflict which is win-lose (zero-sum) in its outcome as there is scarcity of resources claimed by both parties. What one wins the other loses. In Set B the aim is for the needs of *all* parties to be met, win-win. Conflicts are potentially positive sum outcomes. This is possible since there are immaterial needs involved (see above).

*The perspective of all parties* is taken into account in the analysis when solutions are sought according to Set B. This is very different from media reports as well as statements from actors involved. Let us take our Russia - NATO issue from earlier as an example. Media and politicians often cast suspicion on anyone, for instance from the peace movement, who gives the perspective of the opposite party say Russia, Iran, Syria or North Korea. The perspective of the other party is regarded as 'propaganda'. It is a serious problem that could be addressed, I believe, if constructive conflict resolution – as in Human Needs Theory – were generally known, which is the aim of this article.

StratCom in Riga, mentioned above is, as I see it, a center of propaganda since it gives the sole perspective of NATO leaving out that of the perceived enemy. In conflict resolution, as opposed to conflict settlement, the perspective of *all* the parties are considered. This is necessary in order to give an unbiased picture and avoid escalation in efforts to reach long-term solutions to conflicts.

Let us go back to comparing the two paradigms.

*Power.* In the power paradigm there is a struggle for power since the aim is to win *over* the other to get what one wants. The outcome in a settlement might be forced upon one party, a short-term solution where win-lose might easily become lose-lose in the long run. The outcome in Set B is based on objective standards and legal norms (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Power in this context is exercised to reach goals that secure the needs of all parties, to reach a mutual objective with the other party, win-win solutions. This new way of thinking gives alternatives to politics based on the balance of power. Power is regarded in terms of power *to* (to reach something) as well as power *with* (to do it together with someone) and power *over oneself* (Gandhi's self-control).

*Deterrence, threat and coercion.* Threat is used in Set A as a means of power. The idea is to deter the other from using violence or doing something against one's will. According to Set B threat does not work in the long run, whereas trust and confidence are positive factors to build on. Lack of trust is the very essence of conflict. Without trust a long-term solution is hard to reach. When you rely on deterrence, whether by threat or force, the result is hostility and lack of trust, inviting the other party to play the same power game as you. Escalation of the conflict will follow. Burton writes: '*Deterrence does not work when basic human needs are at stake*', i.e. when basic human needs are threatened and cannot be satisfied. This applies at the global as well as the local level. If this is true, the entire foundation of our military defence comes tumbling down! I believe Burton is proved right merely by the fact that wars and threatening scenarios never cease in spite of (or because of) massive military so-called defence systems built on deterrence exist in practically all countries.

Nonviolent methods, where trust is created and the thinking, feelings and needs of all parties are considered, lead to resilient solutions. Research shows remarkably good outcomes of nonviolent compared to violent resistance. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have analysed 323 resistance campaigns of different kinds during the years 1900-2006 and compared the long-term results. They write: ‘The most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.’ (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2013 p 7.)

*How the other party is viewed* differs between the alternatives. In Set A the responsibility lies with the other party, which is looked upon as an adversary or enemy. In Set B parties are regarded as partners in resolving the conflict. No party is humiliated; everybody’s basic needs (state, group, and individuals) are considered. The problem is separated from the person or group of persons viewed as the other party. Thus contact is maintained and not cut off as is often the case in a power setting. Striving for a long-term solution makes it easier to avoid the possibility of a reopening of the conflict. We have, for example, the failure of the peace agreement at the end of the First World War, a second World War following only 21 years later.

*Authority* in power politics is hierarchical, power executed up-down, while Set B has a down-up perspective. ‘Authority finally rests on values attached to relationships between authorities and those over whom authority is executed.’ (Burton, 1986, p. 112.) The ones in power get their authority from those over whom they govern. No-one is completely powerless since there is a mutual dependency in the relationship. This is the foundation of nonviolence.

The list of comparisons between the two ways of thinking is longer than this but let us now look at similarities between conflicts at the global and the local level. Similarities are numerous when considering the causes of conflicts, their dynamics and the best way of managing them so as to gain a long-term solution.

### **Similarities between conflicts at the local and global level – Escalation**

When a conflict escalates similarities become apparent between conflicts at the local and at the global level. Let us look at the dynamics of escalation. As you read this, you will easily find your own examples at the local as well as the global level.

*Personalising* happens by way of suspicion and accusation, leading to defensiveness expressing itself as counterattacks, blame and finding scapegoats. Then the problem grows both regarding the number of issues and people or groups involved. Old wrongs are remembered, firm principles at stake. Each party communicates with its environment, and groups and alliances against the opponent are formed. Contacts between the parties are broken off. Preconceptions and prejudices abound, trust disappears and open hostility is shown, polarisation takes place. Thoughts of revenge develop into actions.

There are often enemy images at hand early in the development of the conflict. These are now nurtured, intensified and spread about. One of the main reasons for not engaging in creating enemy images is to avoid tensions and future escalation of conflict. One example: In Swedish policy Russia is regarded as an enemy through military training, statements by politicians, sanctions, media reporting etc, thus increasing tension and endangering peace. Besides, the hostile build-up provides a biased version of the real picture and is simply not true. The whole



process motivates citizens, however, to support a dramatic increase in the defence budget, deterrence in alliance with others being an integral part of the power paradigm. In the case of Sweden the alliance is with the superpower US leading NATO.

*Johan Galtung's well-known conflict triangle* A (attitude, assumptions), B (behaviour), and C (contradiction, conflicting issue) is relevant both at the local and global level. Differences may arise at any corner of the triangle. Each corner influences the others, escalating the problem. However, it is also possible to de-escalate making use of the interconnections, for instance by changing attitude or behaviour the conflicting issues will be dealt with in a constructive and creative way. Also in de-escalating conflicts there are similarities at the local and global level since the same principles are at work at both levels.

In conflict resolution personalising is avoided as is the whole chain of escalation described above. A conflict between X and Y is best handled by separating the person from the problem trying to solve the problem together. X can do this even if Y does not share his/her way of thinking. X will influence Y through his/her approach. If Y starts a power game X can refuse to join in.

### **Dissimilarities between conflicts at the global and the local level**

*Scale.* There are, of course, dissimilarities between the global and the local level, primarily through the number of individuals and groups, countries or regions involved. Political action is linked to ways of thinking, as we have seen. In Galtung's triangle the political actions are represented by the corner B. As stated, the actions are interconnected with attitudes and issues of conflict. The history of the conflict might be very old, at the global level even centuries old. We must, however, not forget that also conflicts at the local level might go back a very long way, such as feuds in family history. The so-called asymmetrical conflicts (imbalance of power between parties) occur at the local as well as the global level, the number of people involved of course making the difference as do the number of conflicting issues.

*Large groups of people gain from militarism and the status quo.* When discussing conflict at the global level, the central concept is commonly security. At the local level, the equivalent is safety. Both are the opposite of fear. It is a human need not to feel fear but to feel safety/security. Unfortunately, fear is used by those who stand to gain from military exercises and war. And who stands to gain? The arms industry does and the numerous scientists at work on projects related to arms production or military activity all those who depend on the military for employment and status and those needed to rebuild countries devastated by war. There are more jobs and interests to add to the list. Peace researcher Jan Öberg (<https://transnational.live>) has added to president Eisenhower's MIC, the military-industrial complex, MIMAC, the military-industrial-media-academic complex. This gives a hint of who may gain from war and preparation of war. Still, all want peace.

*Leaders* at the global level may exploit people's fear and prejudice through incompetence or for their own gain. They often contribute towards the escalation of conflicts. However, this happens also at the local level. It is a question of scale. Genocide occurs at the global level. Individuals are injured and killed.

*Structural violence* (built into the system without evident actors) is an integral part of the global level. It is built into society for instance, people are out of work, are short of money, food and/or shelter, are discriminated against or oppressed in more or less subtle ways. It happens at the local level but then as a result of global structures.

### **Advantages of seeing similarities between the local and global level**

Spokespersons of the power paradigm see conflicts at local and global levels as very different. Set B, however, stresses similarities between the levels. This is a consequence of keeping human needs in focus avoiding power games by solving problems together with the other party, separating the person from the problem/issue at stake.

*Empowerment.* As an individual, seeing the similarities between the two levels, one can more easily find the opportunities to promote peace and resolve conflict. We can all contribute towards working for peace where we happen to be. We can, as nonviolence theory prescribes, live the world we want to see in the future. We can empower other people as well as ourselves.

In understanding and resolving conflicts we benefit from the store of knowledge that behavioural sciences have developed and practiced through the years. I would very much like to see especially politicians and media use the profound knowledge concerning conflict dynamics and conflict resolution developed by behavioural sciences at the local level. According to the new way of thinking (Set B) the same principles are at work at the global as at the local level. From this follows that there is an opportunity to utilize theoretical and practical knowledge at the local level to resolve conflict and promote peace and development at the global.

I hope that my comparison between the two ways of thinking will make it clear that knowledge of conflict dynamics and conflict resolution should be taught and trained in school from early years and that experience from the local level will inspire security policy. The situation in the world today is dangerous, as pictured above. The entire existence of the human race is at stake. The traditional power paradigm of national security must be transformed into building **human security** with human needs at the centre. John Burton's thoughts are worth considering. As someone said. "Nothing is as practical as a good theory."

Jonstorp, 6th of June 2020

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