

# *New Thinking On* **PEACE**

Essays on Peace and Human Security, Civilizational  
Dialogue, History, Education, Global Citizenship and  
University of the 21st Century.

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## *Fight Terror From Moral High Ground*

By Prof J Oerstroem Moeller

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Let me start with Denmark in the year 1945. Denmark had for more than five years been occupied by the Nazis. When my country was liberated by the Allies, the most acute, sensitive, delicate point on the political agenda was how to deal with those Danes having collaborated with the Nazis. I gather that the same was the case in all countries over Europe and to a certain extent also in Asia after the liberation from the Japanese occupation.

Denmark was split. One camp asked for revenge — pure and simple. Another camp which unfortunately proved to be in minority maintained that now the time had come to demonstrate why we fought the Nazis — why our political system was much superior to the Nazi system. We could do that and should do that by rejecting revenge, choosing magnanimity, even forgiveness, towards the sinners, so to speak, combined with a flawless application of the legal system for those whose crimes could not be overlooked and had to face legal proceedings.

Then, as now, the basic question is the same.

There are no short cuts to the moral high ground. It is like

climbing a mountain. Upwards all the time, you have to strive to reach the summit, there is very little help, your marching equipment weighs you down — but when you get to the summit you feel deep inside your soul that it was worthwhile, that you deserved it, that you resisted the temptation to throw your equipment away. You have overcome temptations to degrade yourself.

Terror, as Nazism and Fascism present the most ugly face of human history. Respect for human lives, human dignity, the individual and other human beings are obliterated from the vocabulary. It is about raw, ruthless, systematic destruction of culture, human lives and values in a broad sense of that word. But above everything else: It is about the right to kill those having another opinion, another culture, another religion, belonging to another ethnicity. It is about stealing the monopoly to shape the world in the picture of a uniform way of thinking and behaving and selecting an unforgiving, bleak and dark model.

The fight against terrorism poses a dilemma for those taking up the gauntlet. Sometimes you feel tempted to use some of the methods applied by the terrorists themselves. It is so much easier. Shoot back!

But let me warn you. This is a short term recipe. It may admittedly give some easy results in the short term but in the longer run it blurs the divide between the terrorists and those fighting against terrorism. And this is exactly what the terrorists hope.

If we do not manage to drive the message home and stand firm on this issue, we will end up in not being much better than the terrorists.

For us there is no other way than the long haul — defending,

standing firm, maintaining the moral high ground — never even opening the tiniest chink in our principles. The culture and civilization that we defend is based upon principles that cannot be negotiated. Only by choosing this road can we in the long run expect the people to rally to our banner. And be true to ourselves and what we believe in. If you surrender the moral high ground to the terrorists, you surrender your identity.

After these opening remarks, let me dig a little bit deeper to analyze an international system capable of and deserving to fight terrorism from the moral high ground rejecting all kinds of short cuts.

A viable international system worthwhile to defend for those inside the system and worthwhile to join for those outside should be built upon three key concepts:

- Self-discipline or self-restraint;
- Tolerance toward others and their set of values;
- Mutual respect and no double standards.

### **Self-discipline**

An international system standing on the moral high ground should reflect:

- restraint exercised by the powerful actors, be it in politics, economics or business;
- an understanding of the need to shape a consensus for most, if not all, major issues even if the major player could force the chosen solution through;

- a mutual understanding that there is a place for others on the scene even if we did not agree with them.

Restraint and self-discipline are called for because in the international/global world, repercussions on decisions cannot be confined to the nation-state whose political leaders take these decisions. The stronger, more powerful and economically dominating a nation-state is, the more its behaviour radiates outside its own borders controlling the life of citizens in other nation-states. Exactly the same goes for the large multinational companies. Their decisions influence the daily life of ordinary people far away, offering those people little or no opportunities to raise their voice and state their case.

If decision-makers do not realize this but drive in the one lane, one direction tunnel designed to suit their interests only, the international system will work in a lop-sided way producing inequalities and harmful political and economic environments alienating people from the outside world.

### **Tolerance**

Tolerance is not to open the floodgates for everybody to behave as they like. Tolerance constitutes the right to think and act differently from other people but within a mutually agreed framework. Tolerance defined in this way forces us to know precisely where we stand ourselves. Other opinions must be measured against our own opinion. We must know what we think and why we think in the way we do — what is our mindset and why do we have it and

why do we think it is the right one for us? Thinking in this way opens the door for realizing that, what is best for us may not necessarily be best for others. And that gives birth to the crucial observation that the heart of tolerance is that, we care for other people's destiny even if we do not agree with them.

Understanding is the key to tolerance and the key to understanding how other people think and why it may be different from the way we think is communication. Unless we communicate and try to understand each other, there is no hope of comparing different ways of thinking with the ultimate objective of shaping a set of values to serve as the mutually agreed framework without which tolerance becomes a beautiful but empty shell. And without striving for that objective there is not much hope for internationalism.

### **Mutual respect**

Mutual respect constitutes the unseen ties making a community or a nation stick together. It requires a common set of values. Nationally a common set of values keeps the nation together, and if mutually agreed upon, and applied successfully, produces a solid even robust nation state. A common mindset presents an almost insurmountable obstacle to fragmentation, disintegration and disorganization. By upbringing and tradition, people react according to some kind of common denominator defined by the underlying set of values.

The question remains whether we are prepared to introduce a set of values on the international level to safeguard the identity of people irrespective of ethnicity and/or religion neglecting nationality as criterion for rights and obligations?

The first and indispensable step is to reject any kind of double standards. An international system in the true sense of the word must be based upon and reflect equitable rights and obligations. Equal to the law is not only a nice sentence nationally but must also apply for the international system — otherwise it is not equitable and if it is not equitable, how can we expect it to be attractive for all nations, all races and all religions, especially for those running for shelter from aggression.

As you may gather, I place the burden squarely on the shoulder of those:

- who has wealth;
- who possesses power;
- who is culturally at ease.

They do not only have the opportunity. They have the duty and the obligation to shape an international system worthwhile to join for the:

- not wealthy;
- powerless;
- culturally impoverished, downgraded.

Those on the sunny side of the world model need to share some of their wealth, show magnanimity, be parsimonious with use of power and get rid of preconceived ideas and prejudices.

They should heed the words and act in the same way as a Danish nobleman, Herluf Trolle, did.

When being advised by a fellow nobleman not to go to war and risk his life, Herluf Trolle answered: "Do you know why we are wearing chains of gold and being held in respect by fellow countrymen? Because we rally to the defence of the realm when called upon so that our subjects can live and work in peace."

He was true to his words. In 1565 he was killed in action as Admiral of the Fleet commanding the Royal Danish Navy.

But, there is an iron lining to this silver plate.

If an international model congruous with the principles mentioned above emerges, those not wishing to participate can choose to stay outside — and such a choice should be respected.

However, they cannot choose to attack, to disrupt even trying to dismantle by violent means the international system chosen and built by others just because it does not reflect a set of values preferred by them. The justification of violence and destruction is very rarely supported by the large majority of members of the same culture, ethnicity and religion — far from it. Violence is contradictory to and not in conformity with the teachings of all major religions.

The model should respect the rights of the minorities and prevent the majority from imposing its will on those having chosen to stand aside. But the mirror casts its spell in two directions. So nor should we accept that the minority prevents the majority from living in peace and stability inside a cultural framework chosen by them and for them.

If minorities and/or groups of minorities by acts of violence seek to destroy wealth, undermine economic and social stability, engineer cultural upheavals, such violence has to be resisted and, if necessary,



by force. It then becomes a question of defence of the trend making seen for centuries towards a more civilized mankind. War, terror and fear have gradually been replaced by negotiations, civility and a genuine rule of the law.

In the fight against terrorism we must distinguish between the recruits and the officers.

The mindset of the recruits is not much different from fellow citizens. They want a decent life. They revolt against society because they feel they have got such a rotten deal that they have nothing to lose. For them terrorism is basically a social and educational problem. If we manage to root up poverty while at the same time provide education, we can squeeze the recruitment basis dry. But it requires a long-term effort with a substantial financial input. If Asia continues to enjoy high, or reasonably high growth, the prospect of a successful campaign to eradicate terrorism is promising. I have floated the idea that the modern secular world offers the Islamic world something akin to a Marshall plan for education but none listens.

The officers are another breed. We cannot negotiate with them, no compromises are possible. They do not ask for concessions. Their perception of the world is square-minded and single-minded. They want to destroy — wealth, values, ideas and people.

The recruits are social losers but they are told by the officers that they haven't failed. Not the fault of their upbringing, behaviour or education. They are innocent, they are acquitted. Somebody else or something else is the villain, the guilty one: Internationalism or Globalization. The officers use Islam as a rallying point for social losers. By mobilizing Islam they depict terrorism as a noble cause

in a materialistic world — a refuge so to speak for many people having lost track of their identity in a hectic world.

What drives terrorism making it extremely difficult to combat is the constellation of social losers not knowing where they belong to without any loyalty to any existing society, being offered a meaningful existence — money, identity and belief — by a small group of fanatics shedding no means to achieve an objective inscribed in destruction.

Let me finish by stressing three points of singular importance for the international world in fighting terrorism.

First, no country, no nation, no culture, no civilization, no religious or ethnic group has the right per se to use power, be it politically, economically, militarily or culturally. The use of power must be justified by being weighed, measured and judged against the principles outlined earlier and the right to do so must be earned by self-discipline, self-restraint, respect and no double standards.

Second, the perception of the small-tiny-group of fanatics believing in terror can never be reconciled with our stance. Whatever offer we make, it will be rejected. But we can reduce, minimize and in the long run — let us hope we have the patience and stamina — estrange the recruitment basis. The way ahead is to improve the conditions for the followers giving them something to gain by joining our world and communicating that they have something to lose by staying with the fanatics. Following that track we may separate the few fanatics from their followers — those who support or even having joined the terrorists because they feel that our world has nothing to offer them and that we have let them down.

Third, challenged by terrorism we must counter-attack applying rules (written and unwritten) making it clear that we occupy the moral high ground. We must be adamant about this. No room for even the slightest doubt. It is precisely because our culture respects such rules that it is worthwhile to defend. If we resort to the same methods as the terrorists, they have already gained their most important victory by corrupting our mindset and let it be controlled by the same evil pattern as is the case for them.

I cannot find a better note to finish off than by quoting Sir Winston Churchill. He wrote as the moral of his book about the Second World War, another struggle between good and evil, and I quote:

*"In peace, Goodwill  
In war, Resolution  
In defeat, Defiance  
In victory, Magnanimity."*

Profile of Speaker



*P*rofessor J Oerstroem Moeller was formally the Danish Ambassador to Singapore, Brunei, Darussalam, Australia and New Zealand (retired August 31, 2005). His current appointments include: Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, Member of the Extern Faculty, Singapore Management University (SMU), Adjunct Professor, Copenhagen Business School, Chairman of the Advisory Board Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Member of Forum Institutional Competitiveness, CBS, Member of the Council of The World Future Society, Member of the Board of Governors ASEF (Asia Europe Foundation), Member of the Advisory Board of Asia Europe Journal and Member of the ASEM Vision Group working from 1998 to 1999.