A couple of years ago, when we were contemplating changing the name of Economists Allied for Arms Reduction, we had to think how to succinctly express our goals and aspirations. We knew that we preferred peace over war, but that seemed a little simplistic. Some wise minds, among the many available to us, suggested that we include security as one of our guiding principles. "Peace," like "love" and "art," is so obviously preferable that it can be a real conversation-stopper. But the word security leads to rich discussion.

What is security? Traditionally one of the main functions of government has been to provide security for its people. This led to the need for boundaries (what part of the world are we responsible for protecting?), armies (how do we protect it?), and other instruments of "defense." In the United States, founded on the principle that the government should stay out of its citizens' lives and be as small as possible, the "defense" budget now swallows more than half of all discretionary spending. The dominant paradigm constricts security within very narrow terms: only government can provide national security, and the strongest instrument for that provision is a robust military.

In recent years, many have begun to question this traditional, narrow view of security. Is protecting its citizens from attack by other governments (or even non-state actors) the full extent of the contract between a government and its people?

As we became Economists for Peace and Security, we decided to embrace the broadest possible understanding of what constitutes security. We rewrote our mission statement to begin with language borrowed from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"In recognition [that] the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world; and [that] everyone is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation, of the economic, social, cultural and security rights indispensable for dignity and the free development of personality…"

In this view, security becomes an inherently economic concept, and we can begin to ask what conditions must prevail in order for people's lives to encompass these rights. What are we willing to trade for freedom from fear - not only of invading armies, but also domestic violence, crime, and prejudice? What incentives could we create to guarantee that everyone gets enough food, water, clean air, health care, leisure time, etc. to be free from want?

The Bush administration absolutely subscribes to an economic view of national security. If access to energy supplies (especially oil) is vital to the economy of our country, then oil is a national security issue and we have the right to secure that access through any means necessary. But if we hold as the bottom line not the protection of the state but the protection of the individuals who live within that state, we will be able to make wiser decisions that lead in fact to more real security.

We come quickly to the realization that many of the issues most important to the individual are not constrained by arbitrary national borders. In today's interconnected world, we have a great opportunity to cross boundaries and address issues of global security such as climate change, water rights and weapons of mass destruction.
I was thinking recently about the situation that led to the founding of the UN and the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Perhaps what distinguishes a world war from any other is not how many countries are involved, but the fact that when it's over the devastation has been so great that a majority of the planet's governments see the need to do something new and different, to institute an entirely new paradigm in the hopes of averting another such catastrophe.

Our organization was founded on the belief that a deep care for the well-being of the individual and an abiding awareness of the larger context must go hand in hand. This belief draws us back again and again to the principles embodied in the UN -we are all in this together, and we had better work together for solutions.

Economists for Peace and Security
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