

# **The United Nations Millennium Declaration and South Asia**

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## **Symposium Globalization and Change in South Asia**

The Center for Humanities and Arts  
The University of Georgia Athens, Georgia  
7 February 2001

### **INTRODUCTION - THE ROAD TO THE MILLENIUM SUMMIT THE SUMMIT AND DECLARATION - RELEVANCE TO SOUTH ASIA - CONCLUSION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Though the harsh term, "globalization," is a new entry in the lexicon of international affairs, the deeper notion of the unity of humankind was much more eloquently described in South Asia's ancient Vedic literature. The Chandogya Upanishad, for example, captured this unity in the following words:

*As the rivers flowing east and west  
Merge in the sea and become one with it,  
Forgetting they were ever separate rivers,  
So do all creatures lose their separateness  
When they merge at last into pure Being.*

Though they may navigate separate rivers, all people share a common destiny rooted in our mortality and our collective responsibility to each other as human beings. As it is with human beings, so too it is with nations. Today, the frequency and depth of interactions between entire nations are unprecedented in world history.

As the tidal wave of globalization continues to crest, it should come as no surprise that leaders and citizens would increasingly turn their attention not just to concepts of global unity but also to implications of this unity for human action. This process has coincided with the global celebrations greeting the new millennium to produce some truly historic events, including the agreement on a United Nations Millennium Declaration.

My intention in discussing this declaration is not to undertake a clause-by-clause exegesis of this landmark document. Rather, my goal is to highlight certain of its themes that are directly relevant to conditions in South Asia -- a region with 1.3 billion residents, almost a quarter of all humanity -- the cradle of ancient religions, philosophies, and civilizations that have contributed so much to global history. Just as the United Nations is today working in response to needs throughout the region -- as illustrated most recently in assistance provided after the Gujarat earthquake -- so too have the people and their leaders from this region stood behind the United Nations. Many of the leading initiatives over the history of this organization originated with initiatives from South Asia, particularly in such fields as development and disarmament.

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## **The Road to the Millennium Summit**

The best way to grasp the meaning of the Millennium Declaration is to understand the process culminating in the special summit that produced it. The Millennium Declaration is contained in a resolution adopted at the end of the largest-ever gathering of world leaders, known as the Millennium Summit, which was held at the United Nations between the sixth and the eighth of September in the year 2000. During this summit, 99 heads of State, three Crown Princes, and 47 heads of governments presented their views on the role of the United Nations in the 21st century and the main challenges facing the peoples of the world. All together, representatives from 187 Member States of the United Nations attended this summit.

The idea to convene such a summit appeared in Secretary-General Kofi Annan's July 1997 report, *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*. Deep in this document was a proposal to convene a Millennium Assembly, with a summit segment at which the world's leaders could gather to articulate their shared vision of prospects and challenges for the new millennium and agree on a process for fundamental review of the role of the United Nations.

In December 1998, the General Assembly adopted a resolution formally designating the 55th session of the General Assembly as the "Millennium Assembly of the United Nations" and providing for a "Millennium Summit" as an integral part of that Assembly. This was clearly to be a historic event.

In the months leading up to the summit, the Regional Commissions of the United Nations organized five regional hearings with representatives of civil society to elicit new ideas on how to

strengthen the United Nations in meeting key challenges of the new millennium. These regional hearings -- which occurred in Beirut, Addis Ababa, Geneva, Santiago, and Tokyo -- identified many serious challenges (both new and continuing) in the fields of peace and security, development, humanitarian affairs, human rights, and the environment.

The regional hearing for Asia and the Pacific took place in Tokyo on 9 and 10 September 1999. The report of this hearing stressed the importance of an "integrated and holistic approach" to development, noting that peace, security, development, human rights and good governance were closely interlinked. The report found that globalization had "exposed the limitations of national Governments" and underscored the need for a revitalized United Nations to assist governments in addressing the many social, economic, political, and environmental problems associated with globalization.

A pivotal event leading up to this summit was the publication in late March 2000 of the Millennium Report, aptly entitled -- "We the peoples." In this report, prepared by his Strategic Planning Unit -- with substantive assistance from the different parts of the UN system including the Department of Disarmament Affairs -- Secretary-General Annan identified six key values that are shared by all nations and that will be of special importance in the years ahead. These were: freedom; equity and solidarity; tolerance; non-violence; respect for nature; and shared responsibility. The report placed heavy emphasis on the importance of reducing poverty. It specifically called for cutting in half by 2015 the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day. It also called for specific improvements in the following areas -- access to safe drinking water, education, the global effort to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, the living conditions of slum dwellers, global access to information technology, market access for goods produced in poor countries, debt relief, development assistance, environmental protection, and even improvements in the administration of UN programmes.

With respect to measures to strengthen international peace and security, including disarmament, the Secretary-General proposed the convening of "a major international conference to identify ways of eliminating nuclear dangers." He also called for greater transparency in the reporting of arms transfers, support for regional disarmament measures, the establishment of local programmes to exchange weapons for goods needed to satisfy development needs, new efforts to curb illicit trafficking in small arms, and strengthening the capacity of the Security Council to conduct peace operations.

The overall theme of the Millennium Report is quite inspirational. It stated quite simply and directly that "we must put people at the centre of everything we do" and that the United Nations "exists for, and must serve, the needs and hopes of people everywhere." In short, the UN must do all it can to ensure that the forces of globalization do not simply promote the enrichment of the few, but serve the greater good of all -- hence the report's term, "inclusive globalization."

To broaden the discussions beyond the realm of diplomatic representatives of governments, the United Nations hosted a Millennium Forum in late May 2000. Attending this forum were 1,350

representatives of over 1,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations from more than 100 countries. The Forum produced the Millennium Forum Declaration and Agenda for Action -- a specific inventory of important initiatives that are needed to achieve the fundamental purposes and objectives of the UN Charter.

Other noteworthy events were held at the UN to commemorate the millennium. Shortly before the Summit, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) organized the first Conference of Presiding Officers of National Parliaments -- with 148 Presiding Officers of national parliaments in attendance. This conference gave a new dimension to globalization by approving a final Declaration that called upon "all parliaments and their world organization, the IPU, to provide a parliamentary dimension to international cooperation." Almost simultaneously, approximately one thousand of the world's pre-eminent religious and spiritual leaders gathered at the UN to participate in the "World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders" -- yet another first-time event.

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## **The Summit and Declaration**

The Millennium Summit -- an integral part of the Millennium Assembly -- was a watershed event in the history of the United Nations. The Declaration it produced is without a doubt the most important multilateral re-affirmation and elaboration of the norms of the UN Charter in its 55-year history.

This Declaration consists of eight parts -- it addressed:

- common values;
- peace, security and disarmament;
- development and poverty;
- the environment;
- human rights, democracy, and good governance;
- protecting the vulnerable (specifically civilian populations, children, and refugees);
- the special needs of Africa; and
- strengthening the United Nations.

While reaffirming many of the well-established principles of the Charter -- such as the sovereignty equality of States, respect for their territorial integrity, and non-interference in their internal affairs -- the Declaration also stated that "the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people."

Noting that the scourge of war had claimed some 5 million lives in the last decade alone, the signers of this Declaration vowed that they would "spare no effort to free our peoples" from this scourge and that that they would also "strive for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction,

particularly nuclear weapons." In this regard, the Declaration stated that the signers would "keep all options open for achieving this aim, including the possibility of convening an international conference to identify ways of eliminating nuclear dangers."

The Declaration did not only contain ritualistic incantations about the need for greater development assistance, but it identified precise goals to be achieved -- including the Millennium Report's vitally important goal of halving global poverty by 2015. With respect to the environment, the Declaration lent new weight to efforts to ensure the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and reaffirmed the principles of sustainable development. With respect to human rights, the signatories vowed to "spare no effort" in promoting democracy and the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development. They pledged to protect the vulnerable from natural disasters, genocide, armed conflicts, and other humanitarian emergencies. They also identified new initiatives to address development needs in Africa and to strengthen the UN organization.

While deliberations were underway on this Declaration, the Secretary-General had made available a special room for accredited representatives to sign existing treaties. This Millennium Summit Treaty Event yielded 187 signatures and 86 ratifications or accessions to 40 multilateral agreements, an impressive contribution to the rule of law to say the least. In South Asia, Bangladesh had a particularly impressive record, by acceding to or ratifying six multilateral legal instruments. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Maldives also added their names to various multilateral agreements at this event.

In their official statements at the Summit, the leaders of Pakistan and India -- despite their many differences on nuclear issues -- agreed that while globalization held great promise for development, it had also failed to deliver on much of its promises. Speaking as the Chief Executive of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf identified corruption as a particularly grave problem and urged the United Nations to "call for banning the transfers of ill gotten wealth and demand cooperation in tracing and repatriating such funds." Prime Minister Vajpayee of India spoke at length about his disappointment over the lack of progress on global nuclear disarmament, a factor that he said forced India to acquire these weapons in 1998. He also stated that India "has a natural claim to a permanent seat on the Security Council." For her part, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh joined both leaders in calling attention to unmet development needs, while noting that the "threat to peace and security anywhere in the world is a threat to peace and security everywhere."

To ensure that the Declaration would not prove to be simply an assemblage of inspirational words, the General Assembly approved a resolution on 14 December 2000 to follow-up on the outcome of the Summit. It placed the main responsibility for action squarely on the doorstep of national Governments. The resolution called upon all parts of the United Nations to adjust their administrative activities in accordance with the achievements of the Summit. Reflecting the multidimensional effort that led to the Summit, the resolution called for "enhanced partnership and cooperation with national parliaments, as well as civil society, including non-governmental

organizations and the private sector," to ensure their continued contribution to the implementation of the Declaration. Finally, it required the Secretary-General to prepare a "road map" for implementation of the Declaration within the UN system, and to prepare a comprehensive report every five years -- with annual updates -- describing progress made on specific commitments.

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## Relevance to South Asia

Given contemporary conditions in South Asia, the Millennium Declaration is a most timely document that is directly relevant to the needs of the people of this region -- a region whose leaders must now demonstrate the political will and ability to translate its bold words into concrete deeds. To the extent these leaders are responsive in meeting the pressing needs of the people, they too will benefit from its full implementation.

The leaders made different types of contributions to the drafting of the Declaration. On the one hand, India -- for example -- was steadfast in its support for the Secretary-General's proposal for an international conference on eliminating nuclear dangers. Pakistan also spoke in support of this initiative -- as did over thirty other countries. Yet, on the other hand, India and Pakistan also strongly objected to any reference in the Declaration to the achievements of the 2000 Review Conference of the parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, a treaty to which neither state is a party. The objections were unfortunate, since it was at that event that the nuclear-weapon states made an "unequivocal commitment" to the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

The remarks made at the Summit by the leaders of Pakistan and India against nuclear weapons were consistent with the general tone of the Declaration against such weapons. They must, however, be viewed in the global context of no recent progress in multilateral or bilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament and in the South Asian regional context -- including the nuclear test explosions of 1998, the subsequent announcement by India and Pakistan of nuclear deterrence doctrines, and the continued failure of both countries to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

The Declaration was primarily about values, values that relate directly to conditions in South Asia. Everything in the Declaration concerning peace and security issues is relevant to conditions in South Asia, perhaps more so than in virtually any other region. If peace is indeed indivisible, and if the existence of nuclear weapons in some places of the world increases the risk of their development elsewhere, then it hardly follows that more proliferation would advance the goal of global nuclear disarmament. The same applies to the development of long-range missiles, a topic regrettably omitted from the Declaration. The value of eliminating all weapons of mass destruction is, therefore, of special relevance in South Asia. Hopes for achieving all of the other important goals in the region -- including social and economic development, human rights,

and a clean environment -- presume the elimination of the threat of nuclear war. And as the parties to the NPT recently concluded, the "only absolute guarantee" against the use of such weapons is to be found in their elimination.

But there is more in the Declaration on peace, security, and disarmament of relevance to South Asia. There are the pledges with respect to -- the rule of law; the peaceful resolution of disputes; concerted action against terrorism; and the fight against drug trafficking and transnational crime. To see the contemporary relevance of the Declaration's language on development issues, one need only re-read the Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), signed in 1985.

It is precisely in these areas where South Asia has its most urgent needs. Consider, for example, the following facts about this region from the Human Development Report for the year 2000 just issued by the UN Development Programme:

- Life expectancy (63 years) is lower in this region than it is in "all developing countries" as a whole (64.7). Infant mortality (72 per 1,000) is higher in South Asia than in all developing countries (64 per 1,000). The percentage of underweight children under age five (49%) is higher in South Asia than the developing world as a whole (31%). Public expenditure on health (0.9% of GNP) in South Asia is less than half the level in the developing world in general (2.2% of GNP).
- Adult literacy (54.3%) is considerably lower in South Asia than in the developing world in general (72.3%). Public expenditure on education (3.2% of GNP) is lower in South Asia than in the developing world as a whole (3.8% of GNP). School enrolment (52%) is lower in South Asia than in the developing world generally (60%).
- Per capita gross domestic product (\$2,112) is much lower in South Asia than in the developing world as a whole (\$3,270). The number of main telephone lines (24 per 1,000) in South Asia is less than half the number in the developing world in general (58 per 1,000). The population without access to sanitation (65%) is higher in South Asia than in the developing world generally (56%).

These are troubling symptoms indeed, and the Millennium Declaration points the way to a cure. They affect the richest resource that South Asia has -- its people. An investment in human development must precede all else. India's achievements in information technology alone illustrates the heights South Asia can reach given the right conditions and opportunities. It is unfortunate indeed that, amid all these unmet human needs, military expenditures in the region continue to grow, diverting precious resources away from meeting these compelling human needs.

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## Conclusion

The Declaration, of course, cannot by itself solve all of these chronic problems -- problems that evaded attempted solutions of all ideological persuasions. It requires persistent human effort. It is also non-binding and therefore can only be enforced in the court of public opinion. Yet whatever the issue -- including disarmament, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the need for tolerance of ethnic diversity, reducing poverty, and cleaning up the environment -- leaders and citizens throughout South Asia would indeed benefit from assessing the performance of existing policies against the specific standards found in the Declaration.

In the end, the people will speak, leaders will listen and -- if they wish to remain leaders that is -- they will act. The strength of South Asia's ancient culture and the glory of its past deserve no elaboration here -- they are self-apparent. The glory of the region's future, however, remains a question mark -- not in terms of if, but when. The Millennium Declaration offers the people and governments in South Asia a valuable road map for navigating the road to this glorious future. Ignoring the guideposts in that historic document would be tragic. The choice is for all in the region to make and, if thousands of years of history are any guide, they will ultimately choose wisely.

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