

A nonlethal alternative to lethal war

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Abstract

There will continue to be conflicts between groups of people for the foreseeable future. Issues will include politics, religion, and territorial survival. 'War' is therefore likely to continue, but we can reduce the damage of war by using nonlethal technology (including such nonlethal weaponry as stun guns). Eventually war may be greatly reduced by the establishment of a world parliament, with international law and with an international police force to uphold that law. Such a police force would be equipped with nonlethal technology. The nonlethal security for peace movement, which promotes this approach is at an early stage, but there has been significant progress. By promoting the use of nonlethal technology by existing military forces the nonlethal security movement could greatly assist other peace activities in achieving lasting world peace. The paper will outline some of the issues involved in developing nonlethal security.

Introduction

Are there alternatives to lethal conflict? In fact there are several. For instance lethal conflict can be prevented by resolving the problems in other ways Preventing conflict is the best option and is the aim of most peace movements. Another option is to halt conflict. This is not so easy once war has begun, although there are a number of tools available for negotiation and non-violent conflict resolution. Another option is to accept that armed conflict is likely to continue in the immediate future at least, but steps can be taken to minimise the damage. This third approach we can describe as 'nonlethal security'. This option is not so familiar to the peace movement and for some people the approach is not looked on favourably. It's felt that we should never accept that armed conflict is inevitable and that if we do so, we are complicit in promoting violence. However, it may be a realistic part of the process towards ultimately nonviolent societies.

Is armed conflict likely to continue?

Until recently it has been argued that incidents of armed conflict have in fact become less frequent in recent years (Mack, 2005). In the last year or two the trend may have reversed to some extent, with the world becoming less peaceful. Unfortunately, whether or not warfare is beginning to decrease, there is every indication that despite much effort and goodwill, some armed conflict is still likely to continue for a while. Why is this? It's because since the dawn of civilisation warfare has always been the last resort in settling disputes between groups of people. There is by no means universal agreement on this, but I maintain that there is significant evidence that the capacity for war is built into our genes. Studies on chimpanzees, our closest relatives in the animal world, have revealed that bands of chimps make war on other chimpanzees (Wrangham and Peterson,1996). You and I are reading these words because our ancestors were good at warfare and therefore survived better than those who were not. Of course there are other inherited drives which support cooperation and conciliation and benefit survival of the species in a different way. In addition to their skills in war, our ancestors were also good at matters like growing food and educating their children. Within families and tribes and even within nations, people do not frequently kill each other.

Conflict within and between nations

Armed conflict is the result of a dispute between groups of people which has not been resolved by non-violent means. Within most communities people have developed ways of avoiding damaging

conflict. If members of a tribe injure and kill each other, the survival of the whole tribe is compromised. For this reason we have developed laws that reduce and usually prevent such conflict. We have also developed sanctions against those who break the law and we have police forces to enforce those sanctions.

In fact we already have some very good models for nonlethal dispute resolution which are mostly working very successfully. What are these models? They are the structures by which the nations of the world maintain an internal rule of law. Around the world today almost all nations resolve their internal disputes with a minimum of death and injury. They have laws, law courts, sanctions (fines, imprisonment and occasionally capital punishment) and a police force and a prison system to enforce those sanctions. The vast majority of nations of the world have no internal war. Most of them could be described as being at peace and many even of being 'at peace with justice'.

Concentrating on the many nations which have genuine internal peace, we must ask how is it that we cannot achieve the non-violent resolution of conflict **between** nations, though we can do so within nations? The answer is quite simple – between nations international laws and the international judicial system are still very rudimentary. Sanctions, although they are slowly becoming more effective, are not very powerful. They are usually designed in an ad hoc way. Similarly, international policing is managed on a piecemeal basis, with United Nations sanctioned military force being assembled as needed. Political disagreement within the Security Council too often prevents needed military intervention. Without adequate international law, law courts, sanctions and policing it is hardly surprising that all too often we cannot resolve international disputes without lethal violence. Because there is no international security on which they can rely for protection, nations continue to maintain lethally armed forces for this role. Inevitably, because of the presence of so many armies around the world, lethal warfare sometimes breaks out.

The eventual solution must be a world federation with a world parliament. Only when we have properly respected international law, capable international law courts, effective international sanctions and a competent international police force can we prevent armed conflict between nations. A world parliament is not yet with us, though there is slow progress in that direction. In the meantime it seems that we'll have to put up with at least some warfare around the world. We could, if regretfully, accept this state of affairs. But, in addition to the damage and grief, there are serious dangers to our species if warfare continues. Not the least is the increasing lethality of military technology. The problem is that localised war could quite easily escalate into a more major conflict, with the danger of nuclear weapons being used. Any nuclear conflict, even quite a small one, would have devastating consequences both from the immediate damage and from long-term radiation.¹

Nonlethal security

Peace activists and some of the more enlightened world leaders are working hard to promote international cooperation and to further reduce armed conflict. Their efforts are very worthy but progress is slow. What can we do to assist their efforts and to speed up progress? We come back to our third option, outlined above, of attempting to reduce the damage of warfare by employing nonlethal security. The concept of nonlethal security is quite simple. It means replacing the lethal weapons of war with technology that achieves the same results as lethal weaponry but without causing death or serious injury.

What do lethal weapons do? In overall terms (leaving aside the fact that they kill people) weapons allow you to repel an aggressor and prevent them from damaging you. With nonlethal security, we need devices which repel and immobilise aggressors, but without killing or seriously harming them. Do we have such devices? Yes and no. There is some technology available, but so far it's very limited. The best known is the stun gun or Taser (which despite its reputation is extraordinarily safe if used

properly). Quite a number of military and police agencies in Europe and North America are conducting research on a variety of other nonlethal devices. The technologies used include acoustics, microwaves, nets and even 'stingballs'. Progress has been slow but is accelerating.

Probably the largest of the non-lethal weapon research centres is the US Defense Force's Non-lethal Weapons Program (NLWP), based within the US Army Marine Corps. The NLWP had a 2013 budget of some \$140 million. It lists a range of some 20 current devices on its website including: "12-Gauge Munitions, 40mm Munitions, 66mm Light Vehicle Obscurant Smoke System and Vehicle-Launched Non-Lethal Grenades, Acoustic Hailing Devices, Enhanced Underwater Loudhailer ... Green Laser Interdiction System, M-84 Flash Bang Grenade, Modular Crowd Control Munition... Escalation-of-Force Mission Modules ... Vehicle Non-Lethal/Tube-Launched Munition System ... (and) ... Running Gear Entanglement Systems".² Further devices are being developed. One such technology is the use of microwaves, which sting but do not burn. The system is called 'Active Denial' because it is intended to 'deny' adversaries access to pieces of territory. A few non-lethal technologies, such as 'Laser Dazzler' vehicle arresters, have apparently been employed in recent armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the introduction has been very slow.

Police forces use a range of nonlethal devices, including stun guns, capsicum sprays, tear-gas and water cannons, but they are not usually faced with lethally armed opponents. Tear-gas and water cannons are often associated with the repression of legitimate civil protest. Unfortunately this does sometimes occur, but we should not forget that police can also play a necessary role in containing riots which could put lives at risk.

Problems with NLWs

Like any new technology that of nonlethal security devices faces a number of problems. For example, when used inappropriately they can often be lethal

- they might not be as effective as the lethal technologies they oppose
- they might not deter ruthless opponents
- they might be used to extend rather than replace conventional armaments
- they might be used to subdue civilian populations
- because they do not kill people they will not 'teach the enemy a lesson'
- they might prolong wars unnecessarily and cause more suffering than conventional weapons would have done
- they might result in a stalemate
- they might distract from the aim of eliminating war altogether.

All these concerns are legitimate and will need to be addressed in various ways. The devices need to be made more powerful and effective and yet, at the same time, more safe. NLWs can certainly be used inappropriately in the civil arena. One current example is with Tasers which are issued to police to use as supposedly a last resort. In some police forces we have seen 'mission-creep' where lasers are used in low risk situations and/or to intimidate people.

The concern that nonlethal security could distract from our main task of eliminating war completely needs to be taken seriously. There are two responses to this. Firstly, that nonlethal security needs to work in partnership with other peace initiatives such as diplomacy, peace building and conflict resolution. Secondly, reducing the lethality of war can promote a culture of increasing non-violence and thus contribute to the eventual elimination of war.

The benefits of nonlethal security

Nonlethal security does have some important benefits. Looking at it from the viewpoint of the losing party:

- at least you survive to negotiate or fight another day
- your victors (particularly if they suffer no casualties) are more likely to be

From the victor's point of view:

- capitulation may come earlier. An opponent threatened by death has nothing to lose and may fight to the end. If the threat is nonlethal your opponent may well surrender sooner. (They know that they will survive and at least have a chance to negotiate at a later date)
- casualties to the victor should be less. An enemy attacked with non-lethal force is less likely to respond with lethal force. As well, the casualties of your own troops from 'friendly fire' (by mistake) would be eliminated
- long term peace may be more feasible. Casualties - particularly death (not surprisingly!) - cause lasting anger and hatred.

The core argument for nonlethal conflict resolution is that it can take the place of lethal warfare and so prevent it. In the longer term by reducing damage to society, nonlethal security can facilitate reconciliation and help to set the scene for the elimination of all war (including nonlethal war). In other words nonlethal security has a role in the ultimate prevention of war. If the resources invested in nonlethal security were increased to just a modest fraction of the hundreds of billions of dollars put yearly into lethal weapon research, we would soon see some dramatic advances. Together with the new technology, we would need a complete change of approach in the military. Military forces would enter a conflict with the aim of causing minimal death and injury. This is a huge change in culture, but it's not beyond possibility. United Nations peacekeeping forces would be prime initial candidates for a nonlethal security approach. In the early days, military forces would probably need to retain their lethal weapons as a back-up.

The origins of nonlethal security

The concept of a nonlethal approach to conflict resolution has been around as long as warfare (for example taking prisoners rather than killing your adversaries). 'Passive' protection such as armour and fortifications is of course nonlethal. The modern nonlethal security movement dates from the late 1950s and gained increasing interest in the latter part of the century. Popular writers such as the Tofflers gave wide publicity to the idea.³ Non-lethal weapons centres were set up at several universities (for example as part of the Peace Studies centre at the University of Bradford). As mentioned above, a number of military centres were also established.

As with many new technologies and movements, after the first flush of enthusiasm there was some disillusion when problems with non-lethal weapons were identified. Recently there has been some re-awakening of interest as the problems with NLWs have been addressed and approaches refined.

The Nonlethal Security for Peace Campaign started life as 'The Non-Lethal Weapons Campaign' in 2009. However it became apparent that the focus of the campaign needed to be more clearly defined and in 2011 the title was changed to include the phrase 'for Peace'. It was realised that the term 'weapons' has problems (for example the association with violence) and the name was changed again to its present title in 2013. At present, the Nonlethal Security for Peace Campaign is an informal organisation with no affiliation or major funding. It is establishing links with peace organisations and with non-lethal weapons centres around the world. The Centre for Global Nonkilling⁴ has some parallel objectives as does the European Symposium on Non-Lethal Weapons.⁵

Nonlethal Security and the Peace Movement

There is some dilemma in the relationship between nonlethal security and the mainstream peace movement. Most peace practitioners recognise that under present circumstances, imperfect as it may be, a military force of some kind is still required to protect a nation from aggression. To some peace activists, however, accepting that war should exist in any form at all is anathema. Engaging in a conflict even using nonlethal technology is perceived as exercising violence. The military is seen as an opponent. Further to this, other peace activists and researchers regard nonlethal technology as having been taken over by their traditional opponents – the military. Non-lethal weapons they assert have just been added to the range of weaponry to perpetuate violence.

The Nonlethal Security for Peace Campaign recognises these issues, but maintains that the road to peace must acknowledge the realities of biology, culture and politics to achieve the best long-term outcomes.

In essence, the argument is as follows:

- we must do everything we can to end all warfare
- however, war is likely to persist for a while
- we can reduce the damage of armed conflict by moving to nonlethal protection
- like it or not, people need protection from aggression. This protection includes nations, communities and individuals
- nonlethal security will not necessarily ensure justice or eliminate oppression – people and society will continue to be fallible – but it will reduce the irreversible damage and grief of death and injury
- nonlethal security is only one of the initiatives we need to take to promote world peace. The Nonlethal Security for Peace Campaign works in partnership with other peace agencies
- the Campaign works at building a bridge between the peace movement and the military.

Conclusions

Armed conflict around the world seems set to continue for the immediate future despite the efforts of enlightened leaders and peace activists. The danger if this continues is that minor conflicts could escalate out of control with the possibility of highly damaging nuclear warfare. A nonlethal security approach could reverse this trend. At present nonlethal security technology is at a very early stage, but increased investment might soon change matters. Military agencies around the world are only just beginning to be involved in nonlethal approaches. A useful start could be made by United Nations peacekeepers employing nonlethal security. A nonlethal 'international police force' might be developed from this initiative, which would support a world parliament, if and when one were established. Adoption of nonlethal security could provide valuable assistance to all the other efforts of the peace movement in working towards sustainable world peace.

References:

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End Notes

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² <http://jnlp.defense.gov/CurrentNonLethalWeapons.aspx>

³ Alan and Heidi Toffler, War and Anti-War, Little Brown, 1993

⁴ Center for Global Nonkilling www.nonkilling.org

⁵ European Symposium on Non-Lethal Weapons www.non-lethal-weapons.com