War, Peace and National Identity

Keynote Address by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans, Professorial Fellow at The University of Melbourne, Chancellor of The Australian National University, President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group and Former Foreign Minister, to the Melbourne Festival of Ideas, Sidney Myer Asia Centre, 15 June 2011

Synopsis:
National, ethnic and religious identity have been major drivers of deadly conflict both between and within states in the past, but looking to the future there are more reasons for optimism than caution. Contrary to common perceptions, cross-border wars declined dramatically after World War II, and civil wars and episodes of mass violence have declined dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Statistically at least, we seem to be learning at last to live together. But identity driven tensions still remain enemies of peace in a number of parts of the world, and complacency would be utterly inappropriate. Much still needs to be done if we are to end explosions of murderous nationalist sentiment, and above all genocide, ethnic cleansing and other mass atrocity crimes, once and for all.

National Identity and War Between States

The sense of national identity is never stronger than when countries are at war with each other, at imminent risk of war, or remembering war. Cultural achievements can stir national pride, and sporting contests can excite national emotion in memorable ways, but it is war, the prospect of war, and the memory of war that has traditionally shaped and defined that collective national sentiment and sense-of-self we think of as being at the core of national identity.

Even in this mercifully laid-back country of ours, where front-porch flagpoles are almost as absent as they are omnipresent in the United States, it is the events at Anzac Cove nearly a century ago which, more than anything else, still seems to capture – not least for the younger generation who flock there in extraordinary numbers now every April – the national sense of what it is to be Australian. And we are not the only country in which a strongly war-forged sense of identity has been based not so much on military triumph as adversity, with resistance and resilience under threat of invasion, or under occupation or in the face of military disaster, becoming the sustaining national story.

In Britain, for example, one really does sense that the dominant source of national pride is not so much the glory days of empire but the magnificently phlegmatic way in which the country collectively responded to the threat of Nazi invasion – the spirit rather nicely captured by John Cleese when he suggested a few years ago that “the English are feeling the pinch in relation to recent terrorist threats and have therefore
raised their security level from ‘Miffed’ to ‘Peeved’. Soon, though, security levels may be raised yet again to ‘Irritated’ or even ‘A Bit Cross’. The English have not been ‘A Bit Cross’ since the blitz in 1940 when tea supplies nearly ran out.”

Of course the link between war and national identity has not always been remotely as benign as in the cases I have been mentioning. We have learned over and again through the long and horrible history of the 20th Century how an overdeveloped sense of national identity – national pride taken to extremes of insensitivity, indifference and sometimes contempt for the rights of the people of other states and nations – can generate, intensify and prolong deadly conflict. We have seen it in the tragic catastrophe of World War I; in the terrible havoc wreaked by the aggressors of World War II; in the resistance by major imperial powers to the liberation demands of their former colonies (themselves driven by a strong sense of national identity) which led to many wars from the 1950s to the 1970s; and in the succession of awful wars waged between India and Pakistan, Israel and its Arab neighbours, Iran and Iraq, and the newly independent countries of the Balkans.

We have seen it in the tensions which persist to this day between China, Japan and Korea, with the memory of wartime occupation atrocities still deeply entrenched, and history wars always close to the surface. And we see it persisting to this day in the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it is not so much the issues of border definition and security that are proving the show-stoppers for any serious endgame negotiation but the identity issues of Jerusalem and refugee return.

Knowing all this, and knowing as much as we all do now about the capacity of the most ordinary-seeming of our fellow humans to perpetrate the most appalling violence on each other, it’s hard to be any kind of optimist in international relations, or about anything to do with violent conflict. To make even the most tentative suggestion that things might not be quite as bad as they seem – as I well know after quite a few years of committing this kind of faux pas – will almost invariably be taken to be compelling evidence of ignorance, naivete or outright dementia.

Yet when we look at the history of war between states over the whole period since the end of the Second World War – I’ll come back later to the issue of war within states – it is perfectly possible to be at least a partial optimist. As both documented and explained by the highly respected Human Security Report Project – a Canadian-based research institute led by Andrew Mack, whose distinguished career included a period in Australia as head of the ANU Peace Research Centre, and on whose work I will draw for a number of my remarks this evening 1 – there has been a quite dramatic reduction in both the number and scale of international conflicts.

Whereas in the 1950s there were on average just over six international conflicts being fought around the world each year – including for this purpose wars of liberation from colonial rule – since 2000 there have been on average fewer than one, and over the whole of the period not a single war has been fought directly between any of the
major powers. And the wars that have been fought have become far less deadly: whereas in the 1950s the average cross-border conflict was killing on the battlefield some 20,000 a year, that toll dropped to 6,000 during the 1990s, and to around half that again over the last decade.

Part of the explanation has been the end, essentially by the mid-'70s, of the anti-colonial wars, which were a majority of all the wars fought in the 1950s and 1960s. But more generally – and especially to account for the complete, and almost unprecedented, absence of conflict between the major powers, three distinct theories have been advanced.

The first is the Realist explanation: “peace through strength” – with Exhibit 1 being the presence on the scene of nuclear weapons since 1945. Argument will continue forever about whether the capacity to destroy each other really was decisive in preventing war between East and West during the Cold War years, whether it has been or will continue to be in the extraordinarily volatile relationship between India and Pakistan, and for that matter even as to whether the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (as distinct from the Russian entry into the war against it at the same time) really was decisive in forcing Japan’s capitulation. What is certainly clear is that US nuclear weapons played no role in preventing or halting Korean or Vietnam wars; Soviet nuclear weapons did not stop the Afghan mujahedeen from attacking and ultimately defeating its army; Israel’s nuclear arsenal did not deter Egypt’s attack in 1973; and no serious military analyst anywhere these days (starting with the US realist “gang of four” – Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn – whose views have been extraordinarily influential in generating a new international disarmament debate) believes nuclear weapons are rationally useable by anyone.

The Liberal explanation of “peace through democratization and interdependence” is not especially plausible on the security impact of democratization – which certainly hasn’t stopped democracies fighting non-democracies, and countries in transition to democracy going through terrible upheavals – but more so in relation to the ever growing interdependencies associated with today’s ever more globalized economy. While there is always the awful historical warning of Europe before World War I, which also believed its countries to be too interdependent for any war between them to be thinkable, the days of any major player even thinking of seizing raw materials through invasion rather than buying them on the open market really do seem to be long over, and the mutual bondage of the US and China through debt and consumer exports will be an immense inhibitor to outright confrontation between them for the foreseeable future.

But in many ways the most compelling of all the explanations for the almost complete disappearance of international war in the contemporary era is a third one:
that of “peace through ideas” – a comprehensive shift in both public and elite attitudes towards the legitimacy or acceptability of war as an instrument of statecraft. What was once seen as an inevitable concomitant of international relations, is now, in the aftermath of the almost indescribable scale of death and destruction in the two world wars, in which ordinary civilians have been targeted and suffering victims far more than in previous centuries, almost universally seen as something to be avoided at almost any cost.

For present purposes what is most interesting is the almost complete evaporation of any general disposition to glorify military achievement as a critical component of national pride, and sense of national identity. There have been occasional counter-examples in recent memory – one case being Serbian military-focused nationalism, which has been a long time a-dying in the Balkans – but the extreme jingoistic passion for waging war that characterized so many countries’ narratives in the last century seems to have almost completely disappeared. And maybe, just maybe, that’s not just because current generations of policymakers, and the publics on whom most of them depend to stay in power, believe that war would be too dangerous for national survival or too destructive to national prosperity, but rather because they genuinely believe that there is something about our larger identity, our membership of the larger global community, or more simply just our common humanity, which makes aggressive war-fighting, and the glorification of war, morally intolerable.

I suspect that for all those Australian youngsters visiting Gallipoli in their thousands each year, the message that they have overwhelmingly been taking away, and will continue to, has much less to do with the glory or excitement of war than with its assault on our common human identity. They can’t help but come away feeling proud to be Australian – because so many of the characteristics of bravery and resourcefulness and mateship we like to think are part of our national character are so much part of the Gallipoli story – but I think they also can’t help but be deeply touched by those words of Kemal Ataturk inscribed on the monument at Anzac Cove. Just about the most moving words ever penned in any language, they go to the absolute heart of the notion of our shared human identity: “There is no difference between your Johnnies and our Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.”

I don’t want to overdo the optimism. The Caucasus is fraught with continuing explosive cross-border tensions with strong underlying identity dimensions, the Horn of Africa similarly, and the Israeli-Palestinian situation is as far from resolution as ever. In the case of China – still harbouring a very a real sense of national humiliation at its treatment for two centuries by Western powers – perhaps we are
overestimating (although personally I don’t believe so) its capacity and willingness to show real restraint as now its economic power, and sometime in the future its military power, grows to the point of the challenging US primacy.

Of more immediate concern is the case of India and Pakistan. Each with their own huge fiercely nationalistic constituencies, anyone who believes that totally rational calculation is going to ensure that a future crisis is going to be contained within manageable bounds hasn’t been concentrating. I had my own sense of this visiting both Delhi and Islamabad six weeks after the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008, wearing my hat as President of the International Crisis Group. In both capitals the tension was still such that you could cut the air with a knife. I asked a meeting of senior officials in the Pakistan capital how anyone could be sure that, with a further provocation of the kind that could occur at any time, the situation wouldn’t escalate into nuclear confrontation. The response was “not to worry: there were hotlines in place between the most senior government and military figures in each country, and they would ensure that no catastrophic misunderstandings or miscalculations occurred.” A few minutes later, walking out to my car, a relatively junior official tugged my sleeve and said softly: “perhaps you should know that, although this situation has been at boiling point for weeks now, those hot-lines have not been used…”

In this context I have to say that, in the contemporary era, it is nuclear weapons that constitute the single most dangerous manifestation of national pride, and national identity anxieties, taking a military form. Status, far more than security – what I have been indelicate enough to describe elsewhere as the testosterone factor – explains at least the UK, French, and Indian bombs. London and Paris originally saw nuclear weapons as coming with the territory of their permanent Security Council membership, and now believe that to surrender them would be to concede that they are less than central global players. In the case of India, though China’s potential enmity was always the stated reason, it is hard to believe that a desire to be seen as playing in the top league was anything other than the major motivation: why else, knowing that Pakistan was bound to immediately follow its example, would India have surrendered the huge advantage it had in conventional weapons terms over its western neighbor? And there is now unquestionably a national pride dimension in Russia’s determination to remain, alongside the US, a major nuclear player so long as nuclear weapons exist.

The trouble with nuclear weapons is that, although there has been since the end of the Cold War an extraordinary degree of political and public complacency about the risks associated with them, the dangers of their use – by miscalculation or misadventure if not deliberate design – are nothing less than enormous, and a very real threat to the survival of this planet as we know it. Knowing what we now know – not only about the destructive capability of the world’s present 23,000 nuclear
weapons (equivalent to 150,000 Hiroshimas); but about how close how many times we came to catastrophe during the Cold War years through human and system error, even with the supposedly super-sophisticated command and control systems of the two superpowers; about the very much less sophisticated systems of some of the other seven present weapons possessing states; and about the risk of diversion of fissile material and nuclear hardware to rogue states and terrorists – it is sheer dumb luck, nothing else, that we have managed to avoid blowing ourselves up over the last sixty-six years. And it would be crazy to assume that luck will continue for decades more. There is no more important priority on the international security agenda than delegitimizing nuclear weapons – reducing their role and salience in military doctrine to reflect the reality of their unuseability, and reducing their appeal to national pride; dramatically reducing their number; and ultimate eliminating them.

**National, Ethnic and Religious Identity and War and Mass Violence Within States**

While numbers of wars between states dramatically declined during the Cold War years, at least from the 1960s onwards, the same was not true for war and mass violence occurring within states. The number of intrastate, or civil wars, rose inexorably throughout the Cold War years, and then reached a new peak – to just over fifty conflicts involving 25 or more battle deaths a year – in the early 1990s in the immediate aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and in the general context of the new political dynamics created by the collapse of Soviet influence. In many parts of Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America there was death, destruction, displacement and immiseration, often on a horrific scale.

To look for any single, overarching cause for all these conflicts, and major episodes of state and group-inflicted violence, is to chase a will-o’-the-wisp. Big theories – whether cast in terms of clash of civilizations, ancient tribal enmity, economic greed, economic grievance, or anything else – may be good for keynote speeches, and are certainly good for academic royalties. But they never seem to work very well in sorting between those situations which are combustible and those which are not. Every conflict is context specific, and every risk situation can involve multiple factors – political, economic, cultural and personal.

All that said I know very well from my work at the International Crisis Group, which has produced hundreds of highly detailed, case by case analyses, that identity issues have been major drivers of a great many civil conflicts and episodes of mass violence. Sometimes it is a matter of national identity – of a kind effectively indistinguishable from that we have been discussing in the context of war between states – with a clearly identifiable national grouping within a sovereign state (or, as in the case of the Palestinians, under occupation by a sovereign state) demanding a separate legal existence – as with the Bangladeshis within the original Pakistan, the
South Sudanese, the East Timorese after annexation by Indonesia and, less successfully, those seeking to sever Northern Ireland from the UK, or Kashmir from both India and Pakistan.

Very often it is a matter of ethnic, linguistic, religious or regional identity, which can sometimes take an independence-seeking nationalist form as well, but more often involves groups, self-defined by one or more of these characteristics, seeking recognition and redress within the framework of a sovereign state for longstanding grievances or aspirations -- as with the Acehnese in Indonesia, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Darfuris in Sudan, the Hutus in Rwanda and Burundi, the Madhesis of Nepal, and the Tibetans and Uighurs in China among many others.

Occasionally the identity issue is completely different again, involving class or ideology, factors which drove some of the most murderous excesses of Stalin and Mao against their own people, and in more recent decades those of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1970s. We always think of Cambodia – with the outright murder, or killing by starvation and disease of some two million people, a quarter of the country’s population – as one of the worst genocides of modern times, but in fact it was not, legally speaking, a genocide at all within the meaning of the Genocide Convention, because those perpetrating the horror did not seek to destroy their victims on the basis of their nationality, race, ethnicity or religion, as the Convention requires, but rather their class, as defined by their education or profession.

It will be a tall order to completely eliminate identity driven deadly civil conflict from the face of the earth. It may be that the kind of extreme ideological, class-driven pathologies we associate with Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot won’t readily gain a toehold again in the kind of world we live in, but we know that strong sentiments of national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional identity exist in every corner of the globe and will be with us for a very long time yet. The issue is whether the world is going to be forever condemned to seeing those identity sentiments taking a violent form, or whether identity grievances and aspirations can be satisfied by other means, choosing peace rather than war.

Here again the news is better than most people think. Since the early 1990s, despite all the terrible cases we all remember, and all the terrible cases still ongoing in the Congo and elsewhere, there has been an extraordinary decrease in the number of civil wars, the number of episodes of mass killing, and the number of people dying violent battle deaths. In the case of serious conflicts (defined as those with 1000 or more reported battle deaths in a year) and mass killings there has been an 80 per cent decline since the early ’90s. Though a number of significant new conflicts did commence, and a number of apparently successfully concluded conflicts did break out again within a few years – though less so recently than in the 1990s – many more conflicts have stopped than started. There has even more striking decrease in the
number of battle deaths. Whereas most years from the 1940s through to the 1990s had over 100,000 such reported deaths – and sometimes as many as 500,000 – the average for the first years of this new century has been fewer than 20,000.

Even more encouraging is the analysis which lies behind these figures. The dramatic decline in wars and battle deaths is partly explained by the end of the Cold War, which – although its immediate result was more conflict rather than less in the Balkans and elsewhere – meant that there were no more proxy wars fuelled by Washington or Moscow, and a more or less complete end to the long era of communist insurgency. But, the best explanation is simply the massive increase in international activism – across the whole spectrum of conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict peacebuilding activity – that has occurred over the last decade and a half, with most of this being spearheaded by the much maligned United Nations.

Many more conflicts have been negotiated to conclusion than have newly erupted; there has been a tenfold increase from 1991 to 2007 in the number of ‘Friends of the Secretary General’, contact groups and other political arrangements that support peacemaking and follow-on initiatives; and as well as a threefold increase in the number of peace operations overall – with more than thirty nor underway around the world – there has been a nine-fold increase from 1989 to 2008 in the number of post-conflict operations specifically focusing on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. And beyond the UN, significant roles of their own have been played by a number of regional organizations (notably in Africa), by many individual states through their own diplomatic and peacekeeping activity and targeted development assistance (with Australia playing a leading and honourable role in this respect under successive governments), and literally thousands of NGOs – including I hope my own International Crisis Group, which did not exist before 1995.

On top of all this classic conflict prevention and management activity we have seen the emergence, over the last decade, of a new international determination to address the intractable problem of mass atrocity crimes – genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other major crimes against humanity and war crimes – sometimes occurring in the context of civil war, but as often as not with a dynamic of their own. For centuries, right up to the beginning of the 21st, mass atrocity crimes perpetrated behind state borders were seen essentially as nobody else’s business. As the tragedies we can all remember in the 1990s unfolded – with the lowest points being Rwanda in 1994, Srebrenica in 1995, and Kosovo in 1999 – there was not even the beginning of North-South consensus around the notion of a “right of humanitarian intervention”. But now, with acceptance by the global community of the new principle of “the responsibility to protect” – unanimously by heads of state and government in 2005, and overwhelmingly in hard-fought UN General Assembly debates since then – there has been a profound normative shift.
While there is still plenty of room for disagreement as to what the proper international response should be in each individual mass atrocity case as it emerges, and in particular about the precise circumstances in which last-resort coercive military action should apply, the sea-change over the last five or six years has been that these are now regarded as cases which simply cannot be ignored -- they are no longer nobody’s business, but everyone’s. The course of action taken by the Security Council in response to the events in Libya – and its parallel action in Cote d’Ivoire – has given extraordinary new momentum and authority to the new responsibility to protect norm, starting as the Council did with warnings and targeted sanctions, but then moving with extraordinary speed to authorize direct military action as it became evident to everyone (or at least everyone but the John Pilgers and Noam Chomskys of this world) that this was the only way further major civilian massacres could be avoided.

As someone who has fought long and hard to develop and implement the responsibility to protect concept, in the hope that we would never again have to say “never again” in the aftermath of a Cambodia or Rwanda, I do share the anxiety that the present Security Council civilian protection mandate not be stretched to breaking point by the current NATO operation. Should Libya, far from setting a new benchmark for future commitment, prove to be the high water mark from which the tide will now recede, that would be an absolute tragedy, given the extraordinary progress that has been made, and much work remains to be done to ensure that we not only hold the line that has been won, but make the responsibility to protect, in all its dimensions – preventive as well as reactive – ever more effective.

But on this, as on most of the great issues of war and peace, and human security and human dignity, with which the international community is wrestling, I remain an eternal optimist. Having strong senses of identity with one’s nation and multiple other groups is an inherent part of what it is to be human. We can’t, and shouldn’t even try, to erode those senses of identity. But we should do everything within our power and competence, in all the ways that each of us find possible, professionally and personally, to emphasise not the things that divide us but our common humanity -- and to continue to find institutional and political ways of ensuring that, as people follow their identity dreams, and try to redress the injustices that their national, ethnic, religious or other identity may have caused them to suffer, that struggle will not take a violent form. On the evidence that I see in the world around me, that job is far from done, but I think we are gradually succeeding. I hope that in what I have said this evening I have given you at least some ground for sharing my optimism.