

War is sometimes a necessary evil. That lesson was learned in the 1930s and 1940s. Aggression by Japan in Manchuria went undeterred in 1931, aggression by Italy in Ethiopia went undeterred in 1935, aggression by Germany in Czechoslovakia went undeterred in 1938. Failure of the international community to respond effectively to these acts of aggression led to the Second World War.

The failure to deter aggression in the 1930s was, more than anything else, a failure in the system of collective security established under the League of Nations after the First World War. The protection that individual states were to receive from all other states through the League of Nations failed to materialize. The system of collective security collapsed and with it the prospects for international peace and security.

Here is what Lester Pearson wrote in his memoirs about the maintenance of collective security:

For collective security to have real meaning for peace, all members must be prepared and willing to join in precisely the kind of action, economic and military, which is necessary to prevent or defeat aggression. Otherwise, an aggressor has nothing to fear from the international community but pinpricks.

With the end of the Second World War, persons of vision like Lester Pearson undertook to create a new international organization to succeed where the League of Nations had failed. As Mr. Pearson wrote in 1945, the architects of the United Nations were determined,

to make certain that never again should an aggressor be permitted to strike down one nation after another before the peace-loving nations of the world organize and take concerted action against it.

This fundamental purpose of the United Nations is proclaimed in Article 1 of the UN Charter,

to maintain international peace and security [by taking] effective, collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace.

Sadly, the Cold War so divided nations, especially those on the Security Council, that the UN's role in maintaining collective security has been very largely unfulfilled.

But the end of the Cold War has made possible a reaffirmation of the UN's intended role in achieving collective security. The conflict in the Gulf of Persia will determine whether the UN