

INTRODUCTION:

One of the major threats to the stability of the emerging international security system is the multiplication of ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts. The case of ex-Yugoslavia, as well as current and potential conflicts in the former Soviet Union (FSU) or other regions of the world, argue for immediate attention to an urgent problem. We need particularly to focus on preventing the most destabilizing effects of these disputes:

- the escalation to armed confrontation, which carries the potential risk of spill-over;
- the fragmentation of the international system through the multiplication of new small states;
- the mass migration of populations; and
- the "ethnicization" of international relations.

While the problem of ethnic, nationalist or religious conflicts is centuries old, and is part of the geopolitical fabric of many regions, it has re-emerged rapidly and convulsively in recent years as the discipline and imposed order of the Cold War have eroded. We should be examining whether there are new approaches to resolve old patterns of conflict.

The heart of the problem, simply put, is to reconcile the twin issues of self-determination and minority rights: to prevent egregious violations of human and minority rights, thereby inducing secessionist movements on the part of a given minority and leading to armed confrontation. The claim to a sovereign state by a minority comes generally from a perception that the guarantees afforded by the international system in the form of "statehood" are the only long-term remedy to its grievances. Alternative ways or "less-than-sovereign" solutions to the problems of minorities should therefore be explored if we are to address this issue effectively.

The most fundamental step towards meeting the aforementioned objectives would be to secure protection of basic human rights, including minority rights, in order to create and maintain a climate conducive to peaceful dialogue and conflict-resolution within the existing state. A mix of regional and international guarantees for respect of these rights could establish the necessary level of confidence for a minority to maintain dialogue and to reach negotiated constitutional arrangements with a majority in the case of specific disputes. In addition to pursuing human rights objectives on the basis of their intrinsic merits, there is therefore an additional international security rationale for giving increased emphasis to the full implementation of minority rights.