

ON THE STATUS QUO OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT IN AUTUMN 2023¹

KRISTÍNA KRÁLIKOVÁ¹, JOZEF KRÁLIK², VLASTA TIBENSKÁ³

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¹ Academy of Police Forces, Bratislava (SK)

² Danubius College, Faculty of Law of Janko Jesenský, Sládkovičovo (SK)

³ Danubius College, Faculty of Law of Janko Jesenský, Sládkovičovo (SK)

Contact: pplk. doc. JUDr. Ing. PhDr. Kristína Králiková, PhD., MBA - kristina.kralikova@minv.sk; prof. JUDr. Jozef Králik, CSc., MBA - jozef.kralik@vsdanubius.sk; Bc. PaedDr. Vlasta Tibenská

Abstract:

The United Nations Organization is a project of international peace cooperation undertaken by the peaceful nations of the world, which have learned from history. Throughout its history, this global international organisation has prevented many international armed conflicts, avoided many and ended many. Despite the enormous human, moral and material sacrifices of all the wars fought around the world, it is clear that a part of the world's human population has not yet learned the lessons of the history of wars. The persistence of war conflicts between nations in the 21st century is a testimony to this fact. One of the most recent armed conflicts to erupt and threaten the entire world is the genocidal war waged between the Palestinian-Arab organisation Hamas and the State of Israel. This article

1 The article represents a partial outcome of the solved scientific-research task VEIGA Nr. 3/2023 *Moderná spoločnosť 21. storočia ako mnohovrstvový a mnohostranný problém (Modern society of the 21st century as multilayered and multilateral problem)* commissioned and funded by 2000 EUR by the Faculty of Law of Janko Jesenský of Danubius College in Sládkovičovo by the principal researcher, JUDr. Jozef Králik, CSc., MBA of Danubius College and pplk. doc. JUDr. Ing. PhDr. Kristína Králiková, PhD., MBA of the Academy of Police Forces in Bratislava

highlights some of the stages of its emergence, its course and its possible implications for the world peace.

Key words: international relations, conflict, Hamas, Palestine, Israel, autumn of 2023, Gaza strip

Introduction

The geopolitically extremely important region of the Middle East has long been a sensitive barometer determining the strategic development of the entire complex of international relations determined by the interests of the world's (super) powers.² This complex of interests is naturally subject to qualitative and quantitative transformations, copying the transformations of the internal and foreign policies of the world powers. Particularly the so-called superpowers. In this geopolitical space, almost everything that the superpowers dominating the world affairs consider to be of vital interest to them is located in this geopolitical space. In the historical space of the Middle East, therefore, there is a complicated intersection of interests that are awakened by the existing sources of natural wealth there, particularly oil and gas. However, there are other realities that determine the overall quality and explosive dynamics of life in this region, which occupies the religious crossroads of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is therefore certainly logical that the space of Palestine has historically been a buffer territory in which confessional, national and racially motivated civilizational conflicts have more or less regularly erupted. The polytheistic Roman Empire and its legions defeated and enslaved the monotheistic indigenous Jewish population of both Canaan and Judea.³ The country where Christianity was born. The military conquests of the European Christian crusaders, ideologically justified and covered by the religious dogma of "liberating the tomb of God" as insistently as the conquests of the Islamic caliphs "in the name of Allah", took place for centuries in the peripheral lands of the so-called Fertile Crescent. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 by the will of the United Nations, also situated in an uncompromisingly confrontational legal environment 'at the edge of the worlds', this hotbed of international tension was inflamed to the extreme.⁴

2 Kissinger, Henry. (2023). *Uspořádání světa*. (3rd ed.). Praha: Prostor. p. 15 – 22.

3 Maškin, Nikolaj Aleksandrovič. (1957). *Dějiny starověkého Říma*. (2nd ed.). Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury. p. 451 – 454, 479 – 483, 533 – 553, 605 – 607.

4 Lasicová, Jana et Ušiak, Jaroslav. (2011). Vplyv ideológie na definovanie bezpečnostného prostredia. In *Bezpečnosť a jej dimenzie v súčasnom globalizovanom svete*. Zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie. Podhájska: Východoeurópska agentúra pre rozvoj n. o., 2011, ISBN 978-80-970277-6-6. p. 122 – 128. Dostupné na internete: <www.eeda.sk>

Of course, the world powers also added “fuel to the fire”. Each of them in its own interest. The fruits of misunderstanding, which were never permanently burnt in this ‘fire’, have ripened into a mass terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas in October 2023. Terrorism is therefore not stagnating, its causes have not been eliminated, and it is therefore not leaving the Middle East, even though individual suicide terrorist acts are not occurring en masse in this geopolitical area.⁵ The Palestinian question is thus still an open issue, smouldering under the seemingly rationally corrected regulatory oversight of the world’s superpowers and the United Nations. “The ‘hot’, though not yet ‘burning’, state of war in which the entire local human population and its daily life in the area is deeply embroiled remains latent. Although for a time the world has seen the hope of a definitive extinguishing of this smouldering hotbed of international tension.”⁶

1. Possible motivation for Hamas attack on Israel

World peace and international security are not only a matter of concern but also of protection for the international community of States integrated into the United Nations. Indeed, peace and international security are the primary prerequisites for the continued progress of human civilization towards the spiritual and material well-being of all mankind. Certainly, it is this goal horizon of civilizational development that is both the motive and the prerequisite for the development of worldwide socio-economic cooperation among individual States and their groupings.⁷ Despite this universally appealing vision of the development of a possible future for humanity, however, individual states and their societies are approaching the resolution of their mutual disputes through the use of military force. In the autumn of 2023, the leaders of the Arab-Palestinian movement Hamas committed themselves to such a problematic solution to a long-unresolved problem of international substance in a way that used the instruments of mass violence applied on the sovereign territory of the neighbouring state of Israel, which was obviously a strategic mistake on the part of Hamas. Indeed, the political and military consequences of this act were foreseeable.

Mohamed Deif and Hamas military commander Ezzeldin Qassam announced on October 7, 2023 the launch of a massive attack from the Gaza Strip on Israel. They called this attack ‘Tufan al-Aqsa’, or ‘Al-Aqsa Flood’. Hamas took Israel by

5 More details e.g. Raděj, Tomáš. (2010). *Sebevražedný terorismus - kult mučedníka islámu*. (1st ed.). Praha: SLON.

6 Compare e.g. Drgonec, Ján. (1991). *Právne kultúry Ázie a Afriky*. (1st ed.). Bratislava: VEDA. p. 20 – 39.

7 See Králik, Jozef. (2003). *Letokruhy diplomacie*. (1st ed.). Bratislava: Iura edition. p. 15 – 20.

surprise and caused it international political embarrassment. Many political and military analysts called the armed terrorist attack on Israel “Yom Kippur 2.0” and compared it to the so-called Yom Kippur War that broke out on October 6, 1973 between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Syria on the other.

The Hamas attack seems to have caught the Israeli Defence Forces, i.e. the army and the police, unprepared, just like the Egyptian and Syrian troops in the so-called Yom Kippur War in 1973. Hamas had good intelligence information, especially on Israel’s weaknesses and the possibility of infiltration by militants into Israeli territory. It can be assumed that it may not even have been intercepted by Israeli intelligence services Shabak (internal intelligence) and AMAN (military intelligence).

The actual armed attack on Israel by Hamas members began on Saturday morning, just in time for the Sabbath and the Jewish holiday. Similarly, the so-called Yom Kippur War of 1973 began on a Saturday morning and also on a Jewish holiday. One can also see a considerable parallel of propaganda colouring in this. The Hamas attack on Israel came about for a number of possible reasons. Apart from the reference to the symbolism of the ‘setta octobr’, one tangible reason was the long-standing Israeli dictate, implemented at the al-Aqsa mosque, whereby observant Muslims were forced to remain outside, that is, in front of the holy shrine, while Jews were allowed into the mosque grounds. Hence Hamas has called the attack the ‘Al-Aqsa Flood’. The Hamas attack on Israel was also fuelled by other factors, including the failure to obtain further concessions from Jews to Muslims, precisely in the Gaza Strip, and the unwillingness to enter into a prisoner exchange agreement with the current Israeli, far-right government. Hamas began blackmailing Israel based mainly on the kidnapping of Israeli citizens into the Gaza Strip from Israeli prisons, or by using them as human shields against the massive Israeli retaliatory attacks carried out in the Gaza Strip to eliminate Hamas leaders and military commanders. Hamas militant leaders have also had pledges of support from Iran and the militant Shia movement Hezbollah in engaging in the concept of ‘Wahdat al-Sahat’ (unity of fronts), which means a joint advance from Gaza, Lebanon, the West Bank and the Arab areas of Israel, which is contrary to the Israeli doctrine of the division of fronts. An associated reason for the Hamas attack on Israel was in retaliation for events in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Israel secretly supplied Azerbaijan with weapons and supported their operation to retake the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Israeli army has responded to the Hamas attack by preparing a retaliatory military operation called “Iron Swords”, aimed at killing some of the top Hamas leaders and military commanders in the Gaza Strip. It is currently impossible to predict how long the fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip will

last. Perhaps the presence of many abducted Israeli citizens in the Gaza Strip could influence the course and intensity of the counter-attack by Israeli military forces.

The Hamas attack on Israel is one of the most extensive and, at the same time, the most devastating operations carried out in the last two decades. The number of casualties compared to the 2nd Palestinian intifada, which lasted five years, is much higher on the Israeli side than might have been expected. It is the calling up of Israeli military reserves that indicates that Israel is preparing for a protracted and probably annihilating war against Hamas. At the same time, Israel is evacuating the population from the northern areas adjacent to the Lebanese border, in effect indicating that it is also counting on Hezbollah opening a northern front. However, the intensity of the fighting on this border still does not suggest a repeat of 2006, when Israel fought in both the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

2. Iran's role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

From day one, Iran has been highlighting the attack by the Palestinian Islamist and paramilitary terrorist organization Hamas on the civilian population of Israel on October 7, 2023. The leader of the Iranian regime himself, Rahbar Khamenei, who possesses the highest powers in the Iranian political hierarchy, has declared that this is the end of the Zionist regime. His remarks were echoed by the Iranian President, Raisi, who sees in the incessant bombing in the Gaza Strip an opportunity to force the authorities and the institutional base of the international community to take punitive action against the Zionist regime in Israel. From the outset, the international community has logically linked this attack to the activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which are linked precisely to Hamas and are responsible for supporting terrorist activities throughout the Middle East. At the same time, the Iranian regime is aware that it does not have sufficient military equipment to launch a conventional war. It has obsolete military equipment from the 1970s and 1980s, home-made defensive missile systems and drones. Although Iran currently supports the activities of Hamas, it distances itself from direct involvement in this armed conflict, which is taking on the character of a genocide of the Arab-Palestinian population of Gaza.

The international community calls on the Iranian regime to make rational use of its ideological pragmatic potential and influence over Hamas in order to reduce tensions in the Middle East region. Iran would probably be able to exert

considerable influence on Hamas leaders in negotiating the release of imprisoned Israeli citizens. It is this task that another conservative Arab Islamic monarchist state has taken under its wing, and so for the time being Qatar's diplomacy has taken over the role of negotiator.

The international community is clearly pointing to the role of Iran, which is clearly supporting Hamas through the IIRG in the Gaza conflict. In this context, a military exercise by the Iranian armed forces was also recorded at the end of October 2023 to test the operational readiness of the infantry forces in the north-west of Iran close to the border with Iraq.

The Iranian regime is vehemently supporting Palestine and positioning itself as the leader of the Islamic world. In this context, Iran is conducting an intensive diplomatic campaign precisely to unite Muslim countries against Israel.

3. Position of the Russian Federation on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

Russian Federation officials maintain a pragmatic relationship with the Israeli government administration and allies in the Middle East, which is why they have not condemned Hamas attacks against Israel. They have therefore called on both belligerent states to halt combat operations and end the violence against the civilian population. Since the outbreak of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Russian Federation has acted impartially in order to restore its position of power in the region, as well as in international politics. The hidden intention of the Russian Federation is, above all, to undermine the attention and support of the West, which has so far been directed primarily towards Ukraine.

Hamas leaders, along with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Baghari Kani, made an unannounced visit to the Russian Federation in late October 2023. The Russian Federation officials described the visit as a continuation of Russian policy leading to the urgent release of Russian hostages held captive by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. By receiving this foreign visit, the Russian Federation demonstrated its involvement in the resolution of the conflict in the Gaza Strip, thus showing its continued influence on developments in the region even after the disintegration of the so-called Middle East Peace Quartet (the Russian Federation, the European Union, the United States of America and the United Nations). At this meeting, the representatives of the Russian Federation reaffirmed their unchanging position in support of a just solution to the so-called Palestinian problem. This is based solely on the relevant United Nations and United Nations Security Council resolutions relating to the demand for the establishment of a

sovereign Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The aim is to ensure the coexistence of state-satisfied Palestinian Arabs in lasting peace and secure coexistence with Israel. The two sides also discussed ways to end the crimes committed against the Palestinian population by Israel, supported by the United States of America, related to the evacuation of foreigners from the Gaza Strip.

4. Hezbollah's position in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

Another potential part of the chain focused on reviving of the process of unleashing armed struggles threatening Israel is the armed component of the terrorist organisation located and operating in Lebanese territory. The threat of an armed attack on Israeli territory by the militant Shia movement Hezbollah, which operates in southern Lebanon, is therefore also real. Hezbollah is the main power in Lebanon and, like Hamas, is financially supported by Iran. However, it is a significantly larger and more organised military and political force than the Gaza-Palestinian Hamas.

Hezbollah leader Nasrallah Hassan has warned Israel of attacks on Lebanon on the Lebanese-Israeli border that could indeed escalate into a full-scale war. The Hezbollah leader sees the United States as being behind the military conflict between Israel and Hamas. The US are using Israel and thereby preventing activities leading to a ceasefire and an end to Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip. According to the leader of Hezbollah, the United States, by its direct involvement in the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip, wants to reignite tensions in the region. For this reason, Hezbollah is prepared to confront the aggression of the United States. According to the leader of Hezbollah, the United States of America's aim is to destroy Hamas, which would ultimately mean encircling Hezbollah from the north and leading to the triggering of another conflict. It is precisely because of the conflict that has arisen between Hezbollah and the United States of America that it is envisaged that Iran would be drawn into the conflict as well. All US military bases in the Middle East are within range of Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles. This means that United States military forces stationed within range of these weapons are unlikely to be able to launch and deploy a ground operation against Iran without serious risk.

Despite provocations by Israel and its allies, Hezbollah has not yet mobilised its reserves. In doing so, it is outwardly trying to declare that it is not yet preparing for open armed conflict. At the same time, it does not seem to want to allow the failure and loss of the position resulting from the existing status quo,

despite the fact that Israel and its allies declare this to be the case. Hezbollah would lose regional significance by being drawn into a war with Israel, and its domestic popularity would also suffer considerably. It would also destroy its military deterrent and lose its biggest sponsor, Iran, which, through Hezbollah, has deployed more than 130 000 rockets in southern Lebanon in case of an attack on Iran's virtual infrastructure. Indeed, it has taken Hezbollah several years to build up such a deterrent military capability.

Iran would probably only come to Hezbollah's defence if it were its own existential struggle. Iran has succeeded in undermining governments in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in recent years, thereby creating the instability it desires in the region. Iran has also played a part in stopping the talks on the Abraham Accords between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which are aimed at developing a process to raise oil and gas prices.

5. The conflict in the Gaza Strip and its implications for the Abraham Accords

The Western powers and their Arab allies believed that a possible Palestinian-Israeli conflict was not that important for the stability of the region. The perception was that Arab normalization of relations with Israel without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could bring peace and security to the region. But the current conflict in the Gaza Strip shows just the opposite. Of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain, it was only the United Arab Emirates that normalised relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords.

The United Arab Emirates was the initiator and first signatory of the Abraham Accords, despite the current conflict between Hamas and Israel. This poly-Arab state entity has a keen interest in developing not only economic but also political relations with Israel. Yet the United Arab Emirates has not always entered into political relations that suit the United States and its Western allies. For example, it has legitimised Syrian President al-Assad, cooperated with the Russian private military company Wagner Group in Africa, taken a neutral stance on Russia's special military operation in the nature of an invasion of Ukraine, and cooperated with the People's Republic of China in the area of defence and security. Other Arab states that have not formally established relations with Israel, and which have developed more autonomously politically, have now reached such international political position, where the United States have a "less permissive approach" to them and their policies.

The United Arab Emirates sees Hamas' actions as a threat to security and stability in the region, as well as undermining national security interests in the region. It is the current conflict in the Gaza Strip that puts the United Arab Emirates in a difficult position. Indeed, the United Arab Emirates is aware that the Palestinian issue is now back at the forefront and is weighing on international relations. It must therefore approach this issue in a sensitive manner and protect not only its national interests, but also the degree of cooperation it has achieved with Israel and the United States of America. The United Arab Emirates considers Iran, which plays a significant role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to be the greatest security threat. As a result of the conflict, the United Arab Emirates has had to take steps to distance itself verbally from Israel and its current right-wing government. As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the United Arab Emirates also drafted the text of a resolution calling on Israel to halt the expansion of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, which was merely illustrative of its criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government despite the Abraham Accords. The United Arab Emirates, as the only Arab country, a composite state that is a member of the United Nations Security Council, condemned the Hamas attack on Israel on the very first day of the conflict. The other GCC Arab States considered the condemnation by the United Arab Emirates to be inappropriate, while pointing to the occupation of Palestinian territories and Israel's long-standing provocative behaviour. Following the bombing of Al-Ahli Al-Arabi hospital in Gaza, the UAE no longer condemned Hamas for the bloodshed and terrorism it had committed. Today, the UAE's attitude towards Hamas is the same as its attitude towards the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. They base their position on the Abraham Accords, which should contribute to a peaceful solution to the Palestinian question. The United Arab Emirates has been aware from the outset that normalisation of relations with Israel will never directly or indirectly involve Palestine and Israel. Their aim was only to gain a close and strategic alliance with the United States of America. The current conflict in the Gaza Strip puts the United Arab Emirates in a difficult situation. On the one hand, they want to maintain their strategic relations with the United States of America, as well as their pro-Israeli policy, and on the other hand, they have to balance the demands made by the other Arab states of the GCC. The UAE will not withdraw from the Abraham Accords because it has and is getting greater benefits from them. It is obvious that they will denounce and condemn Israel only by symbolic gestures.

6. Gaza conflict as a new challenge for Saudi Arabia

The conflict in Gaza has hampered Saudi Arabia's ambitions to become a regional leader, which was supposed to contribute to stabilising relations in the region and to concluding key agreements with the United States and Israel. It is some of the Arab countries of the GCC that have divergent views on the Gaza conflict: the Arab states of Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, which have shown no interest in normalising relations with Israel and have strongly criticised the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, are trying to keep a low profile. They want to ride out this conflict with as little damage and loss as possible and without having to revise their newly established relations with Israel. At the centre of this spectrum of opinion stands Saudi Arabia in particular. Its long-standing ambition is precisely to normalise relations with Israel, which prevents it from being critical of Israel and its policies. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia understands Israel's actions, but, on the other hand, it is again demanding that certain limits be set for Israel. Such limits include, in particular, an immediate ceasefire. From Saudi Arabia's point of view, the ideal solution to the conflict in the Gaza Strip would be the total defeat of the militant movement of Hamas. This would open the way for Palestinian unification and the subsequent resumption of the peace process, in which Saudi Arabia could play a prominent role. This would create the right conditions for Saudi Arabia, in particular, to normalise relations with Israel. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been involved in the process of stabilising the region. In particular, this has involved a ceasefire with the Houthis in Yemen, the re-establishment of relations with Iran, the normalisation of relations with President al-Assad of Syria, reconciliation with Qatar, mediation with Sudan and so on.

In the case of the Gaza conflict, Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator is more complex because it does not maintain formal relations with Israel and does not trust Hamas. It is Israel that is pushing Saudi Arabia into the role of mediator. Israel is seeking to shift responsibility for the population in the Gaza Strip to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is aware that it will not be enough for Israel to return to the status quo ante. In its history, Israel has always made greater territorial or political gains from similar conflicts than the loss of its political points. It was Israel, with its calls for humanitarian evacuation that was apparently trying to create a security space in the northern Gaza Strip, i.e. it was seeking a buffer zone that it could bring under its control and later use in negotiations for the return of the prisoners. Here, then, was just the right space for Saudi Arabia to offer normalisation of relations with Israel as part of the incentive package for reaching a final peace agreement.

It is the normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia that is a red line for Iran, because it would call into question the agreement concluded between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was brokered by China. It is this agreement that has given Iran international credibility. The normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia would create a united Arab-Jewish regional front against Iran and its proxy formations, grouped together in the so-called 'Axis of Resistance'. This would deprive Iran of its historical position in the region as a regional power fitting the role of defender of the Palestinian people.

Saudi involvement was also evident in the drafting of the US-Saudi-Israeli agreement. The agreement being prepared was intended to bring Saudi Arabia a military agreement with the United States, normalisation of relations with Israel and agreement to its own nuclear programme. All these efforts and Saudi ambitions have been frozen because of the outbreak of conflict between Hamas and Israel, which largely suits Iran.

Conclusion

Peace in the world, or its preservation and maintenance in the form of long-term peaceful and non-conflicting coexistence of peoples, as de facto documented by history, is in fact the subject of "bargaining". It depends on the degree of urgency and the objective embodied in the current interests of the world powers. The peace horizon is thus an expected outcome variable integrated into a political equation of multiple unknowns. It is both a desirable and a desired outcome of mankind, which can be arrived at in different ways and practices. Peace among the peoples of the world is unquestionably always both realistically achievable and sustainable. Despite the fact that it has not been permanently established in the world, even by the relevant organs of the United Nations, which was institutionalised with just such a specific objective in mind. Both the threat of the use of force and its direct use in order to establish "desirable parameters" of international relations for the benefit of one party, i.e. the world order currently dominated by the subjects of international law, do not definitively belong to the past. The international legal institution of "humane intervention" can also be placed within these coordinates.⁸ The Palestinian-Arab attempt to achieve progress or a shift in the resolution of Palestinian-Israeli differences, inappropriately wrapped in the form of an armed attack by Hamas on Israeli state territory, which was obvious, provoked Israeli armed retaliation, leading to the total collapse of the Palestinian enclave of Gaza. The obvious

8 Králik, Jozef. (2006). *Kariérny diplomat*. (1st ed.). Bratislava: Iura edition. p. 213 an.

expectations of the Hamas leadership of the subsequent re-engagement of the entire Arab world in this long-running conflict on its side will not be fulfilled, because the objective conditions are not in place to do so. The attack on Israel by Hamas gunmen and the extremely radical armed and diplomatic response to it are both a warning and a lesson to any attacker, which shows that it is primarily through peaceful negotiations that international disputes can be successfully resolved, thus preventing even potential genocide and the ultimate destruction of one's own population. Therefore, the ancient Slovak folk saying, verified over the centuries, also applies in this case: measure first, then cut! However, it is particularly important to point out the possible serious consequences of this conflict, which may have a destructive impact on the future development of international relations and lead the actions of the world's superpowers to extreme solutions that may even be reflected in the threat to world peace.

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