

PALME COMMISSION

The Palme Commission was formed in 1980 and released its report in 1982, led by Olof Palme, who was Sweden's Prime Minister at the time. Its primary achievement was the publication of "Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival." This global effort significantly redefined security ideas during the Cold War, moving away from militarized, zero-sum strategies toward a focus on shared, cooperative, and human-centered security. The principles from the Palme Commission laid the foundation for later initiatives such as UN Human Security, UN peacebuilding, and India's recent emphasis on "ASEAN centrality and cooperative security."

Background and Context

Cold War tensions in the late 1970s included a renewed confrontation between the US and USSR after détente. This period saw a rapid buildup of nuclear weapons, such as the USSR's SS-20 missiles and the US's Pershing II and cruise missiles. The invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, along with the Iran hostage crisis and increasing hostility between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, heightened fears. The risk of nuclear miscalculation peaked during this period.

A new security structure is needed that goes beyond traditional military strength. The Palme Commission questioned this, asserting – *No one is truly safe until everyone is safe – security is a collective effort, not a unilateral one.*

Objectives of the Palme Commission

- To suggest alternatives to nuclear confrontation between superpowers.
- Redefining security as a collaborative effort rather than a competitive one.
- Propose methods for disarmament and arms regulation.
- To prevent nuclear war, it is essential to maintain open communication channels and effective crisis management.
- To enhance global governance for peace, especially via the UN

Composition of the Commission

A mix of political leaders, foreign ministers, defence experts, and diplomats from all regions

Some significant members are –

- Olof Palme (Sweden) – Chairperson
- Cyrus Vance (UK) – former US Secretary of State
- David Owen (UK) – former foreign secretary
- Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway) – PM (later chaired the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development)
- Eduard Shevardnadze (USSR) – foreign minister
- Salim Ahmed Salim (Tanzania) – diplomat, later OAU Secretary-General
- Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (Perú) – later UN – Secretary General

Significant Conceptual Contribution: “Common Security”

The Palme Report focuses on the idea of Common Security.

Definition

Relying solely on military power does not ensure security.

Security depends on cooperation, open dialogue, transparency, and mutual restraint.

Key Principles

- No unilateral security—if one side increases its weapons, everyone becomes less secure.
- Mutual vulnerability implies that cooperation is the only way to ensure survival.
- Dialogue over deterrence as a ground for stability
- Humanitarian results of nuclear war must guide policy

6 Pillars of Commons Security

- Avoid using force.
- Resolving conflicts peacefully.
- Arms – Control and dismantling of nuclear arsenals
- Confidence-building measures (CBMs)
- Enhancing international institutions, especially the UN.
- Tackling the underlying issues of conflict—poverty, inequality, and injustice.

This was groundbreaking for its era.

Important Recommendations of the Palme Commission

Nuclear Disarmament

- Cease the production of atomic weapons.
- No – initially, focus on commitments made by nuclear states.
- Elimination of tactical nuclear weapons from the battlefield.
- Removal of nuclear weapons from high alert status.
- Ban on neutron bombs
- Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) – established decades before 1996.

Conventional Arms Reduction

- Decrease the presence of offensive weapons that contribute to regional instability.
- Establish weapon-free zones in regions such as the Nordic countries, Central Europe, and the Indian Ocean.
- Reduce military budgets.

Crisis Management

- Direct hostility between nuclear powers
- Clarity regarding troop movements
- Early warning systems need to remain effective and be widely shared.

Strengthening the United Nations

- Increased funding for UN peacekeeping efforts.
- The UN should facilitate dialogue to ease tensions among superpowers.
- Enhance the Security Council's efforts in preventative diplomacy.

Regional Security Approaches

- Europe should avoid missile deployments and instead promote East–West confidence-building measures.
- Promote regional arms control and conflict prevention in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Humanitarian Concerns

- Research on nuclear winter warrants serious attention.
- The threat of nuclear war demands a global reassessment of our ethical principles.
- Disarmament in relation to development (Peace Dividend)

Impact of the Palme Commission

Immediate Impact

- Intense moral pressure on the USA and USSR to lower nuclear tensions.
- Affected the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe (1948–86).
- Established the intellectual foundations for:
 - INF Treaty (1987)
 - START I (1991)
 - CFE Treaty (1990)

Long-Term Impact

- Helped develop the Human Security concept (UNDP 1994).
- Inspired debates about the new international security framework after the Cold War.
- It influenced peace negotiations in Cambodia, Namibia, and Central America.

Connection to India

- India frequently discusses Common Security in its multilateral diplomacy.
- No initial use policy.
- Advocates for global nuclear disarmament.
- Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and the concept of cooperative security
- South Asian disarmament initiatives, including the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan of 1988.

Criticisms of the Palme Commission

- Idealistic – Critics contended that the likelihood of superpowers demilitarizing was low.
- Neglected realpolitik – Unable to fully address it.
- It did not entirely stop the arms race, but it shaped long-term discussions.

- The suggested UN reforms lacked clarity and posed implementation challenges.
- Problems such as poverty and inequality in the developing world were acknowledged, but did not take center stage.

In Brief

The Palme Commission, an independent international body active from 1980 to 82 and led by Olof Palme, proposed initiatives including nuclear disarmament, confidence-building measures, strengthening the UN, and promoting Common Security. It focused on a cooperative, non-zero-sum perspective on global security, stressing that the safety of all nations is interconnected and achievable only through dialogue, disarmament, and multilateral institutions.



THE PALME COMMISSION

(Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues (ICDS))

Established: 1980

Report released, 1982

Chair: Olof Palme, Prime Minister of Sweden

Main Outcome: *"Common Security. A Blueprint for Survival"* (1982 Report)

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

- **Cold War Tensions**
 - Late 1970s; renewed US-USSR confrontation (post-detente)
 - Rapid nuclear arms build-up: S5-20 missiles (USSR) and Pershing II/ cruise missiles (USA)
 - Afghan invasion (1979), Iran hostage crisis, NATO–Warsaw hostility
 - Risk of nuclear miscalculation at its peak
- **Need for a New Security Framework**
 - Traditional security = military strength. Palme Commission challenging this, arguing: "No one is safe until all are safe." → security is *shared*, not unilateral

OBJECTIVES OF THE PALME COMMISSION

1. To propose alternatives to nuclear confrontation between superpowers
2. To redefine security as cooperative, not competitive
3. To recommend mechanisms for disarmament and arms-control
4. To prevent nuclear war by ensuring communication channels and crisis management
5. To improve global governance for peace, especially through the UN

COMPOSITION OF THE COMMISSION

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