

## The Power of Ideas and the Power of the State

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**The story of Prince Siddhartha Gautama** who becomes the Buddha is but one of several examples in Indian history of the battle between the power of the state and the power of ideas. In ancient India, history was concerned more with philosophy than chronology. And so the ancient Buddhist texts focused more on what the Buddha taught than on dates, events and places. It would be a courageous historian indeed who would be prepared to argue the counterfactual that Siddhartha Gautama would have shaped the arc of history more as king than he did as the Buddha.

Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the great Maurya Empire, ruled from approximately 320–298 BC and is generally considered to be the first ruler to have unified India, and thus has claims to be India's first emperor. He renounced his kingdom and spent the final eight years of his life as a wandering ascetic. His grandson Ashoka the Great sat on the Maurya throne from 269 to 232 BC. Appalled by the pain and suffering of war in his military conquest of Kalinga (circa 264 BC), he renounced war, embraced ahimsa (nonviolence), truth and tolerance, and propagated Buddhism across the length and breadth of his empire, from modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan in the west to Assam and Bangladesh in the east, and to northern Kerala in the south. The most famous proponent of ahimsa in the modern era of course is Mahatma Gandhi, who himself never occupied a kingly throne yet was responsible, more than any other individual, for the defeat of the British Empire in the subcontinent by the power of his ideas.

In other words, ideas matter and shape the course of history. The ebb and tide of history often takes the form of a contest of ideas. They impart vitality to a society. A society in intellectual ferment is fertile ground for progress and advancement, provided the clash of ideas is given free play. Conversely, a society that is bereft of and represses new ideas is a society doomed to stagnation. The long-term success of civilizations and countries is due more often to the dynamism and vibrancy of ideas and their steady ascendancy over competing visions of the good life.

The provenance or marketplace of ideas is the university. Think tanks like the Brookings Institution in the US, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) in Canada, or the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa, have the mandate to link the two normally isolated worlds of scholarship and policy-making. They lie at the interface of ideas, national public and foreign policy, international organizations and international public policy. They seek to harness knowledge for the promotion of security, development and welfare. As think tanks,

they are the conceptual and policy bridge between the worlds of ideas and praxis, between scholars, governments, and international and civil society organizations.

### Universities in Ferment

The process of transformation of large and complex societies creates social ferment, disorder, dislocation, volatility and sometimes even conflict. The comments apply to international society as well. Universities often find themselves embattled because they are at the forefront of this struggle for social transformation. Education and scholarship provide the terrain on which intellectually arid and stagnant societies encounter new worlds of ideas from foreign cultures.

A university, as a repository of scholarship, is dedicated to teaching and research in the spirit of free and critical inquiry, tolerance of diversity and a commitment to resolution of difference of opinion through dialogue and debate. That is, to the acquisition, criticism and transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next and to being a centre of creative and innovative learning. University qualifications are the gateway to social mobility in an increasingly meritocratic-technocratic society. The concomitant emphases on equitable and affordable access to quality education for all social classes and groups produced an explosion in the number of tertiary students.

Universities across the world are being forced to change from bureaucratic and risk-averse institutions to becoming agile and market-responsive due to changes in the higher education sector. Until about the 18th century, they used to be hierarchical, governed by religious rules, subject to religious authority, and interested very largely in religious scholarship amidst an essentially feudal society. Buffeted by broader social changes, universities too have been transformed through

- Secularization of what is taught and how it is taught;
- Democratization of access and a resulting expansion;
- Consequences of expansion for maintaining balance between supply and demand, access and quality, resources and activities, teaching and research commitments (time, funds);
- Internationalization of students, staff, curricula, campuses, best practice benchmarks, funding opportunities-cum-competition;
- “*Commodification*” – education as a for-profit activity and service export;
- *Changing student profile* – where previously education and employment came together in the ideal of a career, today it is becoming commonplace to think of multiple careers and periodic upskilling, leading to demand for lifelong learning opportunities and modules;

- *Knowledge intensity* – the amount of knowledge per graduating student has increased dramatically from one generation to the next;
- *Technology intensity* in the acquisition and transmission of existing knowledge and creation of new knowledge; and
- *The declining relevance of distance* in the provision and generation of knowledge.

There is nothing to suggest that there will be a significant lessening of the pace/scale of change in the university sector in the foreseeable future. Such constant change is potentially frightening, but also exhilarating.

The trend lines in public investment in education are given in Table 1 (below). Across the OECD, while 37 percent of the relevant cohort entered a tertiary institution in 1995, this had risen to 56 percent by 2006. The implications of affordability, access and equity pose public policy challenges for governments and university alike, but they need not concern us here. Even with a diminishing share of the total expenditure for the tertiary sector coming from public sources, the average is still a healthy 73.8 percent. And the dramatically increased enrolment in university-level programs has meant an increase in the percentage of GDP accounted for by the tertiary education sector, for example from 2.1 to 2.6 percent for Canada in 1995 and 2005 respectively, and from 2.3 to 2.9 percent for the US over the same period (OECD 2008: 237). Of course, all such policy choices on investment come with opportunity costs.

**Table 1:**

	OECD Countries' Expenditure on Education		Tertiary Education		
	As percentage of GDP (2005)		Public Sources (%)		
	Tertiary Education	All Levels of Education	1995	2000	2005
OECD average	1.5	5.8	79.7	78.0	73.8
EU 19 average	1.3	5.5	86.0	85.0	81.2
Canada	2.6	6.2	56.6	61.0	55.1
USA	2.9	7.1	37.4	31.1	34.7

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators (Paris: OECD, 2008), Tables B2.1 and B3.3, pp. 237 and 254.

To insist that the fruits of university research must never be permitted to be transmitted to the public authorities, in order that their policies might be based on the best available evidence and theory, is therefore the metaphorical equivalent of giving the one finger sign to society that is subsidising the tertiary sector. Clearly, that is an untenable position and no one advocates it. Conversely, no one seriously suggests that all university research must be policy-oriented and that fundamental research has no place in academia.

In his message introducing the 2007–08 annual report of Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, President Chad Gaffield writes of the three ambitions animating SSHRC: to increase the quality and support for research in Canada; to foster links between researchers and the wider community; and “to increase the positive impact of research on the lives of people in Canada and internationally” (p.2). That is, two of his three institutional ambitions are predicated on the belief that scientists have a duty to make their knowledge available for the betterment of humanity.

So the principle that knowledge produced in universities should be made available to the policy community is unexceptionable, even though the terms on which the exchange takes place might vary from one set of individuals and institutions to another. In practice, the main difficulty seems to be the lack of a common vocabulary around which scholars and practitioners can engage in shared and informed discourse. Particularly acute in the world at large, this is true even within the UN system. For several years the UN University joined hands with the Director-General of UN Offices in Geneva to convene, in Geneva, a meeting, which I co-chaired, of the producers and consumers of research in the UN system. Both sides complained that their worlds rarely met. Each blamed the other. The operational side was dissatisfied with the relevance and timeliness of the research, and unimpressed by the inability of many researchers to compress esoteric research into easily digested two-four page executive summaries that highlighted the policy implications. The researchers were critical of the failure to provide clear requests of what was needed, the ignorance of what was available by way of existing research or qualified personnel within the system, and the looking-for-keys-where-the-light-is-and-not-where-we-lost-them syndrome that led the Secretariat, Agencies, Funds, and Programmes to commission research from proximate institutions and scholars on the east coast of the US (with a corresponding worsening of the US bias for the system as collateral damage).

None of this will be unfamiliar to scholars and practitioners outside the United Nations. In practice, perhaps the more significant impact that ideas have had on national and international public policy is firstly through a revolving door system of insider-outsider roles – think of Pierre Trudeau and potentially Michael Ignatieff in Canada, Henry Kissinger and Condoleezza Rice in the US, and Francis Deng, Michael Doyle, John Ruggie, Jeffrey Sachs and Amartya Sen in the UN – and secondly as public intellectuals (with some overlap in the two groups). This does suggest that the cherished image of intellectuals speaking truth to power is somewhat inflated. To be sure, many scholars in their role as custodians of a critical social conscience will take this path. But just as many are eager to lend their expertise for the public good and derive satisfaction from making a difference that cannot be given a monetary value. Certainly many good and great scholars worked for UNU projects for honoraria that were modest, if not risible: they felt good about it.

A third mode for scholarly input into policy is via blue-ribbon international commissions. A project between UNU and CIGI (International Commissions and the Power of Ideas, UNU Press, 2005) studied how international commissions have shaped the discourse concerning a wide range of global issues: the global economic order, global inequality and poverty, international security, the utility and risks of nuclear weapons, environmentalism, and the tension between sovereignty and intervention to stop or prevent genocide and atrocity crimes. Commissions seldom produce dramatic shifts in thinking. But, as the conduit for bringing ideas into intergovernmental forums,

they do make a difference over the long term in various subtle and nuanced ways. The Brundtland Commission mainstreamed sustainable development – a legacy that endures; the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty seems to have had a similar impact through the responsibility to protect.

### **Peace Research**

The debate on the relationship between the research and policy communities can be put in perspective by recalling the role that students of war and peace have played, continue to play and aspire to play in shaping statecraft. This takes us back to the quotation with which I began. War in human society is as pervasive as the wish for peace is universal. The use of force and the possibility of controlling it and so controlling others has preoccupied rulers and scholars alike since time immemorial—from Thucydides, Kautilya, and Machiavelli to Karl Marx, Mao Zedong, Hans Morgenthau, and Henry Kissinger. But so too have some of the most charismatic and influential personalities in human history – from Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ to Mahatma Gandhi – reflected on the renunciation of force and the possibility of eliminating it from human relationships.

At any given time, most of the countries in the world are ready to go to war if necessary. Yet most of them are also at peace and long to keep it so. Therein lies the key to the difference between peace research and strategic studies. More countries seem prepared to reach out to scholars for the latter than the former cause, tapping expertise in strategic studies institutes while ignoring much of the much of the peace research and conflict resolution expertise.

As a general rule, strategic studies is infused with realist assumptions. International politics is seen as a struggle for power. The primary actors in world affairs are autonomous states engaged in power-maximizing behaviour. National security is the ultimate and overriding goal, and force is the principal instrument. In such a realist paradigm, violence is seen as endemic, inevitable and an instrument of conflict resolution. The task of strategic analysts is to predict courses of action that will enable states to maximize their own power while neutralizing or minimizing the national power of opponents so that the conflict is resolved on one's own terms and not that of the enemy.

Peace research changes focus from the welfare of the state to that of individuals and the world community. Strategic studies focuses on the successful use of violence; peace research is concerned to reduce the frequency of latent and manifest use of force by human beings. Strategic studies accepts and refines the instrumentality of violence; peace research questions and rejects it. The central problem for peace research is not just to understand violence, but to eliminate or tame it by challenging the basic tenets of the conventional analyses of violence and offering critical alternatives with a view to improving the human condition, providing a better life in a safer world for all.

From the perspective of strategic studies, the most critical lesson of the interwar period (1919–39) is that pacifism and appeasement do not work against the Adolf Hitlers of the world. Few peace researchers would dispute this. But most would point to the injustice and inequity of the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent treatment of Germany from within the realist paradigm, as having spawned Hitler in the first place.

For an Indian strategic studies analyst, the key question on Kashmir is how best to secure the province against the threat from Pakistan. For a peace researcher, it is equally legitimate to ask how best to protect the people of Kashmir against killings by terrorists and extrajudicial killings by Indian security forces. The threats posed by the agents of the state – whether India, Pakistan, Serbia, Bosnia or any other country – to individual and group rights are conceptually alien to strategic studies. They are central to peace research.

Possibilities for the breakdown of peace exist everywhere and at all times. The task for strategic studies is to identify them through the exploration of worst-case scenarios. Possibilities for building peace exist in every human crisis. The challenge for peace research is to identify them through the exploration of best-case scenarios. Under the strategic-studies paradigm, states hope for the best but prepare for the worst. “Trust, but verify,” said President Ronald Reagan in the context of his historic arms-control agreements with the former Soviet Union. For peace researchers, nations should be prepared for the worst but work for the best: Verify, but do trust.

### **United Nations**

Gradually over the course of the last century or two the idea of an international community bound together by shared values, benefits and responsibilities, and common rules and procedures, took hold of peoples’ imagination. The United Nations is the institutional expression of that development, with a structural continuity that runs from the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, through the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919, to the great social movements that swept the world episodically throughout the 20th century. While many instinctive UN supporters might well embed the organization in the intellectual tradition of peace research, the historical fact is that the formal organization has its institutional antecedents in the wartime alliance led by the three “Us”: the UK, USA and USSR. Hence too the creative, and at times overwhelming, tension between idealism and realism that is integral to the UN identity and project. That is, the United Nations lies at the crossroads of the power of ideas and the power of the state.

UNESCO’s Preamble declares that if wars begin in the minds of men, then it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed. The primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security is vested in the Security Council. But if the ramparts of peace must be constructed in the minds of men (and this must be one of the few contexts in which gender-specific language perhaps is still appropriate), then the primary forum for the transformation from a culture of war to a culture of peace must be the educational classroom and the research laboratory. The comment holds true also with respect to the UN’s other great normative mandates, from economic development and environmental sustain-ability to human rights promotion and humanitarian protection. The UN’s operational activities must be guided by in-depth empirical and analytical research. As already noted, intellectual pedigree, respectability and advance is crucial to the development and evolution of society, at both national and international levels.

### **Millennium Ecosystem Assessment**

Because of the heightened and sustained public debate on climate change and its policy implications, awareness of the existence and role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC) is fairly widespread. Less known outside the world of specialists is another interesting exercise in multinational scientific collaboration on a pressing global problem. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was launched by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2001 and completed in 2005. The largest ever assessment of the state of health of the world's ecosystems, it involved around 1,350 scientific experts from 95 countries under the joint chairmanship of Robert Watson of the World Bank and Hamid Zakri of the UN University. Its dual purpose was to assess the consequences of ecosystem for human well-being and establish the scientific basis for actions needed to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems.

It came to four main findings. First, ecosystems have changed more rapidly and extensively over the last half century than in any other 50-year period in human history, largely in order to meet growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fibre, and fuel. Second, the changes to ecosystems have contributed to and underpinned major gains in human wellbeing and economic development, but only at the cost of substantial degradation of ecosystem services that will significantly degrade the ability of future generations to obtain comparable benefits from ecosystems. Third, at present rates of use and exploitation, the degradation of ecosystems will worsen dramatically in the next fifty years. And fourth, the challenge of reversing the degradation of ecosystems while meeting increasing demands for their services requires significant change in practices, policies, and institutions.

The ecosystem approach is relatively new. While this was not the first scientific assessment, most previous ones had been conducted on an issue-by-issue basis in response to specific environmental problems. As a result, there are many different types of assessments on freshwater, climate, ozone, and other environmental issues. The problem with this piecemeal approach is that the natural environment is not comprised of separate, disconnected components: soils, oceans, rivers, forests, plants, animals, and microorganisms are all part of the same ecosystem. They are dependent on one other, and highly interactive. On a global scale, the same principle applies. Each of the different components of the earth's ecosystems is affected by human activity as well as by the other components. [Compare this to the Buddha's principle of dependent origination or contingency (pratityasamutpada in Sanskrit): in a complex web of cause and effect that links the past, present and future, any one particular phenomenon exists only because of the existence of other phenomena. Therefore, all things are both conditioned by others, and impermanent; nothing has its own independent identity. But the MEA team would presumably part company with the conclusion reached by Buddhists from this cardinal doctrine in their philosophy: all phenomena are therefore insubstantial and empty, and wisdom is attained by renouncing attachment to worldly desires and possessions.] So in order to assess fully the natural environment and its capacity for supporting human life, scientists must take better account of this connectivity and adopt a more integrated approach to environmental assessment. Within the scientific community, this cross-sectoral methodology is referred to as the ecosystem approach.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment provides a critical study of the status of ecosystems worldwide and the services they provide to human beings dependent on these ecosystems. It found that two-thirds of the services that ecosystems provide to humankind are in decline. Many of them, such as global fisheries, have been weakened beyond repair. But while these ecosystem

services are already in a state of stress, the eradication of hunger and poverty requires significant increases in the supply of the very same services.

One of the most important conclusions of the assessment is that poverty cannot be measured by income alone. This is the first study to make a concrete link between the environment and poverty. Living on one dollar a day, or even on five, will make little difference to the poor if there is no fertile soil to grow crops, or if the fisheries or forests on which they depend for subsistence are so depleted that they cannot supplement their existence. The dynamics of poverty cannot be delinked from the natural environment in which people live. Their natural environment, more than the feted dollar a day, is in many cases the foundation of their livelihood. For this reason, environmental issues cannot just be tucked away in a neat, separable closet and dealt with singly. Environment underpins all aspects of development and it must be mainstreamed into finance and planning ministries to have a chance of eradicating extreme poverty and disease.

### **Conclusion**

Like the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment team, the IPCC is a body of scientific experts linked to but outside the UN system, part of what the UN Intellectual History Project calls the “third UN” of scholars, civil society, public intellectuals and so on. The “second UN” of secretariat officials does not make policy but plays a role instead in producing technical reports to assist policymakers in making informed decisions, and then can be tasked with monitoring implementation and compliance with international agreements and benchmarks. “Policy” decisions are made by the “first UN” of member states, who meet, for example, in Copenhagen in December to see how far they can advance the agenda based in part on the cutting edge research, evidence-based analysis, net cost and benefits of the different options, and recommendations of the IPCC. But even here policy decisions amount to treaties negotiated and signed at international conferences, or resolutions adopted by the Security Council and the General Assembly. That is, they are not action but commitments/promises and/or recommendations/exhortations. They amount to global standards and norms. The policy authority for translating principles into action, and the capacity to mobilize the necessary resources for achieving common targets, are still vested in states. Thus the second principle-action gap – think Kyoto Protocol or the disarmament Article 6 of the NPT – is between states and international organizations. Even with respect to enforcement, the United Nations can authorize but only member states can execute diplomatic, economic and/or military action.

This helps to explain why the United Nations is sometimes thought of as a knowledge management system more than an actor in its own right. Universities of course are in the business of producing and disseminating knowledge. Interestingly, one of the practices the Buddha warned against was intellectual disputation for its own sake, for it distracts from practices that lead us to enlightenment. The scholar is driven by intellectual curiosity, the practitioner is preoccupied in addressing pressing policy challenges. Both are engaged in solving puzzles, albeit from different entry points. The crossroads on which the professor meets the ambassador, where the study of international relations crosses path with its practice, is that of global governance. Tom Weiss and I define this as the sum of laws, norms, policies and institutions that define, constitute and mediate relations between citizens, society, market and the state on the world stage – the wielders and objects of the exercise of international public power

(Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey, Indiana University Press, forthcoming). So defined, it is clear that individuals and groups from outside government are actors and participants – not merely advocates, lobbyists and activists – in global governance. Moreover, the United Nations is at the centre of the multilateral system of global governance – a set of arrangements that allocates international values authoritatively even in the absence of world government. For standards of international governance to be raised, best practice for diplomats must be informed by state of the art scholarship, and best practice for the academy must be grounded in real-world problem solving.

\*T. Byrom, *The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*. New York: Vintage, 1976, p. 3.