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Combating the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Some Reflections

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As the war in Iraq comes to an end, a central question the international community will have to face is whether the pre-emptive use of force should be the model to address threats of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), or whether alternatives exist that are less unpredictable in outcome and less costly in terms of human life.

Until the end of the Cold War, a bipolar world maintained international security through a combined system of alliances, spheres of influence, global and regional multilateral institutions — including the United Nations — and ultimately a balance of power through nuclear deterrence. With the disintegration of the Soviet empire, however, a uni-polar world has emerged that has dramatically changed the landscape of international security, with the disappearance of the Cold War rivalries and many of the associated old alliances and spheres of influence.

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And while in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War many preached the advent of a new world order — and expressed hope of a new paradigm of security that would be rooted in the UN system of collective security — these hopes have not fully materialized. For while the end of the Cold War has permitted the emergence into free, independent societies of many formerly suppressed countries and peoples, it has also reawakened old ethnic conflicts and cultural disputes that, as a result of the restraint imposed by the superpower rivalries, had lain dormant both between and within nations. And with the United Nations unable to adjust its system of collective security to cope with the changing realities and the new threats, some of the more recent conflicts have been badly handled, as in Burundi, Rwanda and Somalia, or dealt with outside of the UN, as in Kosovo. And all the while, old conflicts such as those in the Middle East and Jammu and Kashmir, continue to fester.

But with all the changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons have continued to have a position of prominence as the currency of ultimate power. And although a number of countries such as South Africa have given up their nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons ambitions, the nuclear umbrellas of NATO and other alliances continue to expand. More importantly, the objectives embodied in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), developed in the early 1970s to control the spread of nuclear weapons and to move us towards nuclear disarmament, are under growing stress. Several thousands of nuclear weapons continue to exist in the five nuclear weapon States party to the NPT (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). And of the three countries that remain outside the NPT, two — India and Pakistan — have in the last few years demonstrated their nuclear weapons capability, while the third — Israel — is generally presumed to have such weapons. Most recently North Korea, a party to the NPT, has decided to walk away from the Treaty and, not unlike some other parties to the Treaty, is suspected of working to acquire nuclear weapons. Other States, on the other hand, have opted for the “poor man’s alternative” by pursuing the acquisition of chemical and biological weapons. And in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, the threat of WMD proliferation gained a new dimension: the prospect of sub-national groups seeking to acquire and use these weapons.

Faced with this reality, must we conclude that it is futile to try to combat the spread of WMD through a collective, rule-based system of international security — and that we have to acquiesce to living in a world plagued with the constant threat of a nuclear holocaust or other disasters? I do not believe so. But reliance on a system of collective security to curb the proliferation of WMD will require bold thinking, a willingness to work together, and sustained effort. The following steps, among others, are in my view urgently required:

1. We must modernize the collective security system of the United Nations Charter — in terms of both preventive diplomacy and enforcement action. This system, built half a century ago to establish world order on the basis of common values and principles, has not fully matured and has not worked as planned. On the other hand, to destroy it is to go back to a Hobbesian world.

What must be changed? To start, the Security Council should be reconstituted to include the major political and economic powers in today's world. In addition, new working concepts, tools and methods are needed to ensure that the Council can effectively shoulder its role as the body with "the primary responsibility" for the maintenance of international peace and security. For example, mechanisms are needed for early intervention to settle emerging disputes, and forces should be at the disposal of the Security Council that are adequate to deal with the myriad post-Cold-War situations and disputes — from supervising elections to maintaining law and order and controlling borders. Sanctions should also be developed that target governments rather than the governed. And use of the veto power should be subject to agreed limitations — confined possibly to those situations in which the use of force is to be authorized — to prevent having the entire Council fall victim to squabbling among its permanent members. The Council should also agree to broaden its definition of what situations "constitute a threat to international peace and security" to cover efforts to acquire WMD, as well as the brutal suppression of human rights — in order to be able to intervene early and effectively in these situations.

2. We must create an environment in which the use of force, as foreseen in the UN Charter, is limited to situations of self-defence or enforcement measures authorized by the Security Council. Pre-emptive strikes, however tempting, can send the global community into uncharted and dangerous territory. Only action by the Council will bring legitimacy and international support to such a measure. More importantly, these limitations will restrict the use of force to those situations where force is the last and only alternative.
3. We must take concrete steps to delegitimize the acquisition or use of WMD, and develop alternative security doctrines that do not rely on them. As with the NPT, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention both lack universal membership, and the latter has no verification mechanism.

Clearly, a new approach is needed — an approach that applies to all WMD, with a number of essential features: universal adherence to conventions that ban WMD; robust and intrusive systems of verification for all WMD conventions; a detailed plan and the determination to eliminate WMD in all States to abolish over time the divide between the "haves" and "have nots"; new doctrines of security that do not rely on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons; and reliable enforcement measures, under the aegis of the Security Council, to effectively counter efforts by any country to illicitly acquire WMD.

4. We must develop a comprehensive regime to ensure that WMD and their components will not fall into the hands of terrorists. This demands an effective global approach to the physical protection of nuclear and other radioactive material and associated facilities, better controls for chemical and biological agents, and an effective approach to export controls worldwide.
5. We must address decisively chronic disputes that create the greatest incentives for acquiring WMD. It is instructive that the majority of suspected efforts to acquire WMD are to be found in the Middle East, a hotbed of instability for over half a century. In any future Middle East settlement, it is essential that regional security arrangements — including the establishment of a region free from WMD — be pursued as part and parcel of such a settlement. The same should apply in any future settlement of such disputes, including the one on the Korean Peninsula.
6. Finally, we must work collectively to address global sources of insecurity and instability, including: the widening divide between rich and poor, in which two-fifths of the world's population lives on less than two dollars per day; the chronic lack in many parts of the world of good governance and respect for human rights — with despots taking refuge under the cloak of "sovereignty"; and the increasingly perceived schisms between cultures and civilizations. Effective alleviation of these causes of insecurity will require adequate financial assistance by the developed countries — assistance that now shockingly stands at only 0.23% of the combined gross national income of those countries. Effective remedy will also require the dynamic involvement of international institutions, governments and civil society to encourage interaction among cultures and people; to disseminate practices of

good governance and to monitor respect for human rights.

This is a tall order. But if our aim is to spare the next generation the scourge of a new century of war in which humanity could self-destruct, we have no other alternative.

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