

The outlook for peace and disarmament

Lecture at the Hay Festival by Hans Blix in memory of Joseph Rotblat

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As delivered

It is an honour to have the opportunity to speak in memory of Joseph **Rotblat**. He was in the **forefront of science**, when he took part in the Manhattan project that ensured that Nazi Germany would not win the race to the nuclear bomb. And he was in the forefront of humanity to rid the world of the bomb and, indeed, of war. We stand in great **gratitude** to him for mobilizing scientists around the world for peace and disarmament.

I share Jo Rotblat's conviction that the **critical and constructive thinking** that is a fundamental requirement of science in its search for truth and reality must be used also in our assessment and analysis of international threats and in the search for peace. Passion and feelings may turn us on and drive us but rationality and a clear view of reality must guide us.

The nuclear bomb became to Jo Rotblat as to many others the bell striking the alarm. He saw its continued existence as the peak of human folly and concluded that it must be abolished before it abolishes us. However, to achieve this, he argued, we need go further and **abolish war**.

Is this romantic folly? I don't think so. In Swedish, we have a saying that "when the devil gets old he becomes religious..." That may be an exaggeration but age sometimes accumulates significant experience and gives perspective. This, I think, is what happened to the remarkable quartet of aging **American statesmen** George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn. In 2007 these old combatants from the **Cold War** published an article in which they reminded the world of something of which – with their life experience they were keenly aware – namely, that **the Cold War** between an expansionist Soviet empire and the market economies **had ended years ago**.

With **perspective and critical thinking** they concluded that **nuclear deterrence** had become obsolete between the US and Russia and obsolescent elsewhere and that the US and Russia now could and should initiate **global nuclear**

disarmament. They did not ignore the continued existence of ‘regional conflicts’ and the need for solutions but, as I read them, they essentially concluded that the **era of world wars was dead** and that an era of disarmament should follow. They took the leap, I think, from the old adage “*si vis pacem para bellum*” – “*If you want peace, prepare for war...*” to a thought made possible by the ending of the Cold War: “*If you want peace, prepare for peace...*”

I agree with these thoughts. Not out of unbounded optimism. I feel somewhat pessimistic about the ability of the international community seriously to tackle the risk of a **slow human suicide** through global warming, but I do think we have passed the risk of a **quick global suicide** through **nuclear weapons**. **I think we might even** be able to do away with large armed conflicts between states – war and intervention -- and develop adequate **peace keeping and peace enforcing mechanisms under international control**.

The thought does not come easily when we see **Syria** exploding, Congo bleeding, Afghanistan and Iraq failing to calm, cyber warfare initiated, killer drones dropping over ever wider areas and annual global military expenses remaining over 1,700 billion dollars. **However**, peace research tells us that the number of **armed conflicts** in the world and the number of killed in armed conflicts has actually **gone down** in the last 100 years. And:

- Between 1913 and 1945 we had **two** world wars. The joint peace mechanism of the time, the League of Nations, was largely a European club and lasted 20 years.
- Between 1945 and 2013 we have had **no** world war. The joint peace mechanism, the United Nations, comprises all states in the world and it has lasted 68 years.

Looking further back into **history** we can see a vast **evolution**. In **Scandinavia** – as in other corners of the world – we used to be very accomplished in slaughtering others and each other, but since about two hundred years there are **no wars between Nordic states**. And whatever you feel about the **European Union** I think you are convinced that we shall not have another war in modern Europe or – even – between Europe and **Russia**. Wars between the US and Mexico or in **South America** are also horrors of the past.

In **Africa** many **borders** are not firmly or clearly settled and there is terrible bloodshed and a great need for peace keeping and peace enforcement, but conflicts there **no longer** risk leading to **larger conflagrations** – as they did risked doing during the Congo crises around 1960. After the end of the Cold War, eruptions in

the **Middle East**, though brutal and bloody, also hardly risk causing global conflict. While **Taiwan**, the **China-India border** and **Kashmir** are dangerous flashpoints they are handled with some **restraint** and it should be possible to manage the many existing differences about **islands and borders at sea** pragmatically or judicially— as Norway and Denmark did years ago in their controversy over Eastern Greenland and the UK and France when they disagreed about the ownership of some islands in the Channel.

No doubt **many factors** have contributed to **this gradual global pacification**. In my view, **nuclear weapons** should not be given any part of the credit. It is true that their existence may counsel restraint but the cost of that counsel – the risk of use – was and is unacceptable. Several times during the Cold War it was more by luck than skill that the launching of nuclear weapons was avoided.

Rather, I believe the vastly increased international trade and communications and the vast expansion of international law and **international institutions** are **weaving the world together in** a fabric that is getting **ever harder to tear**. **MAD** – the mutually assured destruction – is being replaced as **a factor for peace** by **MED** - mutual economic dependence – that is leading states ever more often to **restraint** rather than to **sabre rattling**.

The risk is not zero, regrettably that these modern factors pushing for restraint may be outweighed, if governments of big powers allow themselves to throw away critical thinking. It is, indeed, only **ten years ago** that the governments of the US and the UK miserably failed to exercise such thinking.

In **March 2003 the alliance of ‘willing states’ invaded Iraq** without any Security Council authorization – advancing as the **main reason** their erroneous assessment that Iraq retained weapons of mass destruction in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. By May 2003 it was clear to the invading states that contrary to the allegations they had made, there **were no WMD in Iraq** – no mobile BW laboratories, no weapons that could be launched on the world within 45 minutes.

We can understand that governments must sometimes take actions even before all facts are known. If they wait it may be too late. We can also understand that government leaders may need to simplify matters to make them understandable to the public. It is sad, even vexing, to realize, however, that the leaders of the alliance could have avoided what then Senator Obama called ‘a meaningless war’ by examining their own motivations and evidence with somewhat more **critical minds**.

The 2003 Iraq war is now history but it may have been a **turning point** in several respects and it has many lessons to offer about

- the need to act on the basis of facts – not fiction.
- the limits on what can be achieved by military means, and
- a growing but uneven awareness of legal restrictions on the use of armed force in international relations.

A **first lesson** was that governments should make full use of available **international verification and fact-finding** to check the validity of national intelligence. It is discouraging that even now criticism in the US seems to focus on misleading and misreading **national intelligence**. It is hardly noted in this criticism that many hundred professional on site inspections by the UN and the IAEA all over Iraq, including many sites suspected by national intelligence, reported no evidence of WMD, but, on the contrary, refuted some of the national evidence invoked. While the ‘alliance of willing states’ ignored this, other members of the Council noticed. As a result, there was at least no United Nations authorization legalizing a **war launched on false premises**.

A **second lesson** may be that while a **surgical military operation from the outside may remove an odious leadership**, the gain of a release from oppression may be somewhat doubtful if the result is chaos and anarchy. Outside powers that for various – rarely altruistic – reasons take military action bear responsibility for the result: ‘If you break the pot you own it.’ The experience is that emergence of decent governance must come from the inside – from an accommodation between the people of the region – perhaps with some non-partisan help from the UN.

Is the world then to remain passive in the face of slaughter? The responsibility to protect doctrine – **the R2P** – proclaimed by the United Nations declares that states have responsibility to protect all people within their jurisdiction and if they fail to do so the UN must exert pressure on them. The UN declaration foresees even the possibility of armed interventions to protect human rights, but only with approval of the Security Council and only in extreme situations, such as genocide. Even such actions are likely to be difficult, but they will have the advantage of **international legitimacy** and **support** that action by self appointed world police is likely to lack.

A **third result** of the case of Iraq was greater **awareness** and discussion of the international **legal restrictions that have emerged on** the use of armed force in

interstate relations. They were not always there. **Machiavelli writing in the 16th century** advised his Prince simply

“that war is just which is necessary’ and every sovereign entity may decide on the occasion for war.”

Indeed, it was only through the UN Charter in 1945 that significant restrictions were adopted. Armed force against other states was allowed essentially only in self defense and in actions authorized by the Security Council. While these rules and the security system of the UN were of limited relevance during the Cold War, the Security Council’s decision and the UN’s action to stop Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1991 were celebrated with enthusiasm. President Bush Senior even spoke of ‘**a new world order**’.

Alas, the renaissance of the UN Charter rules did not last long. In a speech in Chicago in 1999 Mr. Blair asked: *where intervention is practical, and where change will not come by evolution to rid a country of despotic dictatorial regime, “should those who have the military power to intervene – (he did not say which) – contemplate doing so?”* The question suggested that great powers should take it upon themselves to go act as an armed world police – even without green light from the UN.

The Bush Junior administration would have fully agreed and it went much further. It was never concerned about the absence of any UN authorization of the war on Iraq in 2003. When in the presidential campaign of 2004 **Senator Kerry** – now Secretary of State – said that preemptive armed action should stand up to what he called a ‘**global test**’, he was ridiculed to have talked about some ‘**permission slip**’ from the Security Council’. A year later **the US National Defense Strategy (2005)** clearly pointed to the US as the armed police of the world. Without any mention of the UN it stated:

“The end of the cold war and our capacity to influence global events open the prospects for a new and peaceful state system in the world.”

The broader reactions to the Iraq war and to the assertiveness of the Bush Jr administration may have led to renewed support for the UN rule. A report to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2004 by a High Level Panel comprising prominent figures like Bent Scowcroft of the US, Lord Hannay of the UK, E. Primakov of Russia, Amr Moussa of Egypt, Qian Quichen of China and Gareth Evans of Australia took the view that

“in a world full of perceived potential threats the risk to global order is simply too great for the legality of unilateral preventive action. Allowing it to one is allowing it to all.”

Later, President Obama showed appreciation for the legal restriction. In his Oslo Nobel lecture he said – I quote

*“I believe that all nations – strong and weak alike – must adhere to standards that govern the use of force. I – like any head of state – reserve the right to act **unilaterally if necessary, to defend my nation.** Nevertheless, I am convinced that adhering to standards strengthen those who do and isolate – and weakens those who don’t.”*

There is, of course, **no guarantee** that even when war **between** big powers has become unlikely, these powers – or, indeed, others -- will refrain in all circumstances from using armed force in disregard of the Charter rule. The risk of large wars has gone down but the risk of armed interventions remains. **In most cases** – say North Korea, Syria or earlier Burma – the **costs** of armed interventions in terms of lives and resources limit the temptations. **But**, it may be asked, **what weight does an international legal rule have per se?** We **have to admit** that in the current cases of **Iran and Syria** there is astonishingly **little attention** paid to the question of **legality** of possible armed interventions.

In the case of **Iraq**, ‘unilateral’ armed action to **eradicate weapons** that **did not exist** was taken. It was very broadly condemned. Even so, in the **case of Iran**, we hear about possible ‘unilateral’ armed action to **eradicate** – **what? Intentions** -- that **may or may not exist**. It is highly improbable that the Security Council would authorize armed action against Iran and it is also unlikely that Iran would launch an ‘armed attack’ that could legally justify any armed action in ‘self defense’. The preparations that are made in Israel and the US are for **a preventive war**.

In the **case of Syria** we are witnessing massive outside interventions by various states supplying weapons or other support to rebels against an oppressive regime or to the government against rebels. Neither human rights nor the UN Charter seem to weigh heavily in these interventions.

Clearly, the legal restrictions laid down in the Charter are per se a fragile and unreliable bar to war and armed intervention. Seen in a historical perspective they

acquire greater significance. An international community free of war must be **guided by law**. International law and international institutions have become vastly more important in the last 100 years and the Iraq war in 2003 led to reactions and reflections I think moved us forward. Yet, we evidently still have **a long way to go before there is greater respect for the rules and less use of armed force**. What can we do?

A few thoughts: We need **more diplomacy, more détente, more disarmament, and more development of international institutions**.

Diplomats, it has been said, are people who ‘**think twice before saying nothing**’... Well, diplomacy, I think is to seek ways that avoid or minimize controversy and to solve controversy when it arises. It is an art that is indispensable for peaceful relations between states and – incidentally – indispensable in your own family. It can and must be practiced both at the conference table and the kitchen table. Both may be difficult. Making **concessions** can sometimes be wrong and is rarely applauded by media and domestic audiences that cherish **macho leadership**. It may sometimes be painful. During the Cold War and the nuclear peril, a Danish poet wrote that

*“the noble art of losing face,
may one day
save the human race!”*

Post Cold War and post Iraq 2003, diplomacy should have brought us détente and disarmament. Apart from much constructive action that was attained in the first years of the 1990s, there was, indeed, a hopeful beginning in 2009 when Presidents Obama and Medvedev met in London. Their determination yielded some good results. However, the central effort ran into rough resistance when the US Senate was to ratify the START – even though its reductions in deployed nuclear war heads were modest. We must recognize, I fear, that gun laws, agreements on control over unauthorized international arms trade and treaties on disarmament are likely to run into a sizeable skeptic opinion in the US and much resistance in the US Senate.

The ambitious detente and disarmament agenda of the early Obama I administration was impeded not only by hawkish forces in the US but also by the financial crisis -- that still dominates the agenda. From 2011 until now disarmament has been in **stagnation**. The Geneva disarmament conference continues its decade long coma. The comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT)

adopted in 1995 does not enter into force. Is there any light on the horizon? Perhaps. Although Syria, Iran and North Korea form a heavy overcast, there are also some common interests among the biggest players: the US, Russia and China., notably the control of **terrorism** and the prevention of a spread of nuclear weapons to more actors. There is much more to do!

Diplomacy needs to be ingenious, seek points of common interest and avoid humiliating any participant. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, Mr. Khrushchev could agree to withdraw nuclear missiles from Cuba, when the US agreed to withdraw nuclear weapons from Turkey. **Perhaps in today's world Iran** could be ready to dismantle its nuclear enrichment program and other states in the region could be ready to commit themselves not to start any such programs, if Israel were to do away with its nuclear weapons and its capacity to produce such weapons? Perhaps Iran and Egypt could offer to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty on condition that Israel and the US do the same?

Let me mention a few other – less shocking – ideas that I think should be on the table and move to positive action.

Today it ought to be possible to withdraw **200 nuclear NATO bombs** stored in Europe. They are unwelcome in most of the host countries and deemed militarily useless. Instead NATO seems to propose they should be modernized. We should hear more from the public opinion!

Today the UK is contemplating a new generation of **Trident nuclear submarines**. Washington is not pushing for this costly procurement. Is it required to protect UK independence? Or pride? Japan and Germany seem to be respected and protected even without nuclear weapons. I would vote for a place for the UK in the Guinness book of records, if it dropped the plan.

Today the US might be ready to shelve the idea of a **fourth phase in the plan for European missile defense**. Let us hope such a diplomatic step will open the path to US-Russian nuclear strategic arms reduction beyond the modest limitations set in the 2010 START. But, one might ask, who in the European public feels today that we need a missile shield against Iran? Does anyone think Iran will attack Europe? Or, is it that NATO is planning to attack Iran and needs missiles to stop a counter attack?

Today the agreement on Conventional Forces Reduction in Europe (**CFE**) is in limbo because of demands that Russia should move their military out from

Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These hurdles should be overcome by diplomacy and we should agree to further reduce conventional arms. We do not seem to bother that Spain is in control of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco and – that the UK is in control of Gibraltar...

Disarmament diplomacy seems too often to take place on a lofty level of war games. Jo Rotblat would have been the first to agree that the public should be more involved. **It pays** for the hardware. Annual global military expenses are now more than 1.700 billion dollars.

A last point: there is a silver lining to the financial and **budgetary crises** in which we live. The combination of an acute need to cut government expenses and a public that does not feel rattled by acute threats to its security **enables ministers of finance to resist** the insatiable demands of security hawks and reduce deficits.

Mr. Gates, the level headed former US Secretary of Defense said that Europeans should not expect the US to continue defending them, if the Europeans were not ready, themselves, to **spend more on their defense**. One might ask: ‘defense **against whom?**’ It is not that we see a deepening democracy in Russia, but we also do not see an expansionist empire. It seems sensible to me that most European states hold their military expenses well below 2 % of GNP. More power to the ministers of finance – the only ones who seem to have both the incentive and power to move governments toward disarmament. Let us support them –at least in this endeavor!