Weapons of Mass Destruction, Terror, and Human Security

I believe that we are in the midst of a profound shift in the security paradigm – both in the nature of the threats or risks that we face and in our responses to them. It was a shift that began after World War II and the subsequent determination to avoid another war. The UN Charter called on the world’s nations to ‘end the scourge of war which has brought untold suffering to mankind.’ The Cold War, however, kept alive the traditional paradigm, the idea of a grand conflict between blocs and nations at least in our imagination. And it was only after the Cold war that an alternative language of humanitarianism, civil society, or human security came to compete with the more conventional language of geo-politics.

In this lecture, I want to argue that the dominant approaches both to weapons of mass destruction and to terrorism are embedded in the traditional security approach and are therefore very dangerous. I will focus on weapons of mass destruction and concepts like arms control or what President Bush calls counter-proliferation. But the same argument can be made in relation to the Global War on Terror, which reproduces the narrative of World War II and the Cold War and the tools which accompany the narrative. What is needed is a new approach, based on human security.

I will start with some definitional points.

The term ‘weapons of mass destruction’ does not refer to weapons that are massively destructive, even though some of these weapons can cause unimaginable destruction. Rather it refers to unconventional weapons – nuclear, radiological, chemical, and biological. In fact, many so-called conventional weapons can cause mass destruction. Suicide bombers flying into the World Trade towers are a weapon of mass destruction. So are the four million cluster munitions dropped by the Israelis in the last few days of the war with Lebanon in 2006.

The word ‘terror’, invented to describe the atmosphere of fear in the aftermath of the French revolution, refers to intimidation of or instilling fear among civilians. The term is usually applied, at least according to the US State Department definition, to non-state actors. The United Nations has still not come up with an agreed definition. In my view, terror applies to both state and non-state actors. Air strikes, for example, are terrifying for those who experience them on the ground. Weapons of mass destruction are, of their nature, terror weapons. Even if they do not cause mass destruction, their unconventional nature leads to fear and panic. The Anthrax letters, soon after 9/11, only killed five people but they were very effective in spreading fear.

The term human security is a comprehensive concept designed to provide an answer to complex interrelated global risks. Nowadays, it is difficult to disentangle the risks of disease, poverty, natural disasters and political violence. Zones of conflict tend to be more vulnerable to natural disasters or to the spread of diseases like AIDS/HIV and, by the same token, the upheaval in social relations associated with disasters or regressive development can also contribute to conflict. Often similar responses are required for different types of crises; healthcare, for example, as a response both to disease and the risk of bioterrorism or humanitarian action in natural disasters or war.
My focus in this lecture is political violence. The main point I want to argue is that, nowadays, the main form of political violence is not war but ‘terror’ defined in the broad sense above. By war, I mean what I often refer to as ‘old war’—war between states where the main encounter is battle between opposing armed forces. This kind of war was prohibited after World War II both in the UN Charter and in the idea of a war crime promulgated in the Nuremberg trials. Moreover, it has become too destructive to be fought. This does not mean that such wars will never be fought again; there may always be mad leaders ready to risk such wars. The Iran-Iraq war was a war of this type and it was the exception that proved the rule. It was trench warfare much like World War I where over a million young men were killed and chemical weapons were used. It ended in stalemate. Terror against civilians is an alternative way of using force for political ends. This includes such phenomena as ethnic cleansing and genocide, carried out by both state and non-state actors, where the aim is to control territory through terror against those of a different identity and against civil society. Saddam Hussein’s use of poison gas in Halabja is one such example. It includes what we conventionally call terror—9/11, 7/7 or Palestinian suicide bombers. And it includes air strikes or long distance shelling, which necessarily involves terrifying collateral damage. It is often argued, especially by the United States, Russia and Israel, that collateral damage is different because it is not deliberate. But that is not how it is perceived by the victims.

Human security is a method of responding to complex interrelated global risks and, in particular to terror and weapons of mass destruction. There are three broad characteristics of the concept:

- It applies to individuals and the communities in which they live rather than to states and borders.
- It includes both physical and material dimensions of security, both ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom from want’.
- It involves a blurring of the distinction between internal and external. We are accustomed to assuming that in democratic states we enjoy human security at home and that the job of external security forces is to confront other states. Human security is about treating the whole world as though it were internal. It is based on the fundamental equality of human lives and enjoins us to treat everyone as though they were citizens, to contribute to human security abroad as well as at home.

Evidently, both terror and weapons of mass destruction are inimical to human security. But I would like to elaborate this by spelling out five principles of human security and show not only how they contradict human security but also how these principles offer a way of dealing with these threats or risks.

The first principle is respect for human rights both political and civil and economic and social. The use of weapons of mass destruction or more broadly terror is a massive violation of human rights. In the traditional paradigm, human rights are suspended in war time when international humanitarian law applies. In fact, both terror and weapons of mass destruction also violate international humanitarian law. In

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1 These principles were developed in our report to Javier Solana A Human Security Doctrine for Europe: Report of the Study Group on European Security capabilities. In that report, we also proposed a human security response force, composed of military, police and civilian specialists.
the Chinkin–Singh opinion on the legality of British nuclear weapons, they argue that international humanitarian law is based on the ‘intransgressibility’ of the combatant/non-combatant distinction, which cannot be maintained when nuclear weapons are used. Thus the use of terror and/or WMD can be treated as war crimes as well as massive violations of human rights or as a ‘crime against humanity’. These terms imply individual responsibility rather than state responsibility for terror or the use of WMD and also that any response has to respect human rights.

The second principle is legitimate political authority. In the end human security has to be guaranteed by a legitimate political authority, normally in a state, but in the case that a state fails to live up to its obligations either because it has failed or because it is an illegitimate state, then this might be the job of a municipality or regional government or an authority established by the international community that is both legal and enjoys the consent of the local population. WMD are associated with an absolutist notion of sovereignty – it is about the inviolability of a state and its borders. The International Court of Justice, which was split 50-50, decided, on the President’s casting vote that the use of nuclear weapons is only legal in the case of the survival of the state. But state survival is not the same as human survival; using nuclear weapons to protect the state, however dire the emergency implies that the lives of non-nationals cannot be respected on an equal basis with nationals. The concept of legitimate political authority implies that sovereignty is conditional, dependent both on international recognition and domestic consent. A human security approach aims to create the conditions for legitimate political authority, where the possession of WMD or indeed the wider use of terror is subject to public scrutiny.

The third principle is multilateralism. It is inconceivable that the use of WMD would be approved in a multilateral framework. Nowadays the use of force, except in self-defence is prohibited unless it is authorised by the United Nations Security Council. In what conceivable scenario might the United Nations Security Council authorise the use of WMD or of terror? Even a more limited coalition of the willing is unlikely to approve, say, the use by President Bush of bunker busters in Iran, even if the aim is to destroy Iranian nuclear capabilities.

Multilateralism does, however, offer a productive approach to dealing with WMD. We now know that UNSCOM was rather successful in dealing with Saddam Hussein’s WMD. We have the beginning of governance regimes with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions and the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

The fourth principle is ‘bottom-up’. Human security can only be guaranteed with the consent of and in consultation with the population. Sadako Ogata says that human

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3 See Michael Howard’s argument about 9/11 in ‘What’s in a Name?’ Foreign Affairs

4 According to Michael Quinlan, who helped to develop Britain’s nuclear doctrine: ‘A nuclear state is a state that no one can afford to make desperate’. Colin Gray, a nuclear strategist, says: ‘The national territory and political independence is not to be violated or challenged for sensible fear of possible consequences.’ Adelphi paper
security goes beyond ‘Responsibility to Protect’ because it is about empowerment as well as protection. WMD and terror are necessarily top-down; they are attacks on civil society. The nuclear codes, for example, are known only to the President or the Prime Minister, who could not in a situation of dire emergency, allow a public debate about their use. Bottom-up pressure, on the other hand, could be critical in developing new multilateral approaches to WMD. Civil society played a key role in recent treaties that contribute to human security, the International Criminal Court, for example, or the Land Mines Convention.

The final principle is regional focus. To-day’s global risks, whether natural disasters or political violence, cannot be contained by borders. The Tsunami affected several different countries. Contemporary political violence has a tendency to spread, through refugees and displaced persons, through criminal networks, or through deadly ideologies. Thus the violence in Darfur is spreading to Chad; the war in Afghanistan spills over into Pakistan; the war in Iraq is having a knock-on affect on the whole region. At the same time, a regional approach to WMD could be fruitful. A Latin American nuclear-free zone has already been established and Brazil and Argentina have given up their nuclear aspirations. The Egyptian government added an amendment to the 1995 Non-Proliferation Review conference calling for a WMD free zone in the Middle East.

Of course, the main argument against what I have proposed is deterrence. Those who favour WMD (nobody would claim to be in favour of terror) argue that human rights can be protected through WMD. That after all was the basis of the case for accumulating large numbers of nuclear weapons during the Cold War; they were supposed to deter an attack, whether conventional or unconventional, by the Soviet Union against the democracies of the West. But did they? It is often argued that deterrence kept the peace during the Cold War. Quite apart from the fact that there were many wars during this period outside of Western Europe and North America, the problem with this argument is that it can only be disproved not proved. Had the Soviet Union attacked the West, then we would know that deterrence does not work. But we do not know whether the Soviet Union would have attacked the West had the West not possessed nuclear weapons. My view is that neither side wanted another war. Instead, the arms race kept alive the idea of war – it was not peace but ‘imaginary war’ that was experienced in Europe during the Cold War. Indeed the arcane arguments about strategic, sub-strategic and tactical weapons were all about how nuclear weapons might be used in the scenarios dreamed up by military planners. The term arms control has to be understood in the context of deterrence. It was about maintaining the idea of war, while minimising the risks of such a war becoming real. Hence, arms control was directed against so-called defensive weapons and against sub-strategic or tactical weapons that were thought to be ‘usable’, while preserving the capacity for ‘mutually assured destruction’.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have plenty of proof that deterrence does not work. The American possession of nuclear weapons did not deter the 9/11 bombers - they inflicted mass destruction even if they did not use what are known as WMD. Likewise, British nuclear weapons did not deter the use of polonium, which could be described as a radiological weapon, i.e. a WMD according to the formal definition, in the murder of Litvinenko. A cartoon in Private Eye showed Blair saying to Putin ‘We need new nuclear weapons’ and Putin replying ‘Try Sushi’.
President Bush accepts this argument. He says that deterrence does not work against rogue states and terrorists. Suicide bombers and mad leaders do not fear retaliation. Indeed they might welcome retaliation since they do not care about human life: it would prove that they are involved in a war against the West. This explains his emphasis on counter-proliferation as opposed to non-proliferation; hence the threats against Iran. But if deterrence only works against states that are rational, why do we need WMD at all; surely no rational state would threaten to use them?

This is a very dangerous moment. New developments in Britain and the United States reinforce the traditional security paradigm, and an absolutist notion of sovereignty, stimulating acquisition by what are known as rogue states and violating the grand bargain that underlay the Non-Proliferation Treaty. There is a real danger from mad leaders and failed states; we already know about the way in which the A.Q.Khan network in Pakistan exported military technology. We know about the use of polonium, which is most likely to be explained in terms of state failure to control nuclear technology. Sooner or later, if proliferation continues, WMD are bound to be used.

I would like to end by saying something about the British decision to replace the Trident submarines, which will be taken in parliament next week. The government’s decision to propose replacement probably stems from the belief that the traditional concept of sovereignty is popular. It may have been the result of American pressure, since the Americans plan to upgrade their Trident missiles, or of domestic defence industry pressure. But it also has something to do with domestic politics – the fear of being tagged by the Conservatives as ‘old labour’. But was old labour anti nuclear? Surely old labour was nationalist – Nye Bevan, perhaps the epitome of old labour, was after all, in favour of nuclear weapons. New Labour sees itself as pioneering a more global approach, as having a holistic view of security. It is, after all, Blair himself who has promoted the conditional notion of sovereignty in his Doctrine of the International Community. Surely rejection of WMD ought to be part of any such global security concept. Parliament should be asked not just to reject Trident replacement but to promote a strengthening of the multilateral regime and to propose a WMD free zone in Europe and the Middle East.

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5 Tony Blair: Doctrine of the International Community Economic Club of Chicago, April 1999
http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page1297.asp