

The UN after Iraq

Tasks for Student/Young Pugwash

Joseph Rotblat

Nobel Peace Prize 1995. Speech given at the ISYP Symposium
'The Role of the UN and Other International Actors after Iraq',
Halifax, Nova Scotia, 15 July 2003

The main theme of this Symposium is the role of the United Nations after the Iraq debacle. There is no doubt that the UN has come out deeply wounded, but even more painful is the resulting assault on fundamental values in a civilised society; I am referring to morality in the conduct of world affairs, and adherence to international law.

Indeed, the Iraq War itself is only one aspect of the sustained aggressive policy pursued by the Bush Administration, since it has been taken over by the neo-conservatives. One of the most bizarre events of the Iraqi war was the non-event. The official reason for the attack on Iraq was the threat to world security – including the security of the US and UK – that was posed by the possession by Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction. But, despite the extensive search these weapons have not been found, and by now we must conclude that they do not exist. On these grounds alone, the attack on Iraq was illegal in international law. This does not seem to bother the Bush Administration; for them the war in Iraq was the implementation of policies formulated a decade earlier.

Nowadays, any criticism of these policies is branded as anti-Americanism. This is partly a consequence of the Bush slogan: 'You are either with us or against us'. Initially, this referred to the action against terrorism, but there are many, perhaps the majority in the world, who are strongly against the terrorists, and ready to join in a campaign to eradicate them, but at the same time are not happy about the Bush policies.

I was among those who opposed the war, but it would be hypocritical of me not to rejoice over the downfall of a tyrannical regime, or not to admit that this would not have come so rapidly without military intervention. But the price that we have paid for this is far too high: it has reinstated in world affairs the cynical doctrine that 'the ends justify the means', a doctrine inherently incompatible with moral values.

The acquisition of military might began in the US even before the Bush Administration. Those of you who were in La Jolla a year ago, will remember the keynote address by William Perry, Secretary for Defence under Clinton, in which he boasted about the tremendous US military strength. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the Americans have built up an enormous military potential. Making use of the latest advances in science and the achievements

in technology – and maintained by budgets of astronomical proportions – the United States has become the greatest military power that ever existed, exceeding in sophistication all other nations combined. With the neo-conservatives coming to power under George W. Bush, this military potential was used to justify and enforce political doctrine in accordance with the maxim: 'Might is Right'. We have the might, therefore we have the right, even if this means disregarding the United Nations. In abiding by international treaties the deciding factor is whether they are in the interest of the United States. If they are not, they can be disregarded.

We have seen this policy being implemented time and time again, since George W. Bush came to power. The withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the start of the National Missile Defence Program; the refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); the refusal to negotiate a Verification Protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention; the withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol to the Convention on Climate Change; the opposition to the International Criminal Court.

To those examples of Pax Americana we have now to add the decision about the future of Iraq; a return to the old practices by which the victor is justified in claiming the spoils of war, such as allocation of lucrative contracts in the oil industry.

Above all, it is the United Nations that is being punished for not obeying Bush's dictates. The Bush Administration was never shy of showing its contempt for the United Nations, which it has always considered to be a useless and enfeebled organ, incapable of reaching any decision. Long discussions and protracted negotiations are an inherent feature of a democratic system, in which the aspirations of a large number of nations have to be reconciled in a peaceful manner. All the same, some of the criticism is valid, and it is important that the UN is made more effective in fulfilling its mandate. The present Charter, which is based on the principle of the sovereignty of member-states, is not sustainable in this age of globalisation and the ever growing interdependence in all walks of life.

Intervention in internal affairs of a state, e.g. against a tyrannical regime, should be legalised, provided that any military action is taken under the aegis of the Security Council. The Bush Administration, while claiming to be a champion of democracy, actually imposes its policies in a dictatorial manner: 'behave as we tell you or else...'. This is a shocking misuse of the term 'democracy'. But, whatever the real feelings of people, I fear that the governments of many countries may feel obliged to adopt a pragmatic policy, acknowledge that there is now a single superpower, and accept the United States as the world's policeman.

I fear that this is going to happen, but it is not yet a fait accompli, and we must do our utmost to prevent this. My main hope is that the opposition will come from the United States itself. Somehow, I do not see the American people accepting for long the role assigned to them by the clique that has hijacked the Administration. Public opinion is bound to turn when the dangers associated with the current policies become apparent. And these dangers will become apparent above all in relation to the nuclear doctrine promulgated by the Bush Administration.

Nearly a year ago, at the meeting of your Board in La Jolla, I presented an outline of these dangers. Since then the situation has become worse, with the new policies on pre-emptive strikes. A radical change has been made in the whole doctrine of nuclear weapons. The general public – and perhaps even some in this audience – do not seem to appreciate the magnitude of that change. Throughout the period of the Cold War, and during the first decade after it, the policy of the US and most of the other nuclear states was based on the doctrine of deterrence, the actual use of nuclear weapons was seen as a last resort, when everything else had failed.

What the Bush Administration has done is to change the basic policy from a defensive one to an offensive one. It has spelled out a strategy which incorporates nuclear capability into conventional war planning. Nuclear weapons have become a standard part of military strategy; they would be used in a conflict just like any other high explosives. This represents a major shift in the whole rationale for nuclear weapons.

The implementation of the policy has already begun. There is now open talk about the development of a new nuclear warhead, the 'Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator'. It is intended to destroy bunkers with very thick concrete wall, in which weapons of mass destruction may be stored or leaders of rogue states may seek shelter. To give the military commanders confidence in the performance of the new warhead, it will have to be tested. At present we have the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the US has signed but not ratified. There is already open talk in Washington about America withdrawing from the CTBT. If the US resumes testing, it would be a signal for other nuclear states to do the same. I think primarily of China, but India and Pakistan may also be tempted. The danger of a new nuclear arms race is real.

But the situation has become even more dangerous under the National Security Strategy on Weapons of Mass Destruction announced by Bush in December last year. 'To forestall or prevent... hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act pre-emptively'. The US may actually use nuclear weapons in a pre-emptive attack on a hostile country.

The situation is really bizarre. The G-8 statement from the June 2003 summit in Evian speaks of nuclear weapons as 'the pre-eminent threat to international security', yet the United States arrogates to itself the right to use them whenever it feels that the situation demands it. How long will it be before other nations follow suit? All of a sudden, the danger of a nuclear war is looming large.

What can be done to avert the danger? In particular, what can Student/Young Pugwash contribute to the prevention of a catastrophe? It seems to me that in the first instance we must return to basics. We have to remind the general public of the need to safeguard the basic principles on which modern society is built. Thanks to the advances in science and technology, there is no longer the need for our actions to be motivated by the instinct for survival. Thanks to the applications of science, we can now afford to be guided by humanitarian principles, adherence to justice and generosity, equity and compassion, tolerance and peace.

You will be berated for taking such a stand. First, you will be told that all this is self-evident truth, like re-affirming motherhood and apple pie, despite the fact that relations between people and nations are often based not on generosity but jealousy, not on compassion but greed, not on equity but oppression; not on tolerance but force.

At the same time, you will be told the opposite – that it is futile to fight for these principles; you will be accused of being naïve, and divorced from reality. You will be told that conflict and war have always existed, even that we are biologically programmed for aggression. Sadly, you will find such views expressed not only by hawks. Even in senior Pugwash, where we have been fighting for nearly half-a-century for these principles, we are becoming frustrated and – to some extent - jaded.

I am going to call on Senior Pugwash to return to these principles, but I want you too to take up the cause. You have the enthusiasm of the youth, the indignation of the idealist. Specifically, I suggest to you to take up the two guiding principles with which I started this talk: morality in the conduct of world affairs, and adherence to international law.

The general public is not aware that these principles are being violated in relation to nuclear weapons. There is ignorance about the real situation and lack of information about the dangers. You can try to do something in this respect. You can make a start by getting yourselves better informed, by reading the material published on the subject. Within each of the National Student/Young Pugwash Groups, arrangements can be made for sharing the effort; to allocate to individual members the task of keeping track of the material on the Internet, to read it, and then transmit the acquired information to others.

Having acquired this knowledge yourselves, it can then be transmitted to student groups at your universities, as well as the general public by lecturing, writing articles to the Press, appearing on TV, etc. The process of educating the public about the immorality of the policies being conducted in their names, and about violation of international obligations, will be very slow at the beginning, and at times frustrating, but with perseverance I am sure it will be growing and rewarding.

This project, under a title such as: 'Public Awareness of the Nuclear Issue' could be run by the ISYP national groups, in collaboration with each other. In addition, national groups, or individuals within them, can undertake more specialised projects. An example is the weaponisation of space problem. Will Marshall will be talking about this here, therefore, at this stage, I will say only that I find it an excellent case study to be undertaken by young Pugwashites, or, for that matter, by old ones.

As intimated in my talk, the present structure of the United Nations makes it a rather ineffective instrument for peace keeping and peace enforcement, and ways to improve it is a desirable topic for study.

For a group, or an individual, interested in legal aspects, there is room for a study of the grounds for indictment, before an international court, of the American government, or President Bush himself, for US policies on the nuclear issue; in particular, policies contradictory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). A number of individuals, as well as some organisations, have advocated such indictments, and it would be useful to put the material together, to study the practicality of this step.

For National Student/Young Pugwash Groups in Asia, the menacing situation in that continent deserves attention by them. Of particular concern is the increasing militarism in Japan and the growing campaign to change the present constitution which forbids any act of war.

To summarise, I have indicated five items for study by ISYP, namely:

1. Public Awareness of the Nuclear Threat.
2. Weaponisation of Space.
3. Up-dating the UN.
4. Legal action on the US violation of the NPT.
5. The Nuclear Issue in East Asia.

Ideas for other projects may emerge from the discussions at the symposium. Projects may have different purposes, from self-education to dissemination of information, to original research. They may involve individuals or whole national groups, or collaboration between groups. I hope that they will be mainly on the nuclear issue, because this has been the top issue for Pugwash throughout its history, and, clearly, should still be at present. This should not,

however, preclude other issues, indirectly linked to the nuclear one, such as the elimination of other types of weapons, or of war itself, or the social and ethical responsibilities of scientists, in which some of you are already involved.

The main emphasis is on 'involvement'. You can afford to spend only a small proportion of your time away from your career work, and this should be spent more on substantive issues and rather less on organisational matters. It is both natural and important that younger people, who have more reason to worry about the future than the older ones, should not leave the job to the latter, but take on themselves the task of ensuring a peaceful world.
