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Militarism and Arms Races: Terrorist Attacks and Nuclear Policies

By Joseph Rotblat

The events of 11 September have had a shattering impact on problems of world security and world order. They have also brought into sharp focus our views about nuclear weapons, the topic of this paper.

Whatever the underlying causes, the situation is that we have been confronted by a group of religious fanatics, who are trying to disrupt the way of life of many people by violent action and with complete disregard for the sanctity of human life. We have become engaged in a struggle between rationality and fanaticism, a struggle which the rational world must not lose. At the same time, however, it has created an opportunity for a fresh, more constructive approach to the long-standing issues of controlling and abolishing weapons of mass destruction; this opportunity, too, must not be lost.

Prior to 11 September, things were going badly. Not only has no progress been made on these issues, but in several respects we have been moving backwards, to a greater polarization of the world and a growing threat of new arms races. This has been especially evident in the US determination to pursue - with almost religious fervour, and certainly with more cash - the missile defence programme, even though it would mean the abrogation of the ABM Treaty and, very likely, a consequent build-up of nuclear arsenals by some countries. Furthermore, this pursuit would inevitably have unfolded a new dimension in warfare: the weaponization of space, with unpredictable deleterious consequences.

In other areas too, retrograde steps by the USA have been evident. Thus, on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, instead of its ratification by the Senate, we have heard calls, by politicians and scientists, for the resumption of nuclear tests of weapons of improved performance. On nuclear policy in general, despite the unanimous, unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear weapon states to proceed to the elimination of nuclear weapons, the USA has persisted in the policy of extended deterrence, a policy that implies the first use of nuclear weapons.

The efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention, by adopting a Protocol on the enforcement of the Convention, have come to nothing as a result of the US government's sudden announcement that it would not sign the Protocol.

These and other negative steps (such as the withdrawal from the Kyoto agreement on safeguarding the environment, or the rejection of the Land Mines Treaty) stemmed largely from the unilateralist policy that has been pursued by the USA, a policy that seems to base its adherence (or non-adherence) to international treaties solely on the criterion of whether they are of direct benefit to the United States. Self-interest appears to have become the prime consideration in US policy, without regard to the interests of the rest of the world.

The events of 11 September blew sky high the illusion of safety through unilateralist policies. They have demonstrated that in this interdependent world of ours "No Man is an Island". They have confirmed, what many critics of the missile defence programme have been pointing out for decades, that national defence systems, even if they were 100 per cent effective technically, would not guarantee the safety of the US population against a determined attack by a group of terrorists, who are ready to sacrifice their own lives in the pursuit of their cause.

The terrible tragedy would be somewhat alleviated if, as a consequence, a new approach to world security problems emerged; if it brought the realization that national security must be viewed in terms of global security; if it resulted in a new attitude in foreign relations of all nations.

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Positive effects of the new approach by the US Government are already being seen in the changed attitude towards Russia and China, and in the remarkable formation of a coalition, comprising a high proportion of the world population. Whether this coalition will survive beyond the current crisis will depend largely on the way the crisis is solved, but it is in the vital interest of all those who strive for peace and justice in the world to make it permanent.

One important step towards this would be the acknowledgement of the vital role of the United Nations as the chief instrument for keeping peace in the world. We have to strengthen the peacekeeping and peace-enforcing operation facilities of the UN, through its Security Council, and give the UN Secretary-General a greater role in dealing with conflicts.

But it is on the nuclear issue that it is of paramount importance to utilize the good relations that now exist between the United States and Russia to make progress, both in reducing the immediate danger and on long-term aspects.

Action needs to be taken to prevent more fearful attempts by the terrorists. They clearly have huge resources at their disposal. This makes it quite likely that they could get hold of, and use, weapons of mass destruction, such as biological weapons. Of particular concern, however, is the use of nuclear weapons, because this could result in casualties a hundred times greater than resulted from the attack on the World Trade Center in New York.

Osama Bin Laden has reportedly claimed to have nuclear weapons; such claims should not be dismissed lightly. It is quite realistic to envisage a terrorist group acquiring and detonating a nuclear device based on highly-enriched uranium. In Russia alone there is enough of that material to make more than 20,000 nuclear weapons. With the considerable financial resources it has at its disposal, it might not be too difficult for al-Queda to buy enough material to make several bombs; it would also be relatively easy to smuggle it into the USA or UK. The detonation by the gun method - the method employed in the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 - would not require a great deal of technological skill.

Apart from the obvious action to strengthen the security of the nuclear weapons in the arsenals, steps need to be taken to reduce the availability of weapon-grade materials. In particular, the long-standing arrangements by which the United States was to purchase large quantities of highly-enriched uranium and to render it harmless by dilution with natural uranium, should be resumed and freed from commercial considerations.

With regard to long-term policies, the events of 11 September have demonstrated the irrelevance of the whole concept of nuclear deterrence in relation to terrorist attacks. What would be our response if a nuclear device were detonated in a city, with the loss of several hundred thousand lives? Would nuclear weapons be used in retaliation? If so, against whom? Surely, we would not resort to the deliberate killing of innocent people, even if we knew the country from which the assault originated. Little can be done if Bin Laden's claim is true, but in the long run, a nuclear catastrophe can be prevented only if there are no nuclear weapons and no weapon-grade material readily available in the world. This means proceeding with the policy already approved by nearly all nations (including the five overt nuclear weapon states), who signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, (NPT), namely, the abolition of all nuclear weapons. Two steps towards this objective can be started forthwith.

The first is a treaty of no-first-use of these weapons. All nuclear-weapon states, official and de facto, should sign a treaty by which they undertake not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. The importance of such a treaty is that, once agreed to, it will open the way for the total elimination of these weapons, leading to a convention, similar to those on chemical and biological weapons.

The main task would then be the establishment of an effective safeguard regime to ensure that no violation of the convention takes place. The study of the ways to achieve such a regime is the second measure on which work should start now.

In addition to this, and perhaps of greater importance, we have to change our attitude towards problems of world security, by putting morality and respect for the law as the dominant elements in international relations, in place of threats and coercion.

