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A way forward on global security

By Kofi A. Annan

While the world has come to a remarkable degree of consensus over the last 10 years on how to grow economies, alleviate poverty and protect the environment, we are still some way from similar agreement on how to make the world more secure. There, things have, if anything, gotten worse in the last few years.

A moment of global solidarity against terrorism in 2001 was quickly replaced by acrimonious arguments over the war in Iraq, which turned out to be symptomatic of deeper divisions on fundamental questions. How can we best protect ourselves against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction? When is the use of force permissible - and who should decide? Is "preventive war" sometimes justified, or is it simply aggression under another name? And, in a world that has become "unipolar," what role should the United Nations play?

Those new debates came on top of earlier ones that arose in the 1990s. Is state sovereignty an absolute principle, or does the international community have a responsibility to resolve conflicts within states - especially when they involve atrocities?

To suggest answers to such questions, a year ago I appointed a panel of 16 people from all parts of the world and from different fields of expertise, asking them to assess the threats facing humanity today and to recommend how we need to change, in both policies and institutions, in order to meet those threats. On Thursday, they delivered their report, "A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility." Its 101 recommendations are the most comprehensive and coherent set of proposals for forging a common response to common threats that I have seen.

The report reaffirms the right of states to defend themselves, including pre-emptively when an attack is imminent, and says that in the case of "nightmare scenarios," for instance those involving terrorists with weapons of mass destruction, the UN Security Council may have to act earlier and more decisively than in the past. And it offers guidelines to help the council decide when to authorize the use of force.

No less useful is the panel's reaching of consensus on a definition of terrorism. That is something UN members have been unable to do because some have argued that any definition must include the use of armed force against civilians by states, as well as by private groups, and some - especially Arab and Muslim states - have insisted that the definition must not override the right to resist foreign occupation.

But the panel members (including several very eminent Muslim representatives) point out that international law as it stands is much clearer in condemning large-scale use of force against civilians by states than by private groups; and they agree that "there is nothing in the fact of occupation that justifies the targeting and killing of civilians." If governments follow their lead - as I hope they will - it will be much easier for the UN to develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, and for me to take the lead in promoting it, as the report asks me to do.

The report also contains a welter of practical proposals to prevent a cascade of nuclear proliferation, to improve bio-security and to make the UN itself more effective, notably in prevention and peace-building.

Among the most significant recommendations is the expansion of the Security Council from 15 to 24 members, either by adding six new permanent members, without veto, or by creating a new category of four-year, renewable seats, which would be regionally distributed. I believe either formula would strengthen the council's legitimacy in the eyes of the world, by bringing its membership closer to the realities of the 21st century - as opposed to those of 1945, when the UN Charter was drafted.

Above all, it clearly spells out the interconnectedness of our age, in which the destinies of peoples and the threats they face are interwoven. Not only is a threat against one nation a threat against all, but failure to deal with one threat can undermine our defense against all the others. A major terrorist attack in the industrial world can devastate the world economy, plunging millions of people back into extreme poverty; and the collapse of a poor state can punch a hole in our common defense against both terrorism and epidemic disease.

Few people could read this report and remain in doubt that making this world more secure is indeed a shared responsibility, as well as a shared interest. The report tells us how to do it, and why we must act now. It puts the ball firmly in the court of the world's political leaders. It is for them to negotiate the details, but I strongly urge them to act on the main thrust of the recommendations.

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