

“2009 – Year for détente, disarmament and non-proliferation”

Comments by Hans Blix, Chairman of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission

Moscow, 9 December 2008

Are we in a new Cold War?

It is sometimes said that nothing is as strong as an idea whose time has come. It seems clear that in 2009 time has come for the idea of global forceful measures to tackle the risk of climate change.

Is 2009 also the time for the idea of disarmament? Many will shake their heads and say that there is winter rather than warming in the global political climate. They might point to some “inconvenient truths”.

- In 2007 the world spent some 1.300 billion dollars on military expenses. Nearly half fell on the US ; 4 -5 % each on China , France and the UK , and 3 % on Russia . (Sipri Yearbook for 2008).
- The US is proceeding to deploy parts of its missile shield on the doorsteps of Russia in Poland and the Czech Republic .. Russia may react by stepping up its own missile program and installing missiles in Kaliningrad .
- US armed forces have had joint exercises with Georgian troops and after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia US naval units that navigate in the Black Sea have delivered emergency equipment to Georgia .
- Russia has given notice of withdrawal from the post Cold War agreement about Conventional Forces in Europe .
- Russia is sending nuclear capable bombers on patrol far away from home and is engaging in joint naval maneuvers with Venezuela in the Caribbean.
- In the US the outgoing Bush administration has advanced proposals for the designing and building of a new standard nuclear weapon. In other nuclear weapons states efforts are, likewise undertaken to modernize their nuclear capacities.
- China is building a blue sea navy and has shot down a satellite of its own, demonstrating a capability for action in space.

What has happened to the successful political cooperation, arms control and disarmament that began at the end of the Cold War?

After the end of the Cold War consensus decisions became common in the Security Council that had often earlier been paralyzed by the veto. Important joint decisions and actions became possible. Many peace-keeping operations were agreed to and in 1991 the Council agreed to stop Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait and authorized the Gulf War. President Bush the elder spoke about ‘a new international order’. There was general euphoria that the UN Charter prohibition of the use of force had been enforced and that, at long last, the system for collective security had worked.

- The nuclear stockpiles in the US and Russia were reduced from levels that were absurdly high and cost too much.
- In 1993 the Convention against Chemical Weapons was concluded after some 20 years of negotiation.
- In 1995 the Non-Proliferation Treaty was extended without any final date.
- In 1996 a Treaty comprehensively prohibiting all nuclear weapons tests was adopted.

Détente peters out. US reliance on military superiority

- However, while the Warsaw Pact disintegrated and the Russian military power crumbled, the NATO alliance survived and expanded. The US became the sole military superpower determined never to lose that position.
- The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that had been signed by the Clinton administration in 1996 was rejected by the US Senate and the moratorium on nuclear tests that has been respected by the P 5 was ignored in 1998 by India, Pakistan and -- later -- by North Korea.
- The disarmament process stagnated. START II never went into effect and a planned START III Treaty between the US and Russia failed to materialize;
- The Disarmament Conference in Geneva went into coma. For over ten years it has been unable even to adopt a work programme.

With the entry of the Bush administration in 2001 and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in the autumn of 2001 the US moved to a greater reliance on its military supremacy and a corresponding lesser reliance on seeking solutions through the give and take of negotiations, through multilateralism, treaties and disarmament.

“War” was declared on terrorism – not simply coordinated international action by police and intelligence.

While broad international support and UN authorization underpinned the US military intervention that freed Afghanistan from the Taliban government that had hosted the Al Qaeda, many other actions were unilateral and some have seriously eroded the international détente that prevailed in the first half of the 1990s. For instance,

- The US formally withdrew from the bilateral US-Soviet the Antiballistic Missile Treaty.
- In 2002 the US almost single-handedly prevented adding verification mechanisms to the Biological Weapons Convention;
- In 2002 a new US National Security Strategy flatly declared that in the era of missiles and terrorists a right to use armed force in self-defense only in cases where ‘armed attacks’ were occurring or were ‘imminent’ would be insufficient. This was tantamount to giving public notice that the US would not feel restricted by the rules of the UN Charter. The armed attack on Iraq in 2003 was launched without authorization by the Security Council.
- The 2005 Review conference of the Non Proliferation Treaty ended in bitterness and without result. The five nuclear-weapon states parties rejected the criticism that they were not fulfilling their duty under Art. VI of the treaty to negotiate toward nuclear disarmament.

- Recent budgetary allocations in the US have demonstrated a determination to maintain global military supremacy. Although the US Congress has imposed some restraints – for instance not funding the nuclear bunker buster -- it has not until now provided a major break. We could recently watch the turmoil and convulsions before the main financial crisis program of some 700 billion dollars was accepted. At the very same time hardly a murmur was heard when with great speed and smoothness about the same amount – 700 billion dollars – was approved for the military budget.

2008 is still a military year

In 2005 I was invited to Stanford University to lecture on the subject “Will there be a new arms race?” My answer was a cautious no. I said that it “takes two to tango and at least two to create an arms race.” At that time I could see only the United States racing itself and – after the threat of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction had proved empty – I doubted that the US tax payer would be willing to continue paying huge arms bills unless new threats materialized into significant actions.

Perhaps I was unduly influenced the situation in Europe where countries were spending 1.9% of GDP on military expenses whereas the US was spending some 3.5%. In 2005 European countries no longer felt a need for military means to keep each other at bay, nor did they see Russia as a threat requiring strong territorial defense. In many European countries a main role of armed forces was seen to be participation in UN or other peace keeping operations.

Today, I must regrettably note that

- the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan together with the controversies with the DPRK and Iran still persuade US Congress – and the US taxpayers – to accept a military budget of unprecedented size; and that
- Russia, China and others are joining the military tango. Unlike the US they may be not be significantly motivated by the threats of terrorism and non-proliferation problems.. However, while they cannot aim at catching up with US strength they may want to avoid trailing even further behind;
- the chill in relations with Russia after the war in Georgia has led some in Western Europe to upgrade the importance of territorial defense.

Factors that may impact on future levels of military expenses

The US presidential election confirmed public support for a militarily strong US but it also showed some tiredness with military engagements, in particular with the war in Iraq . Whether the US public will support a long military engagement in Afghanistan remains to be seen. In any case it may be doubted that such an engagement will necessitate a new generation of nuclear weapons, new aircraft carriers or extensive preparation for space war. In the absence of new terrorist attacks in the US or on US assets abroad demands for a slimmed military budget might get broad public support. The need to find budgetary resources for the huge financial rescue measures may further support cuts on the military side.

Reliance on the threat or use of military force has not been successful.

It is often argued in the US that more emphasis should be placed on ‘soft power’,

meaning diplomacy, economy, culture, legal system. The other side of this argument is recognition that a strong reliance on the threat or use of military strength – as we have seen in the last eight years – has not been successful but proved horribly expensive in lives and resources.

Iraq was meant to be a quick operation removing an odious dictator, eliminating weapons of mass destruction and introducing democracy and a US friendly regime that would – like Korea , Japan and Germany – be glad to host US forces for an indefinite time. It did not turn out as envisaged. The operation is now in its fifth year and the costs in lives and resources are enormous – for the US and even more for Iraq . Contrary to faulty intelligence there were no weapons of mass destruction; democracy is a hard plant to cultivate and requires more than the removal of a dictator; and the continued presence of some US troops is meeting with Iraqi reservations.

The Israeli armed action in Lebanon started as a justifiable retaliation against Hezbollah incursions into Israel and hostage taking. The US encouraged development of the action into an all out military effort to eliminate Hezbollah in Lebanon proved a failure. Eventually the UN had to be called in to guard a fragile peace.

In the case of the small and destitute DPRK it must have been realized early that the huge US military power could not be used to destroy the nuclear programs. Theoretically, the reprocessing plant and other nuclear installations in Nyong Byon could be bombed. However, the risks of North Korean retaliation practically precluded military action.. With many million inhabitants Seoul lies within artillery range from North Korea .

Several years were lost before diplomatic negotiations in the shape of the six power talks were started in Beijing and these years were used by the DPRK to produce plutonium for several more nuclear bombs. Some of the economic pressures exerted by the US and others may have had an effect. Others may simply have made the DPRK intransigent.

It will be of the greatest importance for détente in North East Asia that the talks in Beijing lead to an acceptable result. A further development of North Korean nuclear weapons could have scary domino effects in the region. The cooperation between the big powers is also in itself a useful exercise for them to adjust to each other in order to produce a common position that will be more effective than separate individual positions.

On the whole it would seem that carrots more than sticks have provided leverage. Deliveries of oil and rice to the impoverished country have been and remain important parts. Perhaps promises of diplomatic relations with the US and Japan and guarantees against any attacks provide the best leverage to bring the ostracized regime to abandon its nuclear program.

In the case of Libya it has clearly been talks and promises of an end to isolation that persuaded Mr. Khaddaffi to scrap his nuclear weapons program. He was rewarded by a lifting of sanctions and opening of economic relations and the social and diplomatic ostracism was ended by a procession of Western visitors: Mr. Blair, Mr. Chirac, Mr. Sarkozy and Ms. Rice.

In the case of Iran , there has been no lack of military threats from the US . Again and again it has been declared that ‘all options are on the table’ and several US air craft carriers have been stationed with their ready cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf . It seems that these threats have only strengthened the hardliners in Iran and rallied public opinion in national support of the government. Until now the US – and, indeed, the Security Council -- has taken the stand that direct talks with Iran can only take place when Iran has agreed to suspend its program for the enrichment of uranium. It is not surprising that Iran has proved unwilling. Who gives away the strongest card before the game?

If, contrary to Iran ’s denials, the reason for the enrichment program should be to shorten the distance to a nuclear weapons option one must examine whether the importance of the option can be eliminated. In many cases the incentive to acquire nuclear weapons comes from a perceived compelling need for security or a wish to be recognized. During the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein developed a nuclear program aiming at weapons, Iran may well have felt a need to get closer to the option. Today, none of Iran ’s neighbours would pose a nuclear threat to Iran if Iran stayed away from enrichment.. Only the US might be perceived as such a threat.

Similarly, the isolation of Iran as part of ‘the axis of evil’ is chiefly inspired and pursued by the US . Against this background it might well be that direct talks with Iran and a US offer of guarantees against armed attack and against subversive actions and offer of diplomatic relations would prove more persuasive than military threats. As long as such chips have not been put on the table it is hard to claim that the diplomatic means have been exhausted.

Are there potential conflicts that justify the enormous current armaments?

Wars between nations used most often to be about borders and land. There are certainly still some conflicts of this kind, but hardly between the major military powers. In Europe, the European Union was created to forge a co-operation so close as to rule out armed conflicts. No one can imagine a war between the US and Mexico today and armed conflicts also seem unlikely between states on the South American continent.

Wars of national liberation were numerous in the first decades after World War II, but these conflicts are largely a thing of the past. After the end of the Cold War it is also hard to imagine any further conflicts based on ideology or religion. There will be no wars of civilizations.

There may be more armed conflicts in Africa, where borders were often drawn without regard to tribal and other relevant conditions. We can also not exclude the risk of more armed conflicts in the Middle East, and of civil wars in various places. However, with the Cold War over it is hard to imagine that such conflicts in Africa or the Middle East could cause armed conflicts between major military powers. Admittedly, part of the reason would lie in the existing US military superiority. However, even with a greater balance in the military sphere it is hard to believe that they would allow themselves to be drawn into a major direct military confrontations. Even during the Cold War they did not do that.

Many will suggest that competition about oil, gas and raw materials will lead to armed conflicts. It is not difficult to see that various states seek to establish close relations with countries that have rich resources of oil and gas – Arab states and Iran in the Middle East, Libya and Algeria in North Africa , Sudan, Angola, Nigeria in black Africa, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in Central Asia. There is evidently a competition to have access to energy sources and to safeguard means and routes of transport, like pipelines and sea routes. However, is it not most likely that competition about access to oil will play out in price increases rather than in armed conflicts?

I am left with the question whether the huge military apparatus that has been retained and developed by the US and the sizeable military machines that are now being strengthened in Russia, China, India and elsewhere, are really meaningful. Some will undoubtedly find the question naïve. However, unless there are important terrorist actions or developments that make China and Russia look like threatening vital Western interests or that make the West look like threatening vital Russian or Chinese interests, the climate should be favourable for significant reductions in military budgets, for arms control and disarmament.

However, I believe decisive efforts to create a new *détente* are needed for such a revival. With new leadership in the US and several other big powers *détente* should be possible. Let me make some comments regarding measures to foster *détente* and then turn to measures of disarmament.

Measures for *détente*

I begin with the question of expansion of NATO. Today it concerns Georgia and Ukraine. However, Senator Lugar, who was the Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged that the Alliance should be open also Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and Mr. McCain proposed that it should be open to all democratic states and that a League of Democratic states should be established.

I believe these efforts are misdirected. Some of the independent states that were earlier part of the Soviet Union might well want NATO protection. They have the right to join any security arrangement that is open to them. However, before exercising a right they have, states and alliances as well as people assess what the consequences may be – whether it is wise. It is realistic to assume that the Russian government and Russian public opinion would view further NATO presences on Russia's doorsteps as a Western policy of encircling Russia . Stronger nationalism, more defense spending and more tension might well be the result. This seems to be well understood in several major European states that I think wisely aim at closer economic ties – but not military ties—with the states in question.

I should add that there are also things that in my view Russia as the big power could do to promote *détente*, in particular, to pursue the policy of the good neighbor. Here, as in so many other situations, the use of carrots may lead to better results than the waving of sticks. Making it clear that Russia has no wishes or intentions to seek the reintegration of any of its neighbors would go a long way to restore *détente* and counter suspicions of revanchism. It seems to me that the excellent Russian relations with Finland could be a good model.

The proposal advanced by Senator McCain for a League of Democracies may have appealed to some in the US who are particularly negative to the UN and would wish to circumvent possible vetoes by Russia or China in the Security Council and get a stamp of international legitimacy for measures that would not be approved. Their anger is somewhat misplaced. A large number of decisions are, in fact, taken by consensus in the Security Council. Russia and China have not been alone in sometimes doubting the wisdom of proposed far-reaching sanctions.

Turning to the plans to deploy parts of the US missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, I note that the Russian leaders have not claimed that the links will deprive Russia of a second strike capability. However, they undoubtedly feel that these measures on their doorsteps are provocative and suspect that a further development of the installations could have substantial security implications. Regardless of what they say it should not be difficult for US military strategists to understand such reactions.

The military gains of these measures hardly seem to stand in any proportion to the political damage they do. If, as is asserted, the measures aim only to protect against missiles from rogue states or terrorists, it would seem rational that other states – including Russia and China – be invited to join in a common defense effort. Mr. Obama seems to have generally supported the missile shield if it can be shown to work. This might be a good reason to shelve the measures. Both Russia and the US will need to move cautiously to avoid loss of face on either side. Big powers should avoid challenging each other.

For continued détente with China the new US leadership will need to act in such a way as to minimize the concern in Beijing over the nuclear cooperation agreement that has been made by the Bush administration with India and that will increase India's capability to make nuclear weapons and is designed to draw India in a closer strategic cooperation with the US. The agreement allows India inter alia to import uranium fuel for power reactors and thereby enables the country, if it so chooses, to enrich its indigenous uranium to bomb grade level.

A verified cut-off agreement could help to undo some of the suspicions that might arise. The five nuclear weapon states parties to the NPT appear already to have stopped producing fissile material for weapons as they have more than they need. However, with the adherence of all to a verified cut off agreement, Pakistan, India and China would be able to feel confident that none of them is increasing the stocks of bombs and bomb grade material. Without such an agreement there would be no confidence but a risk of an arms race.

Arms control and disarmament

In the US presidential campaign Mr. Obama certainly sought support by reminding the voters of his opposition to the war in Iraq and of his readiness to talk to adversaries. However, on many issues he presented a centrist position. Not surprisingly, he rejected any idea of unilateral US disarmament and spoke in favour of an orderly exit from Iraq .

When you carefully study Mr. Obama's positions you cannot avoid the impression

that although he is not a dove he is inclined to listen to adversaries, to understand them and, if possible, solve controversies by negotiation. You also get the impression that he strongly and genuinely favours arms control and disarmament.

If steps are taken in 2009 that begin to lead to détente on significant issues – notably the missile shield and further NATO expansion – the outlook for progress on arms control and disarmament will also brighten in 2009.

Several issues are burning. The START 1 agreement between the US and Russia will expire at the end of next year unless agreement is reached on a prolongation. Without a prolongation of this agreement all rules concerning mutual inspection and verification between the two states will lapse. Another instrument requiring urgent care is the comprehensive agreement on Conventional Forces in Europe . Understandably dissatisfied that it has not been brought up to date Russia has given notice of withdrawal. It needs updating and it is absurd that it has not happened earlier.

Mr. Obama is on record as fully supporting the dramatic appeal by the former US Secretaries of State, George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of Defence, William Perry and the former Senator Sam Nunn. It urges the US to take the initiative with Russia and other nuclear weapon states to seek the elimination of nuclear weapons and to begin moving to that goal by seeking a number of important arms control and disarmament measures.

While hawks in the US do not wish to take this initiative seriously it has very broad support among experts in security and foreign affairs. Non-governmental organizations, international disarmament groups such as ours and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission that I headed (report in www.wmdcommission.org) and think tanks also strongly advocate this proposal from inside the US . Campaigning should accelerate in 2009.

The accelerating interdependence of states – including the big powers – lead them to cooperate to preserve the environment, to prevent the spread of diseases, to maintain and restore financial and economic equilibrium, to prevent terrorism and proliferation. The Cold War is over. There are no substantive controversies of significance. No reasons to further delay building an international society based on cooperative security.

Mr. Obama is on record specifically to support that the US Senate should review the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and ratify this agreement that it rejected over ten years ago. No other measure could send a stronger signal that the disarmament process has restarted.

I shall not review the many other measures that my Commission, the American elder statesmen and many others have recommended. One that interestingly had the support of Mr. McCain was the withdrawal of NATO nuclear weapons from Europe . They are left-overs from the Cold War. If matched by a Russian withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons further into Russia the separate measurers would contribute to restore détente.

A measure of considerable importance that I have mentioned would be the

negotiation of a verified agreement to stop the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons -- enriched uranium and plutonium (FMCT). Such an agreement has been on the drafting board – but not the negotiation table – for very long. It would close the tap for more nuclear weapons material. Together with reductions in existing warheads and stocks of nuclear material it would gradually reduce the world's supply of nuclear explosives.

A relatively simple measure that would allow us to sleep better would be an agreement to take nuclear war heads off what is called 'hair trigger alert'. It would reduce the risk of releases by accident or misunderstandings. With many thousands of nuclear weapons – by far most of them in the US and Russia – there would be some comfort to know that they are not ready for immediate firing.

Arrangements will further need to be reached not only to strengthen IAEA safeguards through a general adoption of the so called Additional Protocol but also to strengthen the controls of the use, transport and trade in radioactive materials. We must reduce the risk that such material may come to be used in 'dirty bombs', i.e. bombs that do not explode but spread their material and cause contamination and panic.

Lastly I must mention that in a world that will have many more nuclear power reactors than the some 450 that we now have the incentive to build plants for production of nuclear fuel also needs to be reduced. A plant built to enrich uranium to fuel grade – less than 5 % -- is also capable of enriching to the grade needed for weapons. It will not be possible to establish an international licensing system for such plants. However, incentives can be created for states with few power reactors to forego fuel cycle installations of their own. There is a good starting point: it is not economic to build enrichment plants for small nuclear power programs.