

Peace and Security in our time

National University of Singapore

February 2015

1-It is an honor and pleasure to speak at the National University of Singapore, a leading global university. With a mission “to transform the way people think and do things through education, research and service”, it is quite appropriate to talk here about one of the central issues facing humanity: how should we think and what do we need to do, to transform our world into a more peaceful and humane one.

2- Durable peace remains a quest that humanity has been grappling with without much success. Wars have dominated the human timeline since recorded history. Hundreds of millions have lost their lives to violence under the guise of religion, nationalism, ethnicity and other alleged *casus belli*. We can barely remember the causes of many of those wars. Some of the states involved no longer even exist. We organized ourselves around city-states, empires and sovereign states. We had the Peace of Westphalia, the Congress of Vienna, the League of Nations and the United Nations. We endeavored to create security systems based on balance of power and on collective security. But peace has remained elusive and force and violence have remained our primary choice to settle differences.

3- Today we are not doing much better. And our human condition has become even more paradoxical: amazing creativity that has enabled us to make a huge leap forward in the way we understand our world and ourselves; but at the same time, a striking inability to translate these accomplishments into concrete actions to sustain peace and security, and uphold human dignity.

4- We are all in awe of the amazing scientific and technological advances that have dramatically transformed our life: ever expanding ability to communicate and interact; real time access to all what is going on around the globe; major advances in the medical and biological fields,

human genome mapping, and stem cell research to wit; a surge in the physics' field through the discovery of the Higgs Boson particle and in the industrial field through 3D printing. In one sense we have become closer than ever before. But ironically, in another sense, we have become distanced from each other, with a creeping feeling of "otherness", coupled with increasing inequity and polarization, and in some cases stereotyping bordering on dehumanization.

5-it is no exaggeration to observe that the state of the world today is appalling: Poverty and hunger continue at dreadful levels; some conflicts, have been left to fester for generations; brutal repression and denial of human dignity are the hall mark of a third of the world's nations; the sanctity of life depends on who is dying and where; rich countries are apathetic to the misery of the poor; inequality in the distribution of wealth amongst countries and people has reached obscene levels. The human rights law designed to protect human dignity, and the humanitarian law intended to preserve a modicum of "humanity" to war and destruction, are both now cited more for violation than for compliance. The "responsibility to protect" principle articulated in 2005, so the international community can guard against genocide and other heinous crimes, now almost always rings hollow. Over 50 countries, many of them, disgracefully, well established democracies, reportedly aided and abetted odious acts of torture and "rendition". Target killing, cyber-attacks, wiretapping and other violations of basic human values and decency are being systematically resorted to with no accountability. And efforts to establish an international system of criminal justice through the International Criminal Court, has, until now, been far from universal, and limited in application to the weak and defeated.

6- In the recent past, the International community has practically limited itself to hand wringing while millions of innocent civilians were slaughtered in places such as Rwanda, Congo, and Darfur. And today, as I am speaking to you, violence continues to ravage our planet in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other places: senseless, destructive, dehumanizing

conflicts; a mindset of *Carthago delenda est!* What's worse, due to the annihilating weapons at our disposal, we continue to live with the danger of sleep walking into self-destruction.

6- Almost half the world population struggles to live on \$ 2 a day and some 900 million people do not have enough to eat. Millions die every year because of lack of access to medical care. Masses of refugees live in squalor yearning for a "home". In contrast, the richest one percent will own more than all the rest by 2016, and the 80 richest people now have as much money as the poorest 3.5 billion. And the gap continues to widen. This cannot stand. I believe that poverty is the most lethal weapon of mass destruction because these are not just numbers. The plight of the poor is invariably compounded by and results in human rights abuses, a lack of good governance, marginalization and a deep sense of injustice and anger. Such a combination is a most fertile breeding ground for conflict, civil strife and other forms of violence and extremism.

7- In this environment, fanaticism and often authoritarianism continue to hide behind different masks of ideology, religion, ethnicity or ultra-nationalism to commit the most atrocious of crimes, whether by non-state actors or by repressive regimes. Sadly, the ones footing the bill are the innocent civilians who are blithely dismissed as 'collateral damage', without even being provided with the most basic "humanitarian assistance" due to lack of resources, which the UN and other agencies continue to almost beg for. The irony is that we spend around a mere one percent on peace keeping operations and disaster relief, of the \$ 1.7 trillion we spend on armaments per year.

8- Under these conditions, are we surprised that the 'logic' among some is: if you don't treat me as a human being why do you expect me to act as one? And if you don't care about my life why I should care about yours? It is a foul environment that breeds violence, tyranny and fascism. In our increasingly interconnected world, however, where the city is almost the planet, our connectivity is not limited to opportunities but also to risks. Our most significant global threats are invariably threats without borders: poverty, terrorism, climate change, weapons of

mass destruction, communicable diseases, cyber security, human trafficking and illegal drugs. Traditional notions of sovereignty and national security are being constantly challenged. By their nature, these threats require global cooperation. No one country can overcome them on its own. Our actions or non-actions eventually come back to haunt us no matter where we are. No part of the world can remain quarantined any longer, as we have witnessed in shock recently.

9-Our policies and international institutions have, unfortunately, become anachronistic. The UN system of organizations suffer from structural deficiencies, and lack of authority and resources. As a result they are becoming steadily polarized and paralyzed. The failure of the UN Security Council to take preventive measures or provide adequate responses over the years is a stark case in point. In the words of Navy Pillay the former UN Human Rights chief “greater responses [by the Security Council] would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives “. We are, to my mind, increasingly facing a crisis of governance: governments that pursue short-term myopic policies which fail to address long-term global challenges; and international institutions that remain bereft of the tools needed to address these challenges. This begs the question whether the structures and processes of global governance need to be recalibrated.

10- I turn now to the weapons at our disposal. Nuclear weapons are a legacy of the cold war. But a quarter of a century later, it borders on insanity that we still have over 16000 nuclear weapons and around 2000 of them on alert. The abolition of nuclear weapons is alarmingly, no longer a fashionable topic. Yet it is evident that with the technology out of the box, and as long as some countries choose to rely on nuclear weapons, directly or through bilateral or multilateral alliances, others will eventually seek to acquire them. A security concept based on “some are more equal than others”, and on a system of deterrence that is irrelevant to extremists with no return address, is unsustainable and almost naïve. It raises the question of how long the center of the nonproliferation regime can hold, in places like the Middle East, East Asia and other areas of potential conflicts. More ominously, how long

will it take before a terrorist group lays its hands on a nuclear weapon? It is imperative that no more countries acquire them. But to that end it is equally imperative that the weapon states divest themselves of these weapons.

12- Under the NPT, the Weapon States not only have an obligation to negotiate in good faith towards nuclear disarmament, but equally in the words of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) “ the obligation to achieve a precise result : nuclear disarmament in all its aspects”. However, after more than four decades of undertaking these obligations, nuclear weapon states are moving in the opposite direction. They are modernizing their arsenals and are planning to spend hundreds of billions of dollars for that purpose.

13- Almost all prominent strategic experts have argued strongly that reliance on nuclear weapons is becoming “increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective”. In 2011 former US secretary of defense Bill Perry talked about three false alarms he knows of, in which Soviet missiles were thought to be screaming towards the US, “To this day I believe that we avoided nuclear catastrophe as much by good luck as by good management”, he added. One of his predecessors, Robert McNamara, put it in stark terms: “the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will lead to the destruction of nations “. President Obama emphasized the horrific nature of any use of nuclear weapons: “one nuclear weapon exploded in one city ... no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences may be... ultimately for our survival”.

14-But with all these warnings, have we put our money where our mouths are? Have we seriously tried to drastically reduce the number of weapons in existence? Have we seriously tried to alter the nuclear launch warning system? Have we seriously tried to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons in national security strategy? Have we seriously started thinking about the security architecture in a nuclear weapon free world, including the need to deter and defeat possible cheats? This, in my view, is a dismal record and raises the question whether our commitment to nuclear disarmament is genuine.

15-In addition to nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction are still with us. If you rely on the mother of all inhumane weapons, and I have security concerns, why should I commit not to acquire other WMD's? This, I assume, is the logic of some of those who have not joined the Convention on the prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or the convention on the Prohibition of Biological weapons in the regions of Middle East and East Asia.

16- War and peace, like many other human conditions, are of our own creation. It depends on the environment we construct and the mindset we cultivate. What we need is an environment based on inclusiveness, equity, trust, mutual respect and dialogue and not on double standards, polarization, sanctions, humiliation and dictates; an environment that constrains the human impulse for violence. If we work on eliminating the drivers of insecurity and violence, including the abolition of all weapons of mass destruction, the odds are we will be able to avert or at least mitigate most wars. If we work on the drivers of peace, particularly equity and respect for human dignity, the odds are we will be able to adjust our mindset and understand that we are the same human species, irrespective of our superficial differences of race, religion or ethnicity. We would realize that we increasingly share the same core values, and that it is the same "cake" albeit with different icings. Equity, compassion and above all human solidarity should be our compass. For by now we should have learnt that I am not free unless everyone is free; and I am not secure unless everyone is secure. If we maintain the status quo and the same mindset, possibly we will be able to travel to Mars, but certainly we will continue to kill each other. One day, I shudder to think, we might see Rajeev Gandhi's warning in 1998 come true - when India was hoping for a world free from nuclear weapons: a nuclear war that would mean "the end of life as we know it on our planet earth".

17- The status quo is clearly no longer sustainable because we are not just grappling with an abstract ethical question but with an existential question of survival. We keep uttering platitudes about the need to reach out and work together, while in fact retrenching back into a bunker mentality. We continue to make noise about the major dangers

we face. But we carry on in our same old ways and somehow hope for different results. We seem incapable of acknowledging and addressing the causes, and not just the symptoms. And the symptoms are more visible by the day: violence is spreading, chaos is disseminating, and extremism is metastasizing.

18- We urgently need to think differently and act differently, by charting a course based on “togetherness” and “human solidarity. In other words, address global challenges through global response based on the common good and not on myopic national interests, and where the dignity of every human being is our first priority. The lethal combination of Poverty and repression is the primary cause for insecurity and human debasement. We need to combat both. We need to shift the focus in the interaction between north and south, east and west from rivalry and competition to cooperation and complementarity, using economic models that aim to achieve peace through prosperity; advance science and technology for development; with emphasis on values and institutions that promote dignity and champion democracy. We need global institutions endowed with the authority and resources to address the interconnected challenges we face. We need a global system of justice to which we all subscribe without any claims of “Exceptionalism “. We need a functioning system of collective security, based on equity, inclusiveness and engagement. Weapons of mass destruction have no place in such a system.

19- Finally we have to understand that the challenges we face are bigger than any single country, conflict or issue. And we have to recognize that we are one human family and that none of us is going to prevail alone. We will either swim together or sink together. We need to find a way to live with each other in peace, freedom and dignity. William James said “we are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep “We have lost our way. It is time to save ourselves from ourselves.