

Editorial: Dealing with the Hydra?

‘The horror scenarios of the Cold war have disappeared, but the threat of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons has not. Like the monstrous Hydra of Greek mythology, modern weapons of mass destruction are sprouting new heads faster than anybody can cut them off.’

So wrote Anna Lindh and Erkki Tuomioja, the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Finland respectively, in an article in *The International Herald Tribune*, whose title gives their answer to the threat: ‘Slaying the Hydra – together’. As they conclude:

‘Even Hercules could not kill the many headed monster alone. Only by acting together will we safeguard the security of all.’

The Russell Foundation wrote to a number of European political leaders, Foreign Ministers and Presidents, seeking their responses to the Nuclear Posture Review in the United States, which has rescinded the most important taboo which has hitherto ensured that nuclear weapons have been seen as weapons of last resort. We found widespread concern, because it has become increasingly plain that the reign of a solitary superpower has abrogated the dualism of checks and balances, thus increasing the threat of a multiplicity of Hydras.¹

This is very clearly expressed in the gathering crisis over Iraq, in which the dominant faction of the United States Government asserts, with increasing stridency, its intention to unleash a full scale war, on its own, if necessary.

Members of Nato see in this a sombre continuation of the unilateralist doctrines which underpinned the American war effort in Afghanistan. The United States was set about with criticism from its Nato allies during the bombardment of Yugoslavia, and found their interference irksome. The war on Afghanistan was accordingly taken away from Nato control, even though the organisation had rushed to insist upon its complete solidarity with the United States, following the destruction of the Twin Towers.

Certain important tasks were delegated to Germany (the conference to agree upon an interim Afghan government) or Japan (co-ordination of aid efforts). Certain military dispositions were made, one of which, involving the British occupation of the airport facilities at Bagram, nearly ended in disaster. But it was the United States which called the shots, allocated the tasks, and decided whether

they had been discharged satisfactorily or not. Nato was a trophy cupboard, no more.

Nobody thinks that Nato will make itself available for the Iraq war. From the beginning, this is to be a unilateral initiative, with some delegation to junior partners, if such can be found. So the first part of this argument turns around the acceptability of the United States as a sole actor in an upcoming war which might devastate an area reaching far outside Iraq. Such a war is far from acceptable to the would-be allies, and it will take some considerable diplomatic embellishment before it can be camouflaged sufficiently to disarm their criticisms. Of course, the great advantage of being a unique megapower is that it is not too necessary to attend to unwanted criticism. The disadvantage is that such convenient deafness will be seen as arrogant and will inhibit future alliances, even if the Hydra heads sprout on all sides like genetically modified weeds.

In the old-fashioned days of Treaties and Agreements the recognised effort to deal with weapons of mass destruction involved the idea of 'non-proliferation'. Non-proliferation agreed upon support for regimes that had forsworn all efforts to acquire the forbidden weapons. It also sought to persuade those who had acquired such weapons to forgo them. It advanced through the reinforcement of three main Treaties: the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention. Not all States had ratified these Treaties, and not all States which had agreed to endorse them actually went on to enforce them.

After September 11th, a terrifying series of anthrax attacks was mounted in the United States. Several people died, and numerous sites were attacked, sometimes by powders which were infected, and sometimes by sinister placebos, made of chalk, but calculated to spread fear. It has transpired that those who are accused of responsibility for these attacks all come from the United States, and appear to have deployed strains of anthrax which derive from American laboratories. So it is that the Hydra strikes, never more lethally than when the biter is bit.

Non-proliferation is a process that depends upon argument and agreement, and it is as strong or as weak as our moral conviction, as a community and an international community. But non-proliferation will not do for a megapower. Firstly, it will develop and deploy such weapons as conduce to its continued ascendancy. It has no objection to the most fiendish weapons, unless they are deployed by others. Thus we have seen the convenient invention of the doctrine of counter-proliferation.² This is absolutely nothing whatever to do with non-proliferation. The counter-proliferator zaps the bad weapons as soon as they fall into anyone else's hands. Even if these weapons do not fall in to the hands of bad people, bad people can still be zapped if they might wish to possess bad weapons. Thus, counter-proliferation in Iraq is intended to destroy nuclear weapons which cannot possibly exist, and stocks of chemical and biological weapons which are extremely unlikely to exist in any significant quantities. Terms of the settlement which was imposed on Iraq after the conclusion of the Gulf War have already resulted in a massive reduction of Iraqi capacities in these areas.

Counter-proliferation has a history. In 1981 the Israelis bombed a nuclear reactor which was being built in Osirak. The Israelis said that it would be used to make weapons-grade fissile materials. The International Atomic Energy Agency said that it had all the capacities necessary to ensure that the reactor remained entirely dedicated to production for peaceful uses. It is true that the Iraqis subsequently entered upon attempts to develop a military nuclear capacity. But these were kept away from the oversight of the IAEA.

In 1998, the Americans sent twelve Cruise missiles to destroy a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. This was said to be part of Osama bin Laden's military production capacity. Whole swathes of testimony were produced to the contrary, as British, American and Jordanian experts and engineers insisted that the plant was indeed devoted to the manufacture of pharmaceutical goods. Unsurprisingly, it was the United States which fought shy of the proposal that the United Nations should investigate the site after bombardment.

Today, in a fine old tradition, Vice President Cheney insists that it makes no difference whether inspectors go into Iraq or not, since the issue is one of 'regime change'.

Having a monopoly of a wide range of dreadful weapons, it is extremely likely that the United States can kill its enemies wherever they are and kill a large number of other people in addition. The carnage of the first Gulf War should have pointed that lesson to all who examined it. Mass extermination is precisely what happened to the Iraq soldiery who were buried, and buried alive, in the final stages of that horrific conflict. One of the victims of Norman Schwarzkopf's massacre was the Geneva Convention, governing the disposal of war dead, and the informing of their next of kin. The horror was quite sufficient to turn the upholding of Geneva Conventions into an academic issue. But, academic or not, what is at stake is the whole apparatus of international law and international agreement. Nelson Mandela is quite strictly in the right when he says that a unilateral American war could mean the end of the United Nations system.

But if we abandon agreements about non-proliferation, brute force will be all that we have left. Hercules had the inestimable advantage that he was a God. But he also has a considerable disadvantage, in that he is a myth. The myth of George W. Bush will be less durable than the stories the Greeks told.

Ken Coates

Footnotes:

1. See *Using Nukes: How should we evaluate the American Nuclear Posture Review?* George Papandreou, Anna Lindh, Bill Graham, Hubert Védrine, Brian Cowen, Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, 2002.
2. See Frank Blackaby, 'Reducing the Role of Military Force', *The Spokesman* No.68.