

Moving beyond the use of military force

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“We continue to emphasize our differences instead of what we have in common. We continue to talk about ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Only when we can start to talk about ‘us’ as including all of humanity will we truly be at peace . . .”

These are the words with which Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, expressed his personal conviction when we met in Tokyo last November. In the effort to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, ElBaradei has led a patient and persistent global process of dialogue.

There has probably never been a time when the need for dialogue has been felt more keenly than our own. Throughout the world, the forces of division and conflict continue to rage. Whether it be the ongoing violence and chaos in Iraq, the horrific humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of western Sudan, or confrontations over the nuclear development programs of Iran and North Korea, none of these conflicts can be contained through the use of military power. They cannot be resolved through forceful means. If we have learned nothing else from the course of world affairs since Sept. 11, 2001, it should be this.

When military force or other forms of “hard power” are used to impose an outcome, it is ordinary citizens — people guilty of no crime — who pay the price. The grief and torment wrought by war fall on all sides, on friend and foe alike.

Whatever the justice of the cause in whose name it is wielded, the use of force inscribes bitterness in the hearts of the next generation and risks entrenching and perpetuating conflict. It is only by severing the intertwined links of hatred and vengeance that the underlying causes for further violence can be removed.

A new round of efforts to use dialogue to break through impasses would seem to be emerging, a very welcome development indeed. But mere talking does not guarantee understanding; the realities of dialogue are not nearly so simple. One or both sides may be ensnared in the logic of violence. The history of events may

have complicated matters to the point that the prospects for dialogue seem distant, if not out of reach.

But it is for just these reasons that dialogue is a choice requiring genuine courage and strength. Dialogue starts by clearly recognizing the positions and interests of the respective parties and then carefully identifying the obstacles to progress, patiently working to remove and resolve each of these. It is the ultimate constructive undertaking of the human spirit. And it is for just this reason that conflict resolution through dialogue — unlike military force whose essence is destruction — holds the promise of a genuine and lasting solution.

ElBaradei noted that globalization holds the hope that we can more easily realize that we are indeed one human family. “I sense that hope all over the world right now. I have traveled widely, and I have personally seen that people of every color, religion and race all have the same hopes, the same aspirations.”

From my own experience of having engaged in dialogue with many people from a wide range of political, religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I am equally convinced that when we speak frankly on the basis of our common humanity it is always possible to see our way to the next step forward.

International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War is an organization founded at the height of the Cold War to bring together medical doctors from the Eastern and Western blocs. The initial efforts, I have been told, were marked by incessant clashes between representatives of the two sides.

But as they continued to talk, both sides were able to bring back into focus their common commitment as physicians to the protection of human dignity and the attainment of peace. The warmth generated by earnest dialogue proved capable of melting the ice of confrontation, making possible solidarity and friendship across ideological differences.

A first step in any process of dialogue is to try to move beyond mutual recrimination and refocus on practical, forward-looking questions. Conflict can be recast as a set of shared problems, and the collaborative effort to resolve these can open the way to mutual learning, acceptance and respect. This can

transform the dynamic of the interaction and bring forth unforeseen possibilities.

Opening a process of dialogue is the first step toward dispelling the dark clouds of suspicion that are the consistent backdrop to war and conflict. In the interest of global peace, it is vital to avoid isolating any nation or people.

The distances between people need not act as barriers that wound and harm. Rather, these very differences among cultures and civilizations should be appreciated as creating richer value for all.

In recent years, there have been efforts to promote “dialogue among civilizations,” to use the wisdom born from humankind’s diverse cultural and religious traditions to grasp the prospects of our shared future. Professor Tu Weiming of Harvard University has been an important proponent of this endeavor. He affirms that the true significance of dialogue among civilizations is found in mutual learning, and warns that individuals and even civilizations that cease learning, taking the arrogant view that they only need to teach others, inevitably fall into decline.

Today we confront the unique opportunity to begin building a new civilization — one based on a consistent commitment to dialogue on all levels. The vital, vibrant currents of dialogue have the capacity to shake even the most stubborn allegiance to the use of force. Dialogue is not limited to the exchange of pleasantries, but includes the sharing of sharply differing perspectives. Courage and endurance are essential if we are to continue the painstaking work of loosening the knots of attachment that bind people to a particular point of view. The impact of this kind of humanistic diplomacy can move history in a new direction.

In a world of richly diverse cultures, we cannot afford a regression to shuttered isolationism. It is crucial to revive the spirit of dialogue and to unleash a creative search for peaceful coexistence.

To have faith in the promise of dialogue is to believe in the promise of humanity.