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Disarmament as a Process: Cooperation and security in the 21st century

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San José, Costa Rica

7-9 November 2009

Disarmament as a Process: Cooperation and security in the 21st century

There is unprecedented momentum in the drive towards a world without nuclear weapons. This past April, in an historic address delivered in Prague, US President Barack Obama set forth the goal of seeking the security of a world without nuclear weapons.ⁱ The previous autumn, the Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon laid out a Five Point Proposal to eliminate nuclear weapons.ⁱⁱ The heads of state of Russia, the UK, China, India and scores of others have also publicly aligned themselves with this goal.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet nuclear weapons remain because heads of state alone cannot abolish nuclear weapons through declaration.

Nukes, after all, are not just weapons. They are the most dangerous, burlesque symptom of humanity's failure to resolve our conflicts politically, diplomatically. Nuclear disarmament is not just about dismantling warheads and missiles. It is not an occurrence. It is a process. It is taking incremental steps towards security, with each step making us collectively safer. The process of disarmament builds confidence in the ability to resolve our conflicts *without* threatening planetary extinction. Moreover, the cooperation necessary to engage in this process equips us with the skills and tools we need to collectively tackle the other pressing challenges that fall upon us, the young people - the stewards of the 21st century.

Because in *our* world, global cooperation is needed to address all of the major threats to our security and survival: eliminating poverty, stopping pandemics, reversing climate change and breaking the overlapping cycles of deprivation, small arms trading, radical terrorism and drug trafficking. The cooperation that is required to meet these challenges will be impossible in a two-tiered world where the means of genocide are available to some, but denied to others.

Imagine if we allowed a handful of countries to use or threaten the plague as a weapon. Such discrimination is unimaginable, yet this is the crux of our current nuclear non-proliferation regime, where we allow five countries to have nuclear weapons, look the other way as three countries have them, and then threaten war against others for wanting the same weapon for itself. Genocide is an unacceptable objective for any weapon, for anyone to have.

The current regime governing the possession, use and threat to use nuclear weapons is comprised of a body of international treaties, international organizations, global physical infrastructure, hundreds of UN resolutions, domestic laws and other sources of norms and morés. At the heart of this network lies the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, of 1970. The NPT, to which nearly every country in the world is party, is a short and simple text, a basic bargain between those who have nuclear weapons and those who do not. Those without nukes promised never to acquire them in exchange for the right to peaceful nuclear energy and, more importantly, the promise by the Nuclear Weapons States to get rid of their nuclear arsenals "at an early date."

As useful for understanding as a short and simple treaty may be, the NPT needs some further elaboration. The United States' Declaration of Independence, another short and sweet text, states that "all men are created equal." But that wonderful document, too, needed further clarification- that "all men" included *w*omen, as well as those with non-white skin who didn't own property. It has taken several generations, scores of additional laws, and an ongoing process of clarification and interpretation, but the intent of the Declaration is increasingly realized.

Likewise, if we are to realize the intent of the NPT, further measures are needed. New mechanisms are being developed to deal with ambiguities or unforeseen consequences of the treaty. In one example, Article III requires non-nuclear weapons states to accept internationally-approved safeguards, or means to assure everybody that they are *not* developing nuclear weapons. In the 1980s it became clear that the safeguards specified in the treaty are not quite enough to ensure nonproliferation, so the international community developed further measures, called the Additional Protocol.

The NPT also allowed, under Article V, for countries to reap the benefits of "peaceful nuclear explosions," such as digging canals and increasing production of oil and gas fields. It turns out that the environmental and health damage caused by these so-called "peaceful explosions" far outweighed any potential convenience, and the term "peaceful nuclear explosion" is now an oxymoron. Thus, Article V required further elaboration and codification into law. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, or CTBT, outlaws all nuclear explosions, above or under ground, and is an integral part of our current network of laws constituting the global regime.

The disarmament obligations contained in Article VI of the treaty are similarly insufficient in the 21st century and also require additional measures. The Nuclear Weapons Convention, submitted to the United Nations by Costa Rica and Malaysia, is, as the Secretary-General of the UN called it, "a good point of departure" for fulfilling Article VI of the NPT. Secretary-General Ban included the Nuclear Weapons Convention as one of the elements of his Five Point Proposal, a broad, comprehensive, and forward-looking agenda that he put forth at a civil society conference at the UN co-sponsored by my organization, the Global Security Institute.

The SG's Five Point Proposal was not a roadmap, but rather a menu *a la carte* of steps that could be taken to advance nuclear disarmament. These are all well-known, broadly supported measures, such as negotiating a treaty to ban the production of fissile materials for weapons, getting the last few hold-out states to ratify the CTBT and bring that treaty into force, deeper, verifiable reductions of the two largest arsenals, possessed by the US and Russia. Nothing new, nothing radical. The importance of the SG's proposal, however, is that it is, like President Obama's Prague speech, within the framework of abolition, highlighting that these measures are just small steps down the road to a secure, nuclear weapons-free future.

So with a Secretary-General proffering proposals, the President of the US committed to abolition, dozens of op/eds by former defense secretaries and other cold war planners,

and with a half a century-old civil society movement behind them, what obstacles are preventing progress?

There are many, including the well-funded, expansive, powerful, deeply entrenched nuclear industrial complex. But I would argue that, more powerfully dangerous than the money behind the nuclear proponents is the sustained belief, on the part of lawmakers, the military and the people they represent, that nuclear weapons have strategic value.

Their logic goes something like this: the possession of nuclear weapons ensures no country in their right mind will attack you. It means that other countries will be more willing to do what you want them to do. It is a source of pride, a symbol of power, achievement, even masculine virility. When, in 1998, India and Pakistan tested their nuclear weapons, their people cheered. “We will no longer be eunuchs,” said a cheering Pakistani patriot in Islamabad. “Now we can play with the big boys,” said an Indian on the streets of New Delhi.^{iv}

These nuclear supporters are wrong. Nuclear weapons pose more of a problem than any problem they seek to solve. If you point nuclear weapons at somebody, you are ensuring that somebody is pointing them at you.

In the words of a former Cold Warrior, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara,^v to use nuclear weapons against a nuclear weapons state is suicide. To use them against a non-nuclear armed adversary is unethical. Against terrorists, they are useless entirely. In the words of Senator Alan Cranston, the founder of my organization, they are unworthy of civilization. They are an affront to humanity, to life and to God. Not only do nuclear weapons have no strategic value, but they are in stark contradiction to the values that we do hold, as young people of faith in the 21st century, of the reverence for life that God intended for all of us.

Yesterday’s leaders were so because they dominated others, through military might and industrial superiority. Tomorrow’s power players—including those in this room—will not rise through domination. Their power will flow from their efficacy in leading networks of cooperative action. The country that enriches uranium by itself will not be respected for its mastery of a 20th century technology. Respect and prestige will go to the country that persuades others to pool their enrichment capabilities into a new, international fuel cycle.

As young people of faith, you must find expression of your values in all that you do. Your universities could express these values by divesting from companies that are involved in the nuclear weapons industry. Your youth groups at church could issue statements to your representatives and to your local media in support of a world without nuclear weapons, and you should urge your church leaders to join you in this call.

It is time to sink or to swim. We are one of the first generations that has the power to decide if will be the last. Even a so-called “limited” nuclear exchange would result in catastrophic changes to the climate, decimate global food supplies and spark dozens if not hundreds of local conflicts over dwindling resources, each of which take on their own form and dynamics. Life on Earth, as we know it, would be irrevocably altered. Our parents and grandparents may have been, in their complicit acceptance of the nuclear arms race, willing to take this risk, but we are not. We are too dependent on each other. We are too networked, our futures too intertwined with each other’s.

The young leaders at this conference are learning the tools necessary to cooperate in our globalized world. These skills that you are building will be invaluable as we continue on into this scary and exciting new century. You are preparing for challenges that know no borders, that transcend cultures, and which hold all of us on the planet at risk. You are truly contributing to the advancement of civilization into an era of cooperation like none that has been required of us before. If nuclear weapons are the burlesque expression of our inability to cooperate, then the work that you are preparing for here is the antithesis of that, and a reflection of our best values.

I thank you all for contributing to a safer and saner planet for us all.

ⁱ President Obama’s Prague speech is at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/

ⁱⁱ Secretary-General Ban’s speech is at: <http://www.ewi.info/system/files/Keynote%20Address.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, speeches made at the Security Council Summit of heads of state, chaired by President Obama, available at: http://www.gsainstitute.org/gsi/newsletter/2009_14.html

^{iv} See the film, “War and Peace,” by Indian documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan: <http://www.patwardhan.com/films/warpeace.htm>

^v See “Apocalypse Now,” by Robert S. McNamara, published in the May 2005 edition of *Foreign Policy*: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2829