

Implementing the vision for a nuclear-weapon-free world: Time to close the nuclear umbrella

Background paper for the PNND Forum:

Advancing the UN Secretary-General's five point plan for nuclear disarmament.

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On United Nations Day (October 24) last year, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon released an exciting five-point plan for nuclear disarmament. The plan outlined practical approaches for implementing the renewed vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world being promoted by former high-level decision-makers of the United States (including George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn and William Perry) and other nuclear-weapon States (including former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former British Foreign Secretaries Margaret Beckett and Sir Malcolm Rifkind, and former British Generals Sir Hugh Beach and Lord David Ramsbotham).

Since then, this vision has been embraced by US President Obama, Russian President Medvedev, British Prime Minister Brown and French President Sarkozy. The US and Russia have revived negotiations on verifiable nuclear stockpile reductions. President Obama has announced his commitment to getting the nuclear-test-ban treaty ratified by the United States – a move which would consolidate the global norm against nuclear testing and help bring the treaty into force. The UN-established Conference on Disarmament, after a 12-year hiatus, has started negotiations on a treaty prohibiting nuclear-bomb making materials, as well as deliberations on other disarmament topics. And the UN Security Council has recently held a special session to ensure progress on building a secure world without nuclear weapons.

The success of these initial steps could pave the way for negotiations, in the not-too-distant future, on a treaty or package of agreements that would prohibit nuclear weapons globally and lead to their complete elimination. This route to nuclear abolition was outlined by the UN Secretary-General and is described more fully in the Model Nuclear Weapons Convention (nuclear disarmament treaty) which he circulated to all UN members for their consideration.

However, a major roadblock threatens to derail this process. This is the continued reliance by a number of US allies on extended nuclear deterrence – the so-called 'nuclear umbrella' - for their security.

NATO, for example, maintains a significant role for extended nuclear deterrence in its security doctrine. The current NATO Strategic Concept notes that “Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace.” In addition to an undertaking by the U.S. to use nuclear weapons in defence of NATO countries, a number of them (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey) continue to host US nuclear weapons on their territories along with arrangements for the possible use of these weapons by the host country in a conflict situation.

U.S. military alliances in North East Asia provide the possibility of the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States to protect Japan or South Korea from the threat of aggression by their nuclear –armed neighbours –North Korea, China and Russia. The North Korean nuclear test in May this year and their ongoing ballistic missile testing program have led to increased feelings of insecurity in the region and reinforced the political call to maintain nuclear deterrence in the security doctrines. There is a fear that should the US move too quickly towards nuclear disarmament, thus reducing its commitment and capacity to protect Japan and South Korea with nuclear weapons, then the political forces within Japan and South Korea advocating a domestic nuclear weapons program could gain the upper hand.

It is not widely known that the US nuclear umbrella also extends to the South-West corner of the Pacific. Following World War II, Australia and New Zealand, fearful of any aggression from Japan or from South-East Asian countries, entered in to the ANZUS military alliance with the US which led to US nuclear ‘protection.’ New Zealand rejected the nuclear umbrella when it prohibited nuclear weapons by legislation in 1987. However, Australia still accepts it.

During the Cold War, these extended nuclear deterrence arrangements were perceived by all governments involved as beneficial to their security despite the increased tension they generated . The US gained valuable allies and foreign military bases for its containment of Soviet communism. The allies received assurances that the US would assist in preventing or responding to any threat or actual attack from the Soviet Union, or any other power.

The end of the Cold War significantly altered the security environment – but not sufficiently to convince all the governments under the nuclear umbrella to abandon their reliance on nuclear weapons. During the latter part of the 20th Century there remained a lack of confidence in non-nuclear security mechanisms.

However, in the last decade the security environment has changed in a number of ways. There is no longer any need to rely on nuclear weapons for meeting security needs. In fact, reliance on nuclear weapons is now widely understood as a part of the problem perpetuating security threats, rather than part of the solution. The reasons for this are numerous.

Firstly, the key security issues in the 21st Century are non-military threats which require international collaborative and non-military responses. These security threats include climate change, poverty, spread of diseases, resource depletion and financial crises. The provocative approach of nuclear deterrence prevents rather than assists the global collaboration required to meet these security issues.

Secondly, the military threats that continue to exist can be better met by non-nuclear means. Nuclear weapons have no role in civil wars. Nor can nuclear weapons deter terrorists. International aggression is better prevented and responded to by collective action under United Nations authorization than by the treat or use of nuclear weapons. And the threat of a nuclear attack by a rogue state can also be addressed by either UN collective response, or if necessary by conventional military force.

Thirdly, regional security can be better met by security mechanisms and mutually-beneficial economic and trade relationships rather than nuclear deterrence. International security mechanisms include the United Nations Security Council, International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court and various arms control and disarmament treaties. Regional security mechanisms in Europe include the European Union, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, and the NATO partnership program.

Fourthly, the prohibition of nuclear weapons in regions assists in regional security and confidence-building. Many regions in which nuclear weapons used to play a major role are now nuclear-weapon-free zones (Latin America, Africa, South-East Asia, the Pacific and Central Asia). The countries in these zones agree not to acquire or host nuclear weapons on their territories in exchange for assurances by the nuclear weapon States that nuclear weapons would not be used against them. In addition to the security benefits from ridding the regions of the threat of nuclear-weapons-use, the zones have provided forums for the countries involved to enhance dialogue and to work on additional cooperative security proposals.

This type of security arrangement could work well in North East Asia. North Korea might be more willing to give up its nuclear weapons under a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty as it would provide a binding assurance to North Korea that they would not be attacked with nuclear weapons – currently a key concern of North Korea. Japan and South Korea might be willing to forgo extended nuclear deterrence if they received binding assurances that they would not face the threat of nuclear attack by **any** of their neighbours – including North Korea, China and Russia.

There are also proposals for nuclear weapon free zones in the Middle East, Central Europe and the Arctic – all of which would enhance security and diminish - or eliminate - the role of nuclear weapons in those regions. The Middle East proposal provides a possibility to reign in Iran – a supporter of the proposal – if it included a requirement to accept the IAEA additional safeguards as is included in the Central Asian zone, or if it included a prohibition on uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing activities as proposed by Hans Blix and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.

Finally, the development of verification technology and international legal mechanisms (including the greater application of individual responsibility for violations of international law) has made it now possible to adequately verify and ensure compliance with nuclear disarmament agreements. This opens the door to negotiating agreements to further constrain nuclear weapons and to lead to their elimination. Extended nuclear deterrence is not necessary, and plays no useful role, in this process.

Thus, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which represents 150 democratic governments around the world including some of the NWS, adopted a resolution in April 2009 supporting the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones and calling on parliamentarians and parliaments to actively support the UN Secretary-General's five-point plan for a nuclear-weapons-free world. Parliaments and parliamentarians working in conjunction with governments and civil society can ensure its success.