October 24, 2011

Creating the Conditions for a

World without Nuclear Weapons

by

James Goodby

Hoover Institution

I.

Winston Churchill’s last great speech in the House of Commons in 1955 is famous for his prophesy that “safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation.” That memorable phrase captured exactly how Churchill understood nuclear deterrence. It was, he said, “the certain power to inflict swift, inescapable, and crushing retaliation.” This was the bedrock of American containment policy during the Cold War.

Usually forgotten is that nuclear deterrence was not a feature of international relations that Churchill wanted to last forever. In that last speech he said that he hoped for political change among nations so that nuclear deterrence would no longer be needed. The nuclear shadow over the earth should be removed as soon as conditions permitted so that “tormented generations [could] march forth serene and triumphant from the hideous epoch in which we have to dwell.” Ronald Reagan felt much the same way. He said so many times, publicly and privately.

By the early 1990s the Cold War had ended and the Soviet Union, whose nuclear weapons were the subject of Churchill’s remarks about retaliation, had ceased to exist. Very likely this was even more political change than Churchill privately imagined in 1955. Yet two more decades have gone by since the end of the Cold War and nuclear deterrence still has an almost mystical hold on many opinion-shapers around the world. The idea shapes force structures and dominates the thinking of security communities nearly everywhere. Three years ago today, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that “the doctrine of nuclear deterrence has proven to be contagious. This has made non-proliferation more difficult which in turn raises new risks that nuclear weapons will be used.” So true! “Thinking about the unthinkable” was a phrase popularized in the early stages of the Cold War by the American nuclear strategist Herman Kahn to characterize his work in analyzing nuclear war. The phrase now can be applied to thinking about eliminating nuclear weapons. It is unthinkable to many of the best and the brightest, bearing out what the Secretary General said. A further complication is that “deterrence” has been misinterpreted in recent years. It has come to be linked with nuclear weapons. It would be a huge mistake to perpetuate that misleading idea. Deterrence, through the threat of forceful actions, is an ancient and enduring concept, and “nuclear” is not an essential part of it.

The strategic context in which all nations must pursue their interests is growing more complex, abstract, and multipolar. The “unipolar moment” is over, if it ever existed, and limitations on the direct application of force are powerful. Tools of statecraft requiring force, coercion, and threat will be effective, credible and useful for a much smaller proportion of the dangers we face than has been the case in the past.

Other tools of statecraft should assume more of the burden of preventing unwelcome events. “Preventive diplomacy” is another category of actions aimed at preventing undesirable events. As defined in a 1992 report of the then UN Secretary General:

Preventive diplomacy is action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.

This should clearly be the first line of defense and is increasingly becoming so.

II.

Fortunately, many leaders around the world share Churchill’s and Reagan’s judgment that a day might come and should come when nuclear deterrence will no longer be needed. Among them are former Secretaries of State George Shultz, and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sam Nunn. These men have written several articles supporting the vision of moving toward zero nuclear weapons. They see the world at a tipping point. They have called for broadening the international dialogue on nuclear weapons and for “turning the goal of a world without nuclear weapons into a practical enterprise among nations.” They have been joined in these sentiments by leaders and citizens around the world.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the Cold War is one we rarely think of: nuclear weapons were never used in war after 1945. Can we perpetuate that legacy indefinitely into the future? Twenty years into the Cold War, we had a whole series of understandings with the Soviet Union about the dangers of nuclear war and how to avoid it. The world has not made that much progress twenty years into the “Post-Cold War” period. Nuclear restraint regimes are just about where they were at the end of the Cold War.

The time is past when just two nations could dominate global discussion about nuclear weapons. The Permanent-Five members of the UN Security Council recognized that in a joint statement in Paris on July 1, 2011. They invited other nations to join them in cutting off production of fissile material for use in weapons and they shared with each other their experiences with verification.

Although the United States and Russia have led the way towards zero nuclear weapons, most recently in the New START Treaty that entered into force on February 5, 2011, they need to do more to encourage progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons. But they should not be alone in this. Other nations that are, or have the potential to soon become possessors of nuclear weapons should join in. The effort to roll back nuclear dangers must become a true joint enterprise, or it will not succeed.

III.

Treaties typically take a long time to conclude and they depend on internal political conditions, among other things. Treaties are a necessary part of building an international nuclear restraint regime but we should not rely on this method exclusively. Pending the negotiation of treaties, either between the United States and Russia or in multilateral forums like the Conference on Disarmament, there are a number of steps that could be taken unilaterally or in *concert* with others that would create better conditions for achieving a world without nuclear weapons. Here is an illustrative list:

* A declaration that fissile materials removed from nuclear weapons being eliminated will not be used to manufacture new nuclear weapons; that no newly produced fissile materials will be used in nuclear weapons; that fissile material from or within civil nuclear programs will not be used to manufacture nuclear weapons.
* Acceptance by nuclear weapons states of transparency measures at all nuclear test sites.
* Extending the time available for decisions about launching nuclear weapons by separating warheads from ballistic missiles, particularly those whose basing modes encourage “launch on warning” policies.
* Voluntary acceptance on a trial basis of an updated Open Skies mechanism both in countries where the Open Skies Treaty is now in force and in areas where its utility could contribute to confidence building.
* Intensifying work within the UN framework on verification and compliance methods, using existing international organizations and institutions augmented by outside experts.
* Declarations of national fissile materials holdings in accordance with an agreed standard format.
* Establishing regional forums to promote security and cooperation.

At some point, a more comprehensive international effort will be required to consolidate and institutionalize a coalition of nations that fully accept the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and are ready to take immediate steps to create the conditions for that goal. A “facilitator” might be designated to help organize a meeting that would formally launch this effort. Nations that sincerely are dedicated to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons should be willing to make a tangible contribution to achieving that goal, for example, in the form of unilateral actions that would demonstrate a measure of transparency or of self-restraint in the nuclear arena. Nations might be invited to bring such “house gifts” to the conference just as they did to the April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. A work plan could be devised at such a meeting that could be applied nationally, regionally, and globally.

IV.

A focus on nuclear issues alone can only go so far in creating conditions for a world without nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons do not exist in a vacuum and progress towards zero will require other agreements, some of them relating to international governance.

One of the more important ancillary agreements will deal with non-nuclear forces. Imbalances in conventional forces create tensions and can lead to pressures for nuclear offsets. The only way to deal with that problem is through regional negotiations of the type that took place in Europe in the 1980s and 90s. These led to a treaty that limited conventional force deployments. But importantly, the talks also led to a series of confidence building measures that were considered politically, but not legally binding. They included:

* + Exchange of information on organization, manpower, and weapons/equipment, including plans for deployments of weapons/equipment;
  + Exchange of information on defense planning, including defense policy and doctrine and force plans;
  + Consultation and cooperation as regards unusual military activities and hazardous incidents;
  + Voluntary hosting of military visits;
  + Military-to-military contacts;
  + Joint military exercises and training to work on tasks of mutual interest;
  + Prior notification and observation of certain military activities, including an annual calendar of such activities;
  + Constraints on size and frequency of exercises and prohibition of any large unannounced exercises;
  + Inspections and evaluations;
  + Communications networks;
  + Annual implementation assessment meetings.

For some years into the future in regions of the world outside of Europe, confidence building measures like these would represent an extraordinary advance. Ultimately, of course, a legally binding treaty with an array of rigorous verification measures would be required to assure that conventional force limitations were properly observed.

V.

The preceding discussion underscores my thesis that a convention to eliminate nuclear weapons requires that a large number of building blocks should already be in place. These include a more realistic view of deterrence in today’s world, an infrastructure of nuclear agreements, successful regional conflict resolution, ancillary agreements in non-nuclear areas, and changes in international governance. Difficult, yes, but the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons has the advantage of focusing attention on really significant issues. We should think of these as the world’s urgent security agenda.

Obviously, at some point in the process of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons a treaty or convention would be necessary to codify the definition of what “zero” really means and how to get there. The convention would have to stipulate whether components of nuclear warheads would be permitted and which activities relating to the maintenance of a nuclear weapons infrastructure were to be banned or constrained. It would contain provisions for dealing with delivery systems that could be used either for conventional or nuclear warheads. And, of course, the treaty would have to specify the monitoring requirements necessary to verify the obligations of the treaty. It would deal extensively with monitoring the regime that should exist after reaching zero.

When would be the right time to draft such a treaty? There is no absolute answer, I think, but the latest moment, and perhaps even the best moment, would come when the decisions were made by the nations involved to eliminate the last stocks of deployed or non-deployed warheads. As discussed in a book written by Dr. Sidney Drell and myself (A World Without Nuclear Weapons: End-State Issues. Hoover Press 2009), there would probably be a “pause” in the process of eliminating nuclear weapons when something like 50-100 warheads or less were all that was left to the nuclear weapons states of the Nonproliferation Treaty. By that time all states that possessed nuclear weapons should have become members of the NPT, or its equivalent, one way or another. That would be only one of the several conditions that nations would want to see in place before committing to the final elimination of all nuclear weapons everywhere. Up until that time, nations would be involved in a series of negotiations leading to treaties that led, pragmatically and incrementally, to that goal. A convention that codifies the final steps in the process, including post-zero obligations, is not necessary at the outset. A firm commitment to the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, however, is essential early on and serious efforts should be made to enlist every nation in that quest.