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ARTICLE

Our Greatest Threat

The Coming Nuclear Crisis

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When the first atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it could hardly have been imagined that nearly sixty years later 34,145 nuclear weapons would be in existence. In a long career as a parliamentarian, diplomat, and educator, I have come to the conclusion that the abolition of nuclear weapons is the indispensable condition for peace in the twenty-first century. Yet progress toward that goal has been halted.

In May a conference of the 188 signatory nations to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) will be held in New York City to put a spotlight on this problem. A huge march is planned for May 1. Advocates of nonproliferation will once again try to draw attention to the immorality and illegality of such weapons. But will the eight nations that possess nuclear weapons—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, and Israel—actually take steps toward eliminating their arsenals?

The prognosis is not good. The preparatory meetings for the May conference ended in failure, with nonnuclear nations objecting to the intransigence of the nuclear-weapons states, noting how a world of nuclear haves and have-nots is becoming a permanent feature of the global landscape. The United States insists that the problem is not with those who possess nuclear weapons, but with states, such as Iran and other nations, trying to acquire them. To which Brazil responded: "One cannot worship at the altar of nuclear weapons and raise heresy charges against those who want to join the sect." Faced with this stalemate, the NPT is eroding, and an expansion of the number of states with nuclear weapons, a fear which produced the NPT in 1970, is looming once more.

Any discussion of the elimination of nuclear weapons inevitably raises questions of the feasibility of such action. How is an architecture of security to be built without nuclear weapons? How can states be prevented from cheating and how can such weapons be kept out of the hands of terrorists? A wide range of military, scientific, and diplomatic experts, notably the Canberra Commission established in 1996, have tried to provide answers to these urgent questions.

First, the case for a nuclear weapons-free world is based on the commonsensical claim that the destructiveness of these weapons is so great they have no military utility against a comparably equipped opponent. Historically, nuclear weapons have been used as a deterrent. But even as a deterrent they pose too great a risk. Few doubt that the longer weapons are maintained, the greater the risk of use, or that possession by some states causes other nations to acquire them, reducing the security of all.

Second, the elimination of such weapons will not be possible without a new architecture of security based on an adequate verification system. The components of a reliable verification system are coming into place, beginning with the inspection system maintained by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the monitoring system maintained by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, which has the capacity to detect the most minute nuclear test explosions. On-site inspections of suspect materials will have to be part of the disarmament process (the United States and Russia already do this in the case of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987).

"Trust but verify," President Ronald Reagan famously said. Verification is essential, but the demand for a perfect verification regime is little more than an excuse for not seeking a reduction in nuclear weapons. Perfect security is not possible. Inevitably, some risk will have to be accepted if the wider benefits of a nuclear weapon-free world are to be realized. Not the elimination of risk but an evaluation of comparative risks is the rational approach to take. It is much more dangerous for the world to stay on its present path. Compared to the risks inherent in a world bristling with nuclear weapons, the risks associated with whatever threat a cheating state could assemble before it was exposed are far more acceptable.

No one is advocating unilateral disarmament; that would be an unthinkable policy for the United States. Rather it is in the interests of the United States—and all other nations—to heed the directive of the International Court of Justice and pursue comprehensive negotiations leading to the gradual elimination of nuclear weapons. Such a program would take many years to implement. Many confidence-building measures would be needed. How long disarmament takes is not the most important thing; what is critical is that the major states show the rest of the world they are heading in that direction. Otherwise, the NPT, which entails a legal obligation to pursue negotiations in good faith, will become a mockery. This is the nub of the present dilemma.

In 1995, on its twenty-fifth anniversary, the NPT (virtually every country in the world except India, Pakistan, and Israel has signed the treaty) was indefinitely extended. In agreeing to that extension, the nuclear powers made three promises: a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty would be achieved; negotiations to ban the production of fissile material would be concluded; "systematic and progressive efforts globally" to eliminate nuclear weapons would be made. None of these promises has been kept.

When the NPT was reviewed in 2000, all the states were again able to find common ground and, by consensus, made an "unequivocal" commitment to eliminating nuclear weapons through a program of "Thirteen Practical Steps." Subsequently, the nuclear powers faltered again and bitterness set in.

The United States is in the forefront of the current stalemate. Its commitment to the consensus of 2000 was made under the Clinton administration. When President George W. Bush was elected, the United States position regressed: the ABM Treaty was abandoned and the administration turned its back on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), two of the thirteen steps agreed to in 2000. Moreover, in 2001 the administration conducted a nuclear posture review, which made clear that nuclear weapons remain a cornerstone of U.S. national-security policy. The review outlines expansive plans to revitalize U.S. nuclear forces, and all the elements that support them.

The Bush administration has also speculated about specific scenarios where the use of nuclear weapons may be justified: an Arab-Israeli conflict, a conflict with China over Taiwan, a North Korean attack on South Korea, and an attack on Israel by Iraq or another neighbor. This new policy, in contradiction of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, means that for the first time the United States will threaten the use of nuclear weapons against countries

that do not themselves possess such weapons. Under President Bush, the United States is actually widening the role of nuclear weapons in defense policy far beyond deterrence. The administration is promulgating a policy that would retain a stockpile of active and reserve nuclear weapons and weapons components for at least the next fifty years.

Among the current nuclear powers, the U.S. position is particularly aggressive, but it is by no means alone in its determination to hold onto nuclear weapons or to expand their strategic role in military policy. On November 17, 2004, President Vladimir Putin of Russia confirmed that his country is "carrying out research and missile tests of state-of-the-art nuclear missile systems" and that Russia would "continue to build up firmly and insistently our armed forces, including the nuclear component." The United Kingdom, France, and China are all busy modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Similarly, NATO adheres to its stated policies that such weapons are "essential."

More and more states now treat nuclear weapons as part of a war-fighting strategy, not strictly as a deterrent. Nuclear weapons have become embedded in nations' military doctrines. This shift in the rationale for keeping nuclear weapons is what characterizes our deepening crisis.

Another aspect of this crisis is the specter of nuclear terrorism. "Nothing could be simpler," was the assessment of the eminent physicist Frank von Hippel, on the capacity of terrorists to obtain highly enriched uranium and improvise an explosive device with power equal to the Hiroshima bomb. If the 9/11 terrorists had used a nuclear bomb, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers would have perished. The International Atomic Energy Agency reports that at least forty countries have the capability to produce nuclear weapons, and criticizes the failure of export control systems to prevent an extensive illicit market in nuclear items. The disappearance, by theft or otherwise, of nuclear materials from Russia is well established. The threat of nuclear terrorism is on the mind of every official I know. Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the IAEA, says the margin of security today is "thin and worrisome."

In 2004, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1540, requiring all states to take measures to prevent nonstate actors from acquiring or developing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Similarly, the Proliferation Security Initiative of the United States seeks to interdict on the high seas the transfer of sensitive nuclear materials. And the G8 countries have allocated \$20 billion over ten years to eliminate some stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in Russia.

These steps are by no means sufficient. The fact remains that the proliferation of nuclear weapons cannot be stopped as long as the most powerful nations in the world maintain that nuclear weapons are essential for their own security.

Of course, Iran and any other hostile state must be stopped from acquiring such weapons, and inspection and verification processes must be stepped up with more funding and personnel. But a one-dimensional approach that attempts to stop proliferation while ignoring meaningful disarmament will never work.

The New Agenda Coalition, a group of states (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, and Sweden) pressing the nuclear-weapons states to fulfill their disarmament obligations, offers some hope. The coalition has been gathering political momentum. A recent UN resolution proposed by the group was supported by eight NATO states, including Germany and Canada. That resolution, calling on the nuclear powers to cease activities leading to "a new nuclear arms race," identifies priorities for action: universal adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the early implementation of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; reduction of nonstrategic nuclear weapons and ending development of new types of weapons; negotiation of an effectively verifiable fissile-material treaty; establishment of a subsidiary body to deal with nuclear disarmament at the Conference on Disarmament; and compliance with principles of transparency and verification.

Even though this resolution was mild compared to the regular demands of groups such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France voted against it. China voted for the resolution and Russia abstained.

Can the NPT be saved? Will civil society groups, whose protests have been rather mild compared to the vigorous activities of the 1980s, now start clamoring for government action? Will those who maintain that nuclear weapons are deeply immoral and a blot on God's creation now be heard?

These are questions posed by the present crisis. Another key question is how religious leaders will react to the realization that nuclear weapons are apparently-here to stay.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II sent a message to the Second Special Session on Disarmament:

In current conditions, "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with the minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

In short, deterrence as a permanent policy is not morally acceptable. The American bishops' 1983 Pastoral Letter on War and Peace took up this theme. It argued for a strong "no" to nuclear war, declaring that a nuclear response to a conventional attack is "morally unjustifiable." Moreover, the bishops expressed skepticism that any nuclear war could avoid the massive killing of civilians. Only a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence" is possible. The nuclear weapons states have ignored the bishops' admonitions as well as those of many other religious groups.

A well-considered moral argument must be heard once again that the circle of fear perpetuated by those with a vested interest in maintaining nuclear weapons is a trap from which humanity must escape. The alternative does not bear thinking about.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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