

Reasons Why Nuclear Disarmament Has Not Been Achieved

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My assignment at this conference is to discuss “Reasons Why Nuclear Disarmament Has Not Been Achieved.” While the premise is undoubtedly true, to start with such a negative perspective risks plunging the conference into such despair that you all might want to pack up and go home. Actually, my hope that nuclear disarmament can be achieved -- though not at the present moment -- is based on my assessment of the curve of history. To approach this subject, we must cultivate both confidence and patience.

A global speaking tour last year convinced me that the world is moving into a new stage in the long quest to eliminate nuclear weapons. Weakened government ideology in support of nuclear weapons is now colliding with chronic deficits and other economic realities that make them unaffordable. Governments around the world today are relying on obfuscation to make their case for nuclear retention. The ideology that

drove the escalation of nuclear weapons in the Cold War is long gone, younger officials are coming into status positions, and pragmatists are starting to determine how to maintain security without spending the \$100 billion a year now devoured by the nuclear weapons industry for weapons whose use has been ruled out on military, political and moral grounds.

This shift in thinking doubtless contributed to the unprecedented Summit of the UN Security Council in 2009, which unanimously resolved “to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons, in accordance with the goals of the [NPT], in a way that promotes international stability, and based on the principle of undiminished security for all.” For its part, the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty reaffirmed the “unequivocal undertaking” of the nuclear weapons states to the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the 2010 consensus final document expressed “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, and reaffirms the need for all states at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law.” These official statements at least give nuclear abolitionists a strong base to stand on and show us that history is slowly moving in our direction.

However, despite their protestations, the nuclear weapons states maintain nuclear weapons in a central role in their security policies and are modernizing their arsenals with planning horizons of several decades. Thus we come face-to-face with the question: why is nuclear disarmament not occurring?

I believe there are five central reasons, some with subsets, which nuclear abolitionists must deal with in order to make progress. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but it suggests what we must focus on.

1. Duplicity of the nuclear weapons states and NATO.
2. Timidity of the non-nuclear weapons states.
3. Irresponsible media.
4. Weary and confused public opinion
5. Lack of religious, academic and business leadership.

1. Duplicity of the nuclear weapons states and NATO. “Pride of place,” if one could put it that way, belongs to the five permanent members of the Security Council, the original members of the nuclear club. From the moment of the Trinity flash in the skies of New Mexico, the United States, Russia (Soviet Union), the United Kingdom, France and China engaged, in progressive time periods, in the development of their nuclear arsenals. At the peak of the Cold War, in the early 1980s, some 65,000 nuclear weapons existed, about 95 percent of them in the hands of the two superpowers of the day. Now the stocks have diminished, with about 19,500 still in existence. India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea have joined the club and the P5 are determined that Iran will not.

Even though calls for nuclear disarmament escalated through the years, the nuclear weapons states have consistently dodged any real efforts for nuclear disarmament. Those who negotiated the NPT in the late 1960s gave themselves a massive loophole in the famous Article VI, which enjoins states to enter into good faith negotiations for nuclear disarmament by

joining this obligation to a similar one for general and complete disarmament. The International Court of Justice in later years ruled that nuclear disarmament is a singular obligation, but also left a loophole in not ruling out the use of a nuclear weapon for “extreme” defence. The US and Russia have engaged in bilateral rounds of reductions, but the trumpeting of lower numbers has masked their continued modernization programs. There are, thankfully, fewer nuclear weapons now, but their explosive power (some 2,000 strategic weapons are kept on constant alert) is still horrendous.

The UK, France and China say they will not engage in multilateral negotiations for nuclear disarmament until the two major powers have reduced their stocks to much lower levels than at present. But US-Russia bilateral negotiations for deeper cuts are stalled over such issues as the US’s proposed missile defence system, the militarization of space, and the US intention to militarily dominate air, land, sea, space and cyberwarfare. Nuclear disarmament is inevitably caught up in geopolitical tensions.

The strategy of nuclear deterrence remains firmly rooted in the military doctrines of the nuclear states. All of them say that as long as nuclear weapons exist, they will have to keep theirs. The voracious military-industrial complex, making ever increasing amounts of money through the modernization programs, feeds this insidious thinking.

Duplicitous standards have deeply infected NATO, which continues to claim that the possession of nuclear weapons provides the “supreme guarantee” of the security of its 26 member states. At one and the same time, the NATO states reaffirm their commitment to the NPT and their NATO dependence on nuclear weapons. It is incoherent. The US, the UK and

France, the three Western nuclear powers, drive NATO and have made it the world's biggest nuclear-armed alliance. The continued deployment of US tactical nuclear bombs on the soil of Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey, though resisted by growing numbers of people in those countries, is a standing provocation to Russia, which is consequently disinclined to lower its own huge numbers of tactical nuclear weapons. Russia will not give up its nuclear weapons while it is virtually surrounded by an expanding NATO.

Much of the discussion of nuclear weapons comes down, in the end, to power. The right wing of the US cannot abide the thought of the US diminishing its power through nuclear disarmament. Russia's principal claim to world status is its nuclear weapons. The UK and France fear the loss of their respective seats on the Security Council. China, ever cautious, would like to move toward a global ban, but will not lead. The NPT Review Conferences come and go. The years pass. The hypocrisy of the nuclear weapons states goes on, finding one excuse and loophole after another to avoid the one thing that would bring sanity to international relations: comprehensive negotiations for a global legal ban to provide a system of mutual, assured and verifiable nuclear disarmament.

2. Temerity of the non-nuclear weapons states. In 1984, the leaders of six non-nuclear states (Argentina, Greece, India, Mexico, Sweden and Tanzania), in what became known as the Six-Nation Initiative, launched a diplomatic campaign to press Washington and Moscow toward nuclear disarmament. The personal involvement of such luminaries as Olof Palme of Sweden, Miguel del la Madrid of Mexico, and Indira Gandhi of India caught the attention of the world media. The stepped-up nuclear

disarmament negotiations of the late 1980s – including the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit in Reykjavik of 1986, at which the American and Russian leaders very nearly agreed to abolish all nuclear weapons, but instead listened to the paranoid opinions of their advisers – can be traced back to the Six-Nation Initiative. Mikhail Gorbachev referred to the urgings of the Initiative when he extended the test moratorium of the Soviet Union.

The Middle Powers Initiative, which for 14 years has convened consultations of some 30 key states in a form of Track Two diplomacy, is an offspring of the Six-Nation Initiative. The New Agenda Coalition (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa) greatly influenced the positive outcome of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. There is no doubt that the leaders of key middle power countries do have an impact on the policies of the major states. In fact, they have a duty to express themselves. The 2010 NPT Review Conference affirmed “all states need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons.”

The steam, however, has gone out of both the protests and the creativity of the non-nuclear nations. One still hears the occasional fiery speech, usually from a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, but the Western-oriented nations in latter years have become virtually mute on nuclear disarmament issues. They appear content to issue denunciations of Iran and North Korea, but remain silent on the major powers’ retention of nuclear deterrence with its consequent modernization programs. They have let the UN Secretary-General’s Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament fall flat, and not one of the countries usually regarded as non-nuclear leaders has been willing to call a government conference to start the ball rolling on

preparations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

The tepidity of the important middle power countries can be traced to a combination of fear of upsetting the P5's present dance around transparency issues, reluctance to take the spotlight off Iran, the pressures in dealing with other issues, and a lack of public and parliamentary demand that key governments take action.

3. Irresponsible media. How can one explain the dearth of attention in the mainline media to the paramount issue of global security in our lifetime? It is as if the editors of the important print and TV outlets have collectively decided that nuclear weapons are "old news." The world has moved on after the Cold War. Now the focus is on keeping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and doing something about the ragged efforts of North Korea to become a nuclear power. Hardly ever does one read or see reports that the core of the nuclear weapons problem is the continued existence of a two-class world in which the powerful states have retained their alleged right to possess nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by another state. The media does report the US-Russian reductions, but hardly ever links them to the continued modernization programs that make a mockery of the "nuclear disarmament steps."

The nuclear weapons states have so perfected the art of lying that they have turned the doctrine of nuclear deterrence into gospel. A compliant mainstream media, with fewer and fewer journalists willing to expose the falsity of the nuclear weapons defence, or even willing to counter a corporate mentality that sees anti-nuclear protesters as marginal malingerers, gives support to the lagging establishment thinking. The lobbyists for the arms industry now do more to set the tone of public opinion than the best of

the media commentators, even when those commentators turn their attention from trivial pursuits to world-wide trends. The maintenance of nuclear weapons in the name of security is a sham foisted on a public confused about how to find security in a globalized world.

In dealing with information outlets, we must, of course, recognize the alternative media and the many websites containing full and valuable treatment of nuclear weapons issues. But this “specialist” information does not make it onto the agendas of the talk shows, whose horizons are limited by what is deemed common knowledge. In the past couple of months, two “newsworthy” reports, “Assuring Destruction Forever,” and “Nuclear Famine: A Billion People at Risk,” were published by reputable organizations, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (both Nobel Peace Prize winners). These reports provide startling information about the modernization programs of the nuclear powers and how even a limited nuclear war between India and Pakistan would cause significant climate disruption and lead to turmoil in agricultural markets, further reducing accessible food. I have looked in vain for reports of these findings in the mainline media.

4. Weary and confused public opinion. Nuclear abolitionists are fond of saying: “The public is on our side.” Indeed, important polls have generally shown that a heavy majority of public opinion supports the idea of a legal ban on nuclear weapons. When asked the question directly, most people favour the elimination of nuclear weapons. That, of course, is a better situation than we would find ourselves in if most people wanted the retention of nuclear weapons. But, for the most part, public opinion is so

passive as to rarely register on any list of public concerns.

With the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons went out of people's minds. A bright university student told me recently, "I don't even think about the fact that I don't think about nuclear weapons." A nuclear abolitionist who turned 30 said his friends at the birthday party all expressed amazement that he would spend so much time on an issue they deemed passé. Ask yourself: does even your own circle of friends have any real understanding of nuclear weapons dangers today?

The public has become oblivious to the issue. Thus there is little if any pressure put on governments to take concrete steps to end the danger. The issue is almost never mentioned in election campaigns, and the average elected politician, those we normally consider informed on current events, has a kindergarten-level of understanding of the role nuclear weapons play in preventing the development of the conditions for peace. Those parliamentarians and even many civil society advocates who do get into nuclear weapons issues often succumb to what is considered the higher level of knowledge of the officials and technocrats who treat the subject as a numbers game instead of an expression of our deepest morality as human beings. The public is still intimidated by the "experts."

Disarmament education, started valiantly by the UN in the 1980s, has fallen by the wayside. Defence studies now grab the lion's share of public funds. We are turning out university students who regard nuclear weapons as just part of the "furniture" of life. There is a little nuclear abolition activity on the campuses, thanks to the Global Zero movement, but the paucity of student activism pales compared with the campus advocacy of the 1980s.

Civil society movements contain highly knowledgeable and courageous individuals, and we should be grateful for this. That so much has been done by so few reflects the determination of a core group in our society. But that core group has not yet become a critical mass moving the levers of power.

5. Lack of religious, academic and business leadership. Certain elements of society, by definition, possess the responsibility of leadership. Three of the most influential, religious, academic and business are all failing miserably in their obligation to foster public policies that build true human security. If I am wrong in this charge, then show me the evidence that any group of religious, academic or business leaders has stood up and affirmed in a coherent and studious manner that the continued possession and threat to use nuclear weapons contravenes every aspect of morality, intellectual discernment and economic stability.

It would be astounding if these three principal leadership groups approached the subject collectively, thus magnifying their impact on the governmental processes, but they do not assert themselves even within their individual disciplines. Of course, there are some religious leaders, some academics, some businessmen who have been heard from, but there has been no major, sustained effort to communicate out of their professional wisdom views that address the continuation of life on God's planet, uninterrupted by the human catastrophe that nuclear weapons portend. They appear to be more concerned with the preservation of their own theologies, their own academic freedom, and their own profits than with ensuring the harmonious and sustainable globalization that modern technology has brought us.

I expressed at the beginning a fear that my analysis of the reasons we have not achieved nuclear disarmament might lead to despair. I intend simply to be realistic, and I hope my observations will not produce despondency. Despite the obstacles I have named, support for nuclear disarmament is growing,

More than three-quarters of the countries of the world have voted for a United Nations resolution calling for the commencement of negotiations leading to the conclusion of a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Support comes from across the geo-political spectrum, including from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Europe, and includes support from some of the countries possessing nuclear weapons, including China, India, Pakistan and North Korea. In fact, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons has noted that nations supporting a ban make up 81 percent of the world's population. More support is coming from such important groups as the Inter-Action Council – 20 former Heads of State from key countries, including the United States, Canada, Norway, Germany, Japan and Mexico; and the December 2011 Summit of Leaders of Latin American and Caribbean States.

It will take a combination of enlightened governments, more knowledgeable parliamentarians, and the steady development of civil society activists to build a world agenda for peace, starting with the elimination of nuclear weapons, that not even the recalcitrant elements of the military-industrial complex can counter. Nuclear disarmament is a social movement, and social movements when they mature become unstoppable. The end of slavery, colonialism and apartheid are all examples of social movements

that, at first, were ignored by establishment thinking, then vigorously opposed before at last becoming a basis for a new social order.

The worst thing that anti-nuclear weapons campaigners could do at this moment would be to lose heart that the forces against nuclear disarmament are too powerful to overcome, that the nuclear mountain is too big to climb. The nuclear disarmament movement must maintain confidence that it is on the right side of history. The world at least is moving closer to the construction of a treaty that would ban all nuclear weapons. Even if another generation is required to complete this work, what counts today is that measurable and irreversible progress to this goal be achieved.