

The Nuclear Powers and Disarmament Prospects and Possibilities¹

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The immediate results of the end of the Second World War were changes in national security strategies based on the dramatic impact of the invention of nuclear weapons and their employment in the final stages of that war. In the ensuing decades, these changes affected most seriously the relationship between the United States and the then Soviet Union. These principal antagonists in the Nuclear Age and the Cold War which prevailed throughout most of the rest of the 20th Century resisted the option to go to war to settle their differences. In my view, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons in the hands of the United States and the Russian Federation has been the principal factor in maintaining peace among the great powers.

This morning I would like to examine the current state of affairs with regard to the two nuclear superpowers and the prospects and possibilities for future efforts to mitigate the dangers created by nuclear arsenals with the ultimate goal of removing them from the international political calculus. I will do this in four areas:

- First, technical aspects: current safety and security responsibilities of the two states.
- Second, political aspects: mutual work to reduce tensions and build confidence.
- Third, moral issues and external threats to nuclear stability.
- And I will conclude with some reflections on future prospects and opportunities.

¹ The ideas represented by this paper are the opinion of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United States Government.

Technical Issues that Unite and Divide

It is true that the United States and the Soviet Union were in a way “muscle bound” by their nuclear arsenals during the Cold War, permitting small regional wars to break out in which they found themselves more or less involved. But another world war was avoided. Even though the United Nations and other international institutions have not lived up to their full potential and early expectations concerning prevention of conflict, they have had mitigating effects and have promoted constraint.

Thus, for more than six decades since the end of the Second World War, the concept of nuclear deterrence presumably has prevented major conflict. The stockpiling of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over the period by fewer than ten states has raised legitimate fears concerning their safety, security, and potential use. However, the proliferation of these weapons has been restricted, chiefly through the application of the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the work of the IAEA. Projections of twenty or more new nuclear powers by the end of the century have not been realized. And periodic treaty reviews have focused the attention of the world on the commitment of the nuclear states under the treaty to reduce and eventually eliminate their nuclear stocks.

The world has produced almost 100,000 nuclear explosive devices of various sorts since the beginning of the nuclear age, most configured as offensive weapons. Most of these devices have been produced by two states, the United States and the Russian Federation, successor to the Soviet Union. Providentially, none of these weapons have been used in war or even detonated except under testing conditions. Even test explosions have been restricted for the past two decades and there is hope that a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty will become operational in the future. And the United States, the Soviet Union and its successor states have entered into agreements that have reduced the number of both nuclear warheads and their delivery systems by substantial amounts.

Of the remaining twenty thousand or so nuclear weapons, 90% or more are in the hands of Russia and the United States. The START extension currently under negotiation will likely result in additional reductions of perhaps one half of the remaining inventories.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the principal concern of the rest of the world was the status of the thousands of nuclear weapons

both in storage and in the hands of former Soviet military forces. The Soviet Union had built a formidable array of intercontinental missiles and aircraft as well as nuclear missile submarines, paralleling the forces facing it from the United States and NATO. In an effort to allay these fears, as well as to attempt to insure the safety and security of former Soviet nuclear weapons, the United States embarked on a unique venture: to provide technical assistance to the Russian Federation and other states of the former Soviet Union to ensure safety and security and return all weapons to the territory of the Russian Federation.

This was accomplished under an intergovernmental agreement including specific implementing agreements covering each project. Funds for the program were authorized by legislation sponsored by Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar of the United States Senate. These farsighted Senators recognized that only through cooperative assistance could we be sure that the thousands of weapons in question were secured.

The Nunn-Lugar program accomplished a number of objectives. Among them are:

- Equipment was provided to enhance Russian response in the event of a nuclear accident or incident.

- About 100 Russian railcars used to transport nuclear materials were modernized in the United States.

- Thousands of containers were manufactured to store safely and securely nuclear explosive material taken from dismantled nuclear weapons.

- A \$300 million facility was constructed in Russia to store these containers temporarily as they were readied for elimination.

- The United States agreed to purchase 500 tons of highly enriched uranium taken from destroyed Soviet nuclear weapons, to be used eventually in nuclear power plants. Under the agreement, Russia received much needed hard currency and the United States was assured that nuclear explosive material rendered excess by warhead dismantlement was destroyed. This mutually advantageous program has already passed the half-way mark in transferring uranium.

Comparable programs in Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan assisted these countries to divest themselves of nuclear weapons and enter the NPT as non-nuclear weapons states. All in all, these and other programs

were funded by the United States in an amount approaching \$3 billion. Additionally, recent U.S. legislation and discussions with the Russian Federation recognize that these programs must be truly cooperative in the future and should be extended to third countries. Thus, the Nunn-Lugar program has set the foundation for future nuclear weapons reductions. It has also created a level of understanding and present cooperation between the two nuclear superpowers that bodes well for future endeavors, even in the face of recurring political differences.

Political Issues of Concern

The political sphere is not quite as positive. As the Russian Federation recovered from the economic pressures surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was natural that there would be a certain resentment concerning its present state and nostalgia for its past accomplishments. The rise of a more authoritarian regime in the Kremlin as well as an unwillingness to accept the United States lead in international affairs increased tensions.

In the near future, several events will test the willingness of both states to cooperate:

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York in May will raise questions concerning future cooperative efforts to stem proliferation. The ongoing negotiations to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) will test the ability of the two states further to reduce deployed nuclear weapons in a safe and secure manner with necessary transparency measures. At the present time, hopes are high that agreement can be reached on further significant reductions in nuclear weapons and improved means of monitoring and verification of compliance with the terms of an agreement.

The sides have an opportunity to adopt the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to further limit nuclear testing. Some argue that testing will eventually become necessary again as present nuclear weapons age and might have to be replaced. This is certainly a possibility, but I deem it remote. The success of the U.S. Stockpile Stewardship Program, through which the present nuclear stockpile is examined periodically to ensure that it is safe, secure, and reliable, seems to be obvious. Cooperative lab-to-lab work between Russia and the United States

should continue in order to share knowledge as to how to protect a nuclear stockpile without testing while at the same time protecting national weapons' design information.

The Cooperative Threat Reduction program to which I alluded earlier under the names of Senator Nunn and Lugar has great potential, not only for what it can do to extend our bilateral experience to third countries, but it also enhances mutual confidence.

Moral Issues and Their Impact

The morality of possession and use of nuclear weapons, like all other weapons, can only be judged by their capacity to inflict damage, the use to which they might be put, and the willingness of those who control them to actually employ them in specific ways. Certainly the Church has pronounced clearly on the matter with regard to use of nuclear weapons only as a deterrent, and that under fairly stringent conditions.

Almost all nuclear powers have at least implicit policies to use nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances, most importantly as a response to a nuclear attack on themselves or their allies. Rhetoric concerning fighting and winning a nuclear war has subsided if it has not been totally abandoned. Given a situation in which the use of nuclear weapons might have been contemplated in the past, no national leader has made the decision to resort to them. This speaks to recognition of the negative implications of use as well as the inappropriateness from a military perspective of their use in almost every situation.

The United States has moved away from its earlier willingness to use nuclear weapons tactically on the battlefield in a potential European war, withdrawing and destroying most of its non-strategic arsenal. The Russian Federation, on the other hand, using a former NATO argument, affirms that it will use battlefield nuclear devices to offset what it sees as a preponderance of conventional forces arrayed by NATO. Even though this is dubious, it still justifies a variety of nuclear weapons in substantial numbers in the Russian arsenal.²

If all sides were to recognize that the future purpose of nuclear weapons can only be to deter use by others, nuclear powers could reduce their nuclear arsenals to minimal levels even lower than now contemplated by the Moscow talks, and do it soon.

Nuclear Weapons in the Hands of Other States and Entities

Most of the nuclear states acknowledged by the NPT have made significant reductions in their nuclear arsenals and all have shown restraint in building up these forces.

Other states have acquired a nuclear capability since the NPT's inception and at least two states seem to be pursuing that goal at this time. The multiplication of states with a nuclear weapons capability, even if it has moved much slower than predicted, makes further reductions difficult. New nuclear states, perhaps with different views on use, reduce the predictability that is extremely important in maintaining nuclear deterrence. The arguments of these states range from deterrence in a particular region, such as South Asia, to the implicit need to arm in order to show strength and power such as on the Korean peninsula.

The acquisition of nuclear explosive devices by non-state, terrorist entities is also a threat to international stability. I must note that nuclear terrorism is only a theoretical threat at the present time. It is not easy for a terrorist entity to acquire a nuclear explosive device nor is it easy for such a group to ignite it. However, the mere threat or possibility for such acquisition has its consequences. It is important to note that such acquisition threatens not only the United States and Russia but the rest of the world as well.

Finally, among those events or decisions that could precipitate a nuclear war, a nuclear weapons disaster – an accidental launch or mishap – could be interpreted by other nuclear powers as an attack and a nuclear response could be generated. The United States and the Russian Federation, however, have developed a joint communications system

² President Dmitry Medvedev signed a new Military Doctrine directive on 5 February 2010 in which the use of nuclear weapons is limited to deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction by others or to respond to a conventional weapons attack that “threatens the very existence of the state”. This is assessed to be less aggressive than an earlier statement in 2000, to be less ambiguous, and designed to strengthen strategic stability. The 2000 statement permitted the use of nuclear weapons “in case of aggression against the Russian Federation using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation”.

that would warn of such an incident as well as provide routine information on the test-launch of missiles and other operational information that prevents misinterpretation and reduces risk. After more than twenty years in existence, these risk reduction centers and their communications links have proven their utility.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

The international community can look with some satisfaction on the progress the United States and the Russian Federation have made in the past quarter-century in restraining policies on the use of nuclear weapons, drastically reducing nuclear arsenals, and implementing measures to reduce tensions and the possibility of unauthorized or accidental use. The international community, both non-nuclear powers, non-governmental agencies, and particularly the Church still must provide guidance, education, and encouragement. The United Nations as an organization must have the courage to cooperate with Russia and the United States to work to prevent proliferation and punish those states or entities that do proliferate. The United States must put the Cold War behind us and understand Russia as a partner. Russia must understand that this will only happen if it is perceived that democratic institutions and human rights protections are fostered. There must also be an international effort to constrain non-nuclear weapons in the hands of states in order to limit policy options that entail war and provide less of a rationale for them to obtain nuclear explosive devices.

The obvious question now is "Where do we go from here?" Each state and international institutions have an obligation to work toward a world that no longer sees war as a viable political option. We have seen that reductions of nuclear arsenals by nuclear weapons states and efforts to mitigate their utility have begun to bear fruit.

For example, a Bill has been introduced into the United States House of Representatives (HR 278) that calls on the Administration to enter into immediate negotiations with the Russian Federation, after conclusion of the present START negotiations, to further reduce the number of deployed warheads on each side to 1000 and to reduce the total inventory of nuclear devices to no more than 3000. This would be a major

reduction and advance since current agreements limit only deployed weapons, not total inventory.

The resolution would also call on the Administration to divert any savings accrued by this proposed agreement to alleviate world poverty, one of the principal causes of friction in today's world and a condition that feeds terrorist ideology. Since the United States alone spends more than \$50 billion each year on nuclear weapons according to some estimates, this would be a major step and a major investment. What is significant to me is that this resolution has been introduced in a bipartisan manner by two Roman Catholic representatives from opposite sides of the country and opposing political parties. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has actively supported this bill.

Let me conclude by saying that historians will ultimately decide whether or not nuclear weapons have kept the peace for almost seven decades following over a century of wars causing the annihilation of hundreds of millions. Moving from confrontation to cooperation in the past two decades, the United States and the Russian Federation must continue to show leadership in the reduction of nuclear armaments. The test of our generation and the next is whether or not we can mitigate the dangers of these very weapons as we reduce them to minimal levels with appropriate constraints on their possession and use.