

Rhetoric vs. Reality: Elite Disarmament Proposals and Real Disarmament Prospects

*By Jacqueline Cabasso**

It has become fashionable for former Cold War hawks, elites and leaders of nuclear armed states to proclaim their support for a nuclear weapon free world. And, with the election of a new American President, there are encouraging signs that U.S. – Russian relations are thawing. In their Joint Statement of April 1, 2009, Presidents Obama and Medvedev declared:

“We, the leaders of Russia and the United States, are ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in relations between our two countries. In just a few months we have worked hard to establish a new tone in our relations. Now it is time to get down to business and translate our warm words into actual achievements of benefit to Russia, the United States, and all those around the world interested in peace and prosperity.”¹

In a refreshing turn, President Obama’s April 5 speech in Prague indicated that the U.S. President has a pretty good understanding of the real horrors of nuclear weapons. “The existence of thousands of nuclear weapons is the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War,” he declared. “No nuclear war was fought between the United States and the Soviet Union, but generations lived with the knowledge that their world could be erased in a single flash of light.... Today, the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not.”

And, importantly, he acknowledged: “[I]f we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable.”

We wholeheartedly applaud President Obama for stating, “clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” And we commend him for his courageous and historic admission that, “[A]s the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act.”²

In the aftermath of Obama’s Prague speech, there has been a disturbing spate of editorials ridiculing the American President, accusing him of being naïve, and declaring that nuclear abolition is impossible – even a bad idea! *We couldn’t disagree more*. However, it won’t be easy.

As committed nuclear abolitionists, we examine here some of the “inconvenient truths” that lie between this new wave of promising rhetoric and the realities that will have to be addressed to bring its promise to fruition. These include: the continuity of “national security” doctrines in the post-World War II and post- Cold War eras, despite dramatically changed geopolitical conditions; the power and influence of entrenched military-industrial complexes and other special interests; the role of nuclear arsenals in maintaining an undemocratic and economically polarized global order; the inherently dual use nature of the nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear energy’s inextricable link to institutions and development patterns that sustain an inequitable

status quo; and the fact that nuclear disarmament is unlikely so long as major powers continue to pursue global or regional military dominance, including with conventional weapons. In a time of twin global economic and environmental crises and growing competition over natural resources, the dangers of conflicts among nuclear-armed states are increasing. We cannot afford to wait decades more for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Nuclear disarmament cannot be contingent on solving all of the world's other problems. But we cannot avoid the connections either. ***Nuclear disarmament should serve as the leading edge of a global trend towards demilitarization and redirecting resources to meet human needs and restore the environment.***

It is only natural that we begin with the United States, because it spends as much as the rest of the world's countries combined on its military. In fiscal year 2008, the United States spent \$52.4 billion on nuclear weapons-related programs alone.³ This staggering amount – a low estimate - is a drop in the bucket compared to overall U.S. military spending that year (\$711 billion), but it exceeds the entire military budgets of nearly every other country. In 2006, the last year for which figures are available, only China (\$121.9 billion), Russia (\$70 billion), the United Kingdom (\$55.4 billion) and France (\$54 billion) spent more on their militaries than the U.S. spent on these programs.⁴

Obama's remarks in Prague notwithstanding, preliminary White House reports project roughly the same levels of U.S. military spending in FY 2010.⁵

The U.S. military operates 10 Unified Combatant Commands whose areas of operation cover the entire Earth.⁶ Elements include, more than 2,500,000 U.S. personnel serving across the planet and perhaps more than 1,000 military bases spread across each continent.⁷ The United States is the *only* county to deploy nuclear weapons on foreign soil, at six NATO bases in five European countries.⁸

Unfortunately, the U.S. practice of dominating the globe through projection of overwhelming military power complicates prospects for global nuclear disarmament.

Continuity of "National Security" Doctrines

In late 1997, eight years after the end of the Cold War and four years before the September 11, 2001 attacks, President Bill Clinton signed Presidential Decision Directive-60 (PDD-60), recommitting the U.S. to nuclear weapons as the "cornerstone" of its national security and reaffirming the U.S. policies of threatened first use and threatened massive retaliation.⁹ In fact, PDD-60 reiterated a U.S. national security policy that had been reaffirmed by every President, Republican or Democrat, since 1945, when President Harry Truman, a Democrat, ordered the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Reprising his campaign rhetoric in Prague, President Obama declared: "To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same." But this was immediately followed by: "Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies." What does deterrence mean in U.S. national security doctrine?

As stated in a September 2008 Department of Defense Report on the Air Force's Nuclear Mission:

“Though our consistent goal has been to avoid *actual* weapons use, the nuclear deterrent is ‘used’ every day by assuring friends and allies, dissuading opponents from seeking peer capabilities to the United States, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies from potential adversaries, and providing the potential to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails.

The quality and *credibility* of U.S. nuclear forces, and New Triad forces more broadly, are critical to an effective deterrent.”¹⁰

The “New Triad” forces refer to the combination of nuclear and high-tech conventional offensive strike capabilities (swords) and defensive systems (shields) at the core of U.S. global warfighting strategy. The third leg of the triad is a “responsive” research and development infrastructure that supports the other two legs. These three elements are bound together by “enhanced command and control” and “intelligence systems.”¹¹

Power and Influence of Entrenched Interests

According to its proponents, maintaining this “credible” deterrent will require a massive investment in the nuclear weapons infrastructure. In March 2008, General Kevin Chilton, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, in charge of U.S. nuclear war planning, told Congress:

“If the nation is going to maintain a nuclear deterrent, the capabilities that support this deterrent should be second to none. We must care for the stockpile whether we possess one weapon or thousands. . . improvements to our aging infrastructure will be required whether or not we decide to pursue an improved warhead design. . . . The transition to a more modern stockpile will re-invigorate the design and engineering technology base – especially its human resources – and enable a more responsive and cost-effective infrastructure. A revitalized infrastructure will facilitate a reduction of the large inventory of weapons we maintain today as a hedge against strategic uncertainty and weapon reliability concerns, and will allow us to sustain our nuclear capability and expertise throughout the 21st Century.”¹²

To this end, the U.S. nuclear weapons research and production infrastructure is being renovated through a program initially called “Complex 2030,” subsequently re-labeled “Complex Transformation.”¹³ While funding has been eliminated (for now) for the “Reliable Replacement Warhead,” modifications to every existing warhead type are underway under the “Stockpile Life Extension” Program, in some cases providing new military capabilities. For example, the W76 Sea-Launched Ballistic Missile warhead, carried aboard the 14 U.S. Trident submarines currently patrolling the world’s oceans, is being given a new capacity to destroy “hard targets” with a “ground burst” by modifying a subsystem in its delivery vehicle.¹⁴

Strategic Stability

Perhaps even more dangerous than nuclear warhead modifications, are upgrades to delivery systems for conventional weapons. According to General Chilton:

“While our nuclear capability remains vital, our ability to integrate conventional long-range precision weapons is every bit as important. . . . *We have a prompt global strike delivery capability on alert today, but it is configured only with nuclear weapons, which limits the options available to the President and may in some cases reduce the credibility of our deterrence.*”¹⁵

With Strategic Command’s full support, the Pentagon and its contractors are poised to begin development of a new generation of long range delivery systems capable of carrying conventional warheads that would allow the United States to strike any target in on earth within 60 minutes or less. Those at the receiving end would have no way of knowing if the incoming missile was nuclear, and if they had a nuclear capability they would probably use it.¹⁶

Russian security analysts have raised concerns that these conventional U.S. “alternatives” to nuclear weapons might pose an obstacle to U.S. – Russian nuclear arms control negotiations. According to Alexi Arbatov, a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center, “There are very few countries in the world that are afraid of American nuclear weapons. But there are many countries which are afraid of American conventional weapons. In particular, nuclear weapons states like China and Russia are primarily concerned about growing American conventional, precision-guided, long-range capability, [or] Prompt Global Strike systems.” Arbatov added that what he termed “threshold states,” nations with potential for developing a nuclear weapon, are similarly concerned about U.S. conventional capabilities.¹⁷

Paradoxically, using almost the same words, Robert Einhorn, a Clinton administration nuclear policy expert and arms control advocate was quoted in 2007: “We should be putting far more effort into developing more effective conventional weapons. *It’s hard to imagine a president using nuclear weapons under almost any circumstance, but no one doubts our willingness to use conventional weapons.*” This statement, unfortunately, is all too true. But an even more overpowering conventional U.S. military threat surely is not the desired outcome of the nuclear disarmament process. Moreover, how practical would that approach be? How would potential adversaries with fewer economic resources - especially those on the “enemies” list - respond? Wouldn’t they have an incentive to maintain or acquire nuclear weapons to counter overwhelming U.S. conventional military superiority? And wouldn’t that, in turn, even further entrench U.S. determination to retain and modernize its own nuclear arsenal, thus rendering the goal of nuclear disarmament nearly impossible? *This conundrum is one of the biggest challenges we face and it cannot be ignored.*

During the period in the run up to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, there was a rash of reports and presentations by branches of the Armed Services, nuclear scientists and military commanders espousing future requirements for nuclear weapons and a central role for nuclear weapons in the 21st century. These documents reflect the positioning of powerful entrenched military-industrial complex interests in anticipation of a new Administration.

A U.S. Air Force report, released on October 24, 2008, less than two weeks before the election, presents a “Strategic Plan to Reinvigorate the Air Force Nuclear Enterprise.” It concludes:

“Nuclear forces continue to represent the ultimate deterrence capability that supports U.S. national security. Because of their immense destructive power, nuclear weapons, as recognized in the 2006 National Security Strategy, deter in a way that simply cannot be duplicated by other weapons. Additionally, the special nature of nuclear weapons demands precise performance

across the Air Force nuclear enterprise, with no tolerance for complacency or shortcuts. *In short, we will continue to fortify current operations, develop our people, and sustain and modernize current capabilities.*”¹⁸

Mirroring U.S. national security policy, “The new face of the Russian Armed Forces until 2030,” a draft military doctrine reported in early 2008, affirms that the nuclear triad of ballistic missiles, nuclear powered submarines and strategic bombers will remain the core of Russian armed forces for the next two decades. While planning for new high-tech conventional weapons, Russia will continue to maintain a strong nuclear deterrent. And Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces will continue the deployment of new ballistic missile systems, modernization of strategic command-and-control networks and the development of enhanced warheads and their delivery systems.¹⁹

In August of last year, against the backdrop of the sudden military conflict between Russia and Georgia, it was reported that in response to U.S. plans to base missile-defense interceptors in Poland, Russia was considering arming its Baltic Fleet with nuclear warheads for the first time since the end of the Cold War.²⁰ And in October, Russia announced plans to deploy a new nuclear missile in 2009 designed to penetrate anti-missile defenses, and to build eight submarines to carry it, by 2015.²¹

More recently, just two weeks before his first meeting with Barack Obama at the G20 Summit in London, in a hawkish speech to Russia’s top generals, President Medvedev announced plans to upgrade Russia’s conventional and nuclear forces, starting in 2011, in order to counter a perceived threat from a growing NATO, and U.S. plans for a missile defense shield in central Europe. Reportedly, Russian defence minister Anatoly Serkyukov charged the U.S. with trying to control energy and mineral resources in central Asia and other post-Soviet countries on Russia’s border. According to Serkyukov, “The military-political situation is characterised by the US leadership’s desire to expand its military presence and that of its allies in regions adjacent to Russia.”²²

Not to let any members of the nuclear club off the hook, in his speech of March 21, 2008, presenting France’s aptly-named new nuclear submarine, “*Le Terrible*,” in Cherbourg, French President Nikolai Sarkozy proclaimed: “Our nuclear deterrence protects us from any aggression against our vital interests emanating from a state – wherever it may come from and whatever form it may take.”

To the ever-fluid definition of deterrence, he added: “It cannot be ruled out that an adversary might miscalculate the delimitation of our vital interests or our determination to safeguard them. *In the framework of nuclear deterrence, it would be possible, in that event, to send a nuclear warning that would underscore our resolve.* That would be aimed at reestablishing deterrence.”

Sarkozy explained how France’s nuclear policy will be integrated with UK and NATO security policies.

“Together with the United Kingdom, we have taken a major decision: It is our assessment that there can be no situation in which the vital interests of either of our two nations could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened.

As for the Atlantic Alliance, its security is also based on nuclear deterrence. British and French nuclear forces contribute to it.”

Only near the end of his speech did Sarkozy get to the subject of disarmament, pledging to reduce the number of French nuclear warheads to fewer than 300, but providing no details or timeline.²³

France’s nuclear partner, the UK, while also announcing cuts to its arsenal, is proceeding with plans to replace its Trident nuclear weapons system, while pursuing massive development of its Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermasten. In addition, and without Parliament’s agreement, the British government has endorsed the use of its Menwith Hill radar station for the U.S. missile defense system.²⁴

In February of this year it was reported that the U.S. has been using Britain’s Atomic Weapons Establishment to carry out research into its own nuclear warhead program. U.S. – U.K. cooperation in nuclear weapons research has been ongoing since the Manhattan Project, though the details are secret. Speculation is that the U.S. is or has been using the UK’s facilities to get around restrictions placed on development of a new “reliable replacement warhead” (RRW) by the U.S. Congress. In an interview last year, John Harvey, policy and planning director at the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration, said: “We have recently, I can’t tell you when, taken steps to amend the MDA [Mutual Defence Agreement], not only to extend it but to amend it to allow for a broader extent of cooperation than in the past, and this has to do with the RRW effort.”²⁵

Of the five Nuclear Weapon States Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), China is the only one believed to be increasing its numbers of nuclear weapons, roughly 25% since 2005, with a total stockpile estimated at 240 warheads. The Pentagon, in its 2008 assessment of China’s military power, claims that China is “developing and testing offensive missiles, forming additional missile units, qualitatively upgrading certain missile systems, and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses.” While acknowledging substantial uncertainty about the composition of China’s future arsenal, independent analysts predict that China will deploy more warheads on new systems, but also retire others as it phases out older systems, reflecting the “fewer but newer” trend in all of the NPT Nuclear Weapon States.²⁶

In a major speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on October 28, 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, kept on from the Bush Administration by President Obama, began by noting that

“[T]hree presidents I worked for during the Cold War, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, genuinely wanted to eliminate all nuclear weapons and said so publicly. More recently, George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn echoed that sentiment in *The Wall Street Journal*, but all have come up against the reality that as long as others have nuclear weapons, we must maintain some level of these weapons ourselves to deter potential adversaries and to reassure over two dozen allies and partners who rely on our nuclear umbrella for their security, making it unnecessary for them to develop their own.”

He continued:

“Try as we might and hope as we will, the power of nuclear weapons and their strategic impact is a genie that cannot be put back in the bottle, at least for a very long time. While we have a long-term goal of abolishing nuclear weapons once and for all, given the world in which we live, we have to be realistic about that proposition.”²⁷

In other words, Gates seemed to be saying, it’s unfortunate, but as long as nuclear weapons exist, nuclear weapons will exist!

The Inextricable Links

Fueled by the corporate-driven campaign for a nuclear power “renaissance,” the pursuit of nuclear energy has become a leading cause of conflict around the world due to the inherently dual use nature of the nuclear fuel cycle. The U.S. – India nuclear deal, approved by Congress in October 2008, will provide India, a non-NPT party, with nuclear technology and materials that might enable it to further develop its weapons program.²⁸ Pakistan and Israel, both non-NPT nuclear-armed states, are reportedly pursuing similar deals.²⁹ The potential for further inflaming already volatile regions of the world by adding nuclear capacity is obvious. However, there is another less frequently examined dimension to this problem.

Nuclear power, the most expensive form of centralized electricity generation, is an inefficient way to deliver energy to the world’s vast underserved populations, particularly those in rural areas. Investing the immense capital needed to construct nuclear plants in decentralized, renewable energy technologies world-wide also would promote further innovation and bring down prices, encouraging their spread. This approach would improve energy access, provide employment, and broaden the economic potential of areas left out of the current system of corporate globalization, reducing both greenhouse gas emissions and oil consumption, and reducing as a consequence competition for shrinking oil and gas supplies that is, among other things, a significant factor driving global conflict.³⁰

We simply must phase out and move beyond nuclear power, as well as fossil fuels, if we are to achieve a world of human and ecological security.

Seriously moving toward abolition of nuclear weapons will require taking on other challenges, together with nuclear disarmament or on parallel tracks. But this is not a reason to delay any longer eliminating the role of nuclear weapons in national security policies – which will require *delegitimizing deterrence* – and getting on with the process of their verified physical destruction.

Indeed, some of these challenges are beginning to be discussed openly in policy circles. At a recent conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC, Vladimir Orlov, a Russian security analyst, predicted that Moscow might raise the issue of conventional weapons in the next phase of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reduction negotiations, which could begin after an anticipated initial treaty is completed by the end of this year. Of particular concern, he said, are “strategic weapons which can be used not only in nuclear but in conventional” modes. And, he suggested that addressing “Prompt Global Strike” should be just the start. According to Orlov, “Very dramatic reductions in military expenditure in the world: This is where the United States clearly – even more than in nuclear disarmament – should take the lead.”³¹

This view was underscored by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at a recent high-level conference in Rome. “Defense budgets far exceed reasonable security needs,” Gorbachev said. “The United States spends on military purposes almost as much as the rest of the world put together.” And, he warned: “Military superiority would be an insurmountable obstacle to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. *Unless we discuss demilitarization of international politics, the reduction of military budgets, preventing militarization of outer space, talking about a nuclear-free world will be just rhetorical.*”³²

Redefining Security

What is to be done? The answer is clear to ordinary people. We need to fundamentally redefine security. We must put universal human security and ecological sustainability at the heart of conflict resolution and prevention. We must divest precious resources from militarism and invest them instead in this new security paradigm. Fortunately, one excellent vehicle for moving in this direction is already in place.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals, agreed by all of the world’s governments, are designed to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.³³

The Hiroshima-Nagasaki Protocol, put forward by Mayors for Peace, provides a vision and a plan of action for immediate cessation of all nuclear weapons activities and commencement of negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention to be completed by 2015 and implemented by 2020.³⁴ By happy coincidence, the specific milestones established in each category of the Millennium Development Goals are to be met within the same timebound framework!

Fulfilling these commitments will cost far less than war. Each year about \$1.3 Trillion dollars goes into the world’s military coffers. The best estimates are that a ten year commitment of around \$76 billion per year, less than 7% of current military expenditures, would lead to fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals.³⁵

“The Fierce Urgency of Now.”

Lately there’s been a lot of rhetoric about the U.S. and Russia “getting down to” 1000 nuclear weapons on each side. But, as President Obama reminded us in Prague: “One nuclear weapon exploded in one city – be it New York or Moscow, Islamabad or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague – could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences might be - for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.”

Unfortunately, while recognizing this urgent danger and calling for a world without nuclear weapons, Obama demurred: “I’m not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly - perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, ‘Yes, we can.’”³⁶

A great American, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a prescient speech exactly one year before his tragic assassination in 1968, described our current predicament: “We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood-it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, ‘Too late’.... We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. We must move past indecision to action.”³⁷

Recommendations

Nuclear disarmament should serve as the leading edge of a global trend towards demilitarization and redirecting resources to meet human needs and restore the environment. *As immediate measures:*

All states possessing nuclear arsenals should halt research, development, testing, and component production while reductions of arsenals are in progress, not afterwards, with production and research facilities subject to an intrusive verification regime at the earliest possible time.³⁸

All states should support the establishment of international controls on delivery systems and anti-missile systems as part of a global process of reducing and eliminating nuclear forces, banning weapons in space, limiting strategic weapons generally, and implementing a policy of “non-offensive defense.”³⁹

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Notes

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