Conclusion

*Drafted and delivered by Zia Mian, Princeton University’s Program on Science and Global Security*

For over sixty years, civil society groups around the world have worked towards abolishing nuclear weapons. The Hibakusha gave witness to the horrors of nuclear weapons, scientists and physicians warned of the dangers of arms races and nuclear war, artists and writers, film-makers and poets gave expression to collective fears, countless citizens petitioned leaders, marched and protested.

It has been a difficult struggle in the face of determined opposition from nuclear weapons states and their allies and supporters. Time and again, those who hoped for world without nuclear weapons were forced to justify themselves.

But from the start, there have been states who chose to not pursue nuclear weapons. The United Nations has shown the commitment of the majority of states to nuclear disarmament since the General Assembly passed its first resolution in 1946. In the shadow of the American atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the UN called for plans “for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”

International law too is clear. The 1996 International Court of Justice judgment was that there is an obligation to pursue and bring to a conclusion negotiations on nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.

As part of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the world was promised in 1970 that there would be good faith talks leading to nuclear disarmament. No NPT weapon state has given up its arsenal. Instead arsenals grew.

In 2000, at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference, the nuclear weapon states declared their “unequivocal undertaking” to nuclear disarmament. What we have seen since then are policies and plans and investments to keep and to modernize nuclear arsenals.

Today, we see leaders of nuclear weapon states again promising to abolish nuclear weapons. It is a good sign. But we have been here before. This time the world needs more than promises.

To demonstrate that they are serious, nuclear weapon states should announce clear policies to move irreversibly and quickly towards nuclear weapons elimination.

There is a simple test. We can use the old saying—if you want to know what is really going on, follow the money. The only way that nuclear weapons states can prove that they are serious about the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons is if they stop investing in modernizing and improving their nuclear weapons capabilities.

A simple example is offered by the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). If the United States and other nuclear weapon states agree to be bound the CTBT but continue to invest
in developing or producing new design warheads or to modify existing warhead types in a manner that creates new military capabilities, then it is fair to question their commitment to the purpose and objectives of the CTBT.

Similarly, it is not enough for nuclear weapon states to agree to take their weapons off hair-trigger alert and to begin talks on a treaty to verifiably ban fissile materials for nuclear weapons. States must stop investing in new delivery systems for nuclear weapons and stop modernizing their nuclear weapons research and production complexes.

The challenge is fundamentally political. Nuclear weapons, first and foremost, are weapons. They are instruments of violence and the threat of violence. The strategies and policies for their development, deployment and use are not contained within them. Nuclear weapons are given meaning and purpose by the politics of nuclear weapons states.

The nuclear weapon states and the international community as a whole need to change the politics around nuclear weapons. A way to do this would be for states to write into international law the 1961 UN General Assembly declaration that “using nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons is to be considered as violating the Charter of the United Nations, as acting contrary to the laws of humanity and as committing a crime against mankind and civilization.”

Progress towards nuclear abolition will need new thinking in many other areas, including by non-weapon states. Disarmament and non-proliferation must go hand in hand. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has warned that there are today 20 or 30 “virtual nuclear weapons states.” These are non-weapon states that have the capacity to develop nuclear weapons in a very short time span. For these countries, it may take a threat from an existing nuclear-armed state, a change in leadership, a newfound desire for national power and prestige, a resourceful scientist or unexpected access to technology to tip the balance.

For all these reasons, a strong case can be made that a nuclear-weapon-free world would be far more sustainable as part of a double abolition: an end to nuclear weapons and to nuclear energy.

Finally, if we are to achieve the goal of nuclear abolition we must acknowledge that states and people can not feel secure when great powers can unleash almost overwhelming conventional military force anywhere in the world. Lesser powers pose the same problem on a regional scale.

Here, again, the NPT offers away forward. The treaty calls for an end to the arms race and the elimination of nuclear weapons. But it also requires all states to negotiate and reach agreement on “a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

It is time to start working on comprehensive disarmament. We invite all states, including those who are not parties to the NPT, to join international civil society and peace movements everywhere in thinking about how to achieve this goal.