Nuclear Weapons Can and Must Be Banned: 
The View from Russia 
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Throughout nearly the entire history of nuclear weapons development, the Soviet Union (Russia) has been a proponent of their reduction, up to a complete universal elimination. Apart from the humane considerations, the question always remained as to where, when, and in what specific circumstances should one use nuclear weapons without breaking the commonly accepted concepts of decency, logic, and advisability. The Americans lost the war in Vietnam, the Soviet Union lost a long, exhausting, high-toll war in Afghanistan, but neither one employed nuclear weapons, or even considered that possibility. The USA came to Kuwait’s rescue, carried out military operations against Iraq, backed by the international community, with its own air and naval power, but did not use nuclear weapons.

NATO, led by the United States, clearly in violation of its authority and the UN Charter, unleashed the war in Yugoslavia, bombing Belgrade and other cities. The Russian people are utterly indignant and express their complete sympathy with their Slavic brothers. The potential of an alliance between Yugoslavia and Russia, akin to that with Belorussia, was quite seriously discussed. The only thing lacking was concrete military help, or even a most general hint at the fact that Russia, by the way, possesses nuclear capabilities.

For months Russia has engaged in military action against Chechen terrorists. Initially our society interpreted these actions as a forced response to the bombed houses, to the plundering raids, with hostages and stolen cattle, on adjacent territories and against direct aggression in Dagestan. However, as the events in Chechnya evolved, we gradually lost the thread, the golden mean, which separates a fight with thugs from a war in your own back yard, against your own people. We have totally destroyed and burned down Chechen cities and villages, with civilian deaths, many of whom are Russians.

Here is a quote from a piece written by a military correspondent for one of our popular newspapers, Argumenti i fakty (Arguments and Facts”, Issue No. 14, April 2000, p. 5), “They say, one should keep the seamy side of war hidden. But how can one hide the fact that the daily losses in the second Chechen campaign have been twice as high compared to the first one, and 2.5 times higher than during the war in Afghanistan?”

We are “almost” used to the weekly mourning of the deaths of Pskov’s paratroopers and elite militia forces from Podmoskovye and Perm.

The United States and Europe don’t see our rationale, and accuse us of being cruel, inflexible and unwilling to search for a compromise.

We, too, desire peace with all our heart. We are tired of our daily television news, which is equally divided between elections and the war in Chechnya. We are heart-broken to the point of
tears to see women in black headscarves burying their loved ones; we are terrified to think of children born somewhere in the Caucasus to the sounds of artillery shell explosions, thus absorbing from infancy hatred to all that is Russian.

Nevertheless, despite the universal alarm, one should recognize that the Chechen war is local in nature, and it does not directly affect the concerns, so to speak, of the general population. The military command treats it with a certain attitude as well, one with a trace of superiority, clearly underestimating the strength of the opponent, his fanaticism, and the support of the international Islamic community.

And since the artillery entirely dominates the air, the feeling of an approaching victory is lacking. That, despite complete uncertainty of the outcome of the war, we do not even contemplate utilizing more sophisticated weaponry, including nuclear weapons, should not come as a surprise. It would be totally absurd for us to succumb to extreme measures in order to settle our domestic problems. However, what is worth contemplating is why the Chechen leaders, when engaging in the role of military provocateurs, do not give a second thought to the confrontation with powerful nuclear forces. It means that the nuclear deterrent function, which has always been considered paramount, has failed to work in these circumstances.

We have attempted to come up with hypothetical examples that would illustrate what conceivable life circumstances would force one to use nuclear weapons, would justify the tremendous concentration of destructive power, of radioactivity, capable of turning the Earth instantaneously into hell. We did not find such examples, for the simple reason: the main function of nuclear weapons does not lie in the solution of a military task on the battlefield, but in the destruction of cities, industry, in mass annihilation of people, which, in turn, is in profound contradiction with the morals and the very essence of the purpose of human existence.

An indirect argument of this universal truth is the inability up to now of any nuclear strategist to clearly delineate the distinct quantitative prospects for the future: how many warheads do we need to maintain in permanent arsenals to ensure world stability: 1, 10, 100, 1000, or more?

We are not talking about a twofold error here; what we are dealing with is a failure to come up with a substantiated range of the value. In physics it would signify complete failure, lack of a valid idea. Time-wise, the situation is the same: a sluggish beginning (START-2, 3) and a far-from-defined end. Nevertheless, statements, such as, “Russia will perish without nuclear weapons, from the hand of the United States, China, etc.,” persist. By all indications, the sentiment is symmetrical in the United States. “One can deal with Russians, as well as the Chinese, Iraqs, and other Asians, only from the position of strength, with a nuclear baton in hand.”

Basic common sense gets lost in the emotional nuances of such statements. The question is, why does the United States, even if it intends to conquer Russia, need a land devastated by nuclear fire, with demolished cities and industry, angry and sick people?

We are told, there are no weapons which, once born, will ever die. First of all, it is not true: Chemical weapons have been banned; secondly, nuclear weapons possess attributes of the
absolute, which is something that did not exist before. Their unrestrained use could cause all life on Earth to cease. Today we painfully lament the hundreds of lives lost over the months of the Chechen war. In the event of any more or less sizable nuclear war, the numbers would run into millions in a matter of an hour.

In the final analysis, we never found a reasonable argument which could define the place of nuclear weapons, apart from emotional, psychological and philosophical motives, which are widespread and have to be reckoned with. We must confront them with rational reasoning.

And I challenge anyone to suggest the global idea, or purpose, for the sake of which it would be acceptable to sacrifice just one city, say, New York, to just one hydrogen bomb.

Very recent and memorable is the time when the work of a state leader was evaluated not only for economic achievements but also for successes in the realm of foreign policy. The anti-military and, first and foremost, anti-nuclear achievements were particularly prestigious. They were met with enthusiasm by the people, being in tune with their frame of mind and memories of the victims and the role of the European liberator in the 1941-1945 war. We have talked from high podiums, at length and with gusto, about disarmament, nuclear reductions, test bans, and done precisely the opposite. In the attempt to catch up with the United States, we have accumulated over 40,000 tons of chemical weapons, 80,000 tanks - more than is owned by the rest of the world's nations. We have millions of artillery shells and mines which are way past their shelf life, and over 40,000 nuclear and hydrogen bombs. In the heat of the competition, few ever gave a thought to why we need so much. At that time, very popular was a song by Vladimir Vysotskiy, “And as for us, we are making rockets, we are damming the Yenisei,” and, as the ballad goes, “we are ahead of the entire planet.” Tons of money has been spent on all these armaments, and over 70% of the industrial resources of the USSR.

Only with the advent of the new ideology, new leaders, and M.S. Gorbachev’s perestroika did we begin to understand the absurdity of the situation which had emerged, and were horrified at the estimates which showed that in order to eliminate this massive pile of armaments, we would need at least as much as had been invested in their creation, i.e. dozens of billions of dollars.

M.S. Gorbachev took a decisive stand on the nuclear disarmament issue. In 1985, he proposed and, more importantly, began to implement the program of complete nuclear weapons elimination by the year 2000. It was a phased-in program, strictly tied to a time schedule. Unfortunately, in early 1990s, the program vanished just like the Soviet Union itself. It is no longer even remembered.

Then, the era of B.N. Yeltsin’s rule began. Nothing concrete was happening in the realm which is of interest to us. All the propaganda sources – newspapers, radio, television – were filled to the brim with news on the war in Chechnya, the oligarchs, the next change in government, the status of health and rest of the President. From time to time, one would catch glimpses of press releases telling about the meetings with the leaders of foreign states, “our friend Bill,” “our friend Helmut,” “our friend Ryu.”
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On occasion, the calamitous state of the army was remembered, the hungry soldiers, the helicopters which were not flying because of the gas deficit, the nuclear submarines abandoned on the banks of Murmansk. Former Russian grandeur, its past military strength, were talked about with nostalgia, but there was no money. Neither were there any changes for the better.

With the new President V.V. Putin in power, it looks like the situation is changing. V.V. Putin is young, energetic, and never idle. He has had many meetings with official figures, numerous tours of cities, military bases, plants. A trend is slowly taking shape. Along with a firm stance of repression with regard to Chechnya, the President exhibits a clear interest in the development of Russian military forces. Over a short period of time, he visited a missile carrier in Vladivostok, witnessed yet another launch of Topol-M in Plesetsk, as well as visiting the leading nuclear centers of Sarov and Snezhinsk. He has personally flown in a supersonic jet, submerged and even spent the night on a nuclear missile submarine. It can be considered symbolic that at a time when we are expelled from the European Council for the war in Chechnya, a successful launch of a ballistic missile destined for Kamchatka is implemented from the underwater starting position in the presence of and supervised by the Commander-in-Chief, V.V. Putin.

This purely military aspect of the work of the newly elected President appeals to the population which is forever charged with an ineradicable spirit of the greatness of power. No Russian will ever make peace with a secondary role. He believes he is the son of a Great Power, it runs in his blood.

A president has come to power, who will not allow any monopolarity, any dictatorship on the part of the United States. Military capabilities and nuclear weapons are coming to the forefront once again, and are seen as a guarantee of our freedom, for lack of anything else at our disposal that would be worthy of the task. V.V. Putin recently made a statement to the effect that all issues pertaining to the national security of Russia and the implementation of its international commitments must be considered from the point of view of the offensive.

Let me remind you that not so long ago our government used to promote the slogan of “no first use of nuclear weapons.” At the beginning of 2000, the new “Russian Federation National Security Concept” was adopted, in accordance with which the army is instructed to use nuclear weapons “in the event of repelling an act of armed aggression, should all other means of resolving the crisis be exhausted and prove ineffective.” As we see, the formula is vague and does not permit an unambiguous interpretation. This leads us to a question, “Does the protracted war in Chechnya, with the bandit-like attempts to penetrate into Dagestan, give cause for us to use nuclear weapons if we were to formally follow the ‘Concept’?”

A new, justifying philosophy is emerging as well. There was a time when Stalin was still in power when we proposed a ban on nuclear weapons. The great minds, such as Einstein and Russell, fervently advocated against nuclear war, warning everyone of a global demise.

What answer did we receive? “No. You have a strong army, we will not be able to deal with it without nuclear weapons.” Today it looks like the roles have been reversed, and now it is us saying that Russia can protect its independence only with the help of nuclear weapons.
Russia faces a decisive turning point: it will either choose to strengthen and build up its armed forces, or it will follow the route of integration and friendship with the rest of the world. An important role in this decision will be played by public opinion in the European countries and in the United States.

It is very hard to understand why America, with its strong naval and airforce capabilities, state-of-the-art missiles, separated from the rest of the world by two oceans, is not taking decisive steps towards complete nuclear disarmament. The only conceivable (in principle) real threat to the American people that could come from other countries lies in missiles with nuclear warheads. The START-2 and START-3 treaties help make progress toward disarmament, but they lack the necessary degree of completion.

The barrier between nuclear and non-nuclear nations is precarious, as evidenced by the transformation of India and Pakistan from non-nuclear into nuclear nations that took place right before our eyes. Article VI of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty pertaining to complete nuclear disarmament, which would eliminate the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear states, is not being observed. We worry when other countries obtain nuclear capabilities, but there is nothing we can do about it, because we understand their concern with their own safety.

The United States would fulfill its historic mission if it were to pronounce the elimination of nuclear weapons, complete global nuclear disarmament, and not in general terms, but by a specific date, say, 2010. The world community would benefit tremendously from such an action. Russia would no longer need to support its strategic forces, which eat up a significant portion of its military budget. What need would we have for intercontinental missiles, both ground-launched and sea-launched, which are so complex and expensive, if they are not equipped with nuclear warheads and as such will not affect the outcome of a war?

The need for ballistic missile defenses, on which the United States so ardently insists, and which therefore contributes a factor of agitation in their interaction with Russia, would naturally disappear. It is clear to us that no ABM system possesses the required high degree of reliability. It can be overpowered by a build-up of standard offensive means, which is much cheaper to do. At the same time, U.S. intentions to build an ABM system, and even its talk about it, is pushing Russia to augment its military potential.

The talk about National Missile Defense being created not against Russia but to ward off terrorists and maniacal dictators is not being treated seriously. Indeed, isn’t it a little too expensive to create a national missile defense system, which is meant to prevent a highly improbable event? It is easier for a terrorist to smuggle into the United States a nuclear mini-bomb in a “sack of sugar” than to build a long-range missile, and as for a maniac leader with a disturbed psyche, he will think a hundred times before launching a single missile only to receive a thousand-fold retaliation back on his own head.

Under any circumstance, the emergence of unforeseen circumstances involving the use of nuclear weapons is less probable in a nuclear-free world, with global monitoring in place to prevent the emergence of nuclear weapons which is strict and equally obligatory for both former
nuclear and non-nuclear states. International controls can be effective only if there are no exceptions and if the rules are the same for everyone.

Finally, one last thing. For historical reasons, Russia has a highly developed nuclear industry, which is on the cutting edge of science and technology, and is competitive on a global basis. Given the situation at hand, it would be extremely advantageous for Russia to transform this industry entirely to non-military production, to support increasing power generation, including generation for export purposes.

Power generation at nuclear power plants, as opposed to using coal, gas, or oil, is one of the crucial aspects of the economic revival of Russia. It will require new ideas and approaches in reactor engineering, radioactive fuel processing and, first of all, a widespread introduction of breeder reactors that burn cheap uranium-238. Then, Russia can go on for thousands of years, with the uranium it has stockpiled by now.

However, the shadow of the lethal weapons, the law adopted by the United States prohibiting the construction of the most promising type of reactors – breeders, and the measures barring plutonium separation as nuclear warhead pit material, have a negative effect on the nuclear industry and on the creation of a closed nuclear cycle. Only a world effectively free from nuclear weapons will provide a foundation for large-scale utilization of nuclear power, not to harm, but to benefit people.

Thus nuclear weapons have outlived their historic mission. The sphere of application of nuclear and hydrogen bombs is unclear. National security as ensured by nuclear weapons is illusory, because the only function inherent in such a system is instilling fear.

Once Albert Einstein was asked, “Will there be a World War III?” He answered, “I can not tell you with complete certainty whether there will be a third world war, but there will be no fourth world war – that I can tell you for sure.” Let us follow the precepts of the wise men: “The mission of science is to make the impossible possible, to make the possible a reality, and to make the reality reasonable.”

Conclusions

1. Nuclear weapons can and must be eliminated in the foreseeable future. They are immoral in essence because they are primarily directed against the civilian population and carry an inherent threat to life on Earth.

2. The overall current situation in Russia is such that it is not conducive to peace-promoting tendencies. Most likely, it is the opposite: a new arms build-up cycle can emerge, which will encompass, among other things, nuclear weapons.

3. Only international forces, and first and foremost, the United Nations, are capable of combating militarism. As for the United States, having emerged as a world leader, it must play a primary role in the peace process, in the process of disarmament.