

Making Progress on Nuclear Disarmament

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United Nations First Committee, 23 October 2009

The elimination of nuclear weapons is being discussed today with a seriousness that has been absent during most of the nuclear age. It has taken strong advocacy over many years by civil society, non-nuclear weapon states, and international organizations to achieve this.

World-wide public support for nuclear abolition is evident in polls showing overwhelming majorities even in the nuclear-armed states in favor of a verified agreement to eliminate these weapons. The most recent example is the poll carried out in 21 countries by Global Zero in 2008. These countries included all those with nuclear weapons, except for North Korea.

The poll showed that, on average, across all these countries, three out of four people support an international agreement for eliminating all nuclear weapons according to a timetable. The public will for nuclear abolition is clear. What are missing are appropriate policies by the nuclear-armed states.

In his now famous Prague speech in April, President Obama said "As the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act... So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

The recognition of a "moral responsibility" by the United States to abolish nuclear weapons is profoundly important and is to be welcomed. This is in part why so many people around the world are hopeful that the long sought for goal of abolishing nuclear weapons finally may be within reach.

But President Obama is not the first American president to offer a vision of nuclear disarmament. Many now recall that President Ronald Reagan agreed with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 to abolish nuclear weapons. More powerful still was the call by President John F. Kennedy.

In a famous September 1961 address to the United Nations, President Kennedy described the profound nuclear danger that hung over mankind and called for the abolition of nuclear weapons. He said "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."

President Kennedy proposed that "disarmament negotiations resume promptly, and continue without interruption until an entire program for general and complete disarmament has not only been agreed but has actually been achieved." This program, he said, should involve "steady reduction in force, both nuclear and conventional, until it has abolished all armies and

¹ This statement is made in a personal capacity

all weapons except those needed for internal order and a new United Nations Peace Force.”

Nothing came from these earlier efforts. Instead of nuclear disarmament, the world saw a runaway arms race in both nuclear weapons and conventional military forces.

What can we expect this time round? In Prague, President Obama said nuclear disarmament might be a distant prospect. He said “This goal [of nuclear disarmament] will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime.”

This week, in a speech in Washington DC, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton explained that the US believes the elimination of nuclear weapons may take much longer than many imagine. She said “we might not achieve the ambition of a world without nuclear weapons in our lifetime or successive lifetimes.”² She did not say how many lifetimes it may take to abolish nuclear weapons.

So what will the United States do with its nuclear weapons? Secretary of State Clinton said this week “until we reach that point of the horizon where the last nuclear weapon has been eliminated, we need to reinforce the domestic consensus that America will maintain the nuclear infrastructure needed to sustain a safe and effective deterrent.” She explained that this means “in addition to supporting a robust nuclear complex budget in 2011, we will also support a new Stockpile Management Program that would focus on sustaining capabilities.”

Taken together, these policy statements make clear that the US under President Obama is committed to sustaining and modernizing its nuclear weapons complex for the indefinite future. This modernization will go hand in hand with reductions in the nuclear arsenal as part of the current arms control talks with Russia and may be one of the conditions attached to the US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

The US is by no means alone in wanting to maintain and modernize its nuclear arsenal. Britain has already made this clear. As proof of its commitment to nuclear disarmament in some far off future, it has offered a plan to build only three new nuclear-armed submarines instead of four. China, France and Russia are also modernizing their nuclear arsenals, as are India and Pakistan, and Israel. None will choose to be left behind.

If the nuclear-armed states are committed to maintaining and modernizing their nuclear weapon complexes, how are these states going to agree to give up their nuclear weapons?

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1887 offers an answer. The nuclear weapons states who agreed to this resolution said they wanted “to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.” They did not say what those conditions are.

If the nuclear-armed states are to be taken seriously in their commitment to eliminate their nuclear weapons, then they need to make clear what they see as the conditions for nuclear disarmament.

Charting a path today to elimination is a more difficult challenge than it seemed six decades ago. In 1946, there was just one nuclear-armed state, and it had an arsenal of about ten nuclear bombs. Today, there are nine nuclear-armed states, and over 20,000 nuclear weapons.

2 United States Institute of Peace lecture, Washington DC, 21 October 2009.

There are also huge stockpiles of highly enriched uranium and plutonium, the key materials for making nuclear weapons. The current global stockpile of highly enriched uranium is roughly 1600 metric tons, more than 99% of which is in the possession of the nuclear-weapon states. It takes 25 kilograms to make a simple nuclear weapon.

The global stockpile of separated plutonium is about 500 metric tons. It is divided almost equally between weapon and civilian stocks, but it is all weapon-usable. It takes about 5 kilograms to make a simple nuclear weapon.

The stocks are so large that the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China have stopped making highly enriched uranium and plutonium production for weapons. But they have not codified an agreement formalizing their respective moratoria and there are no verification arrangements.

India and Pakistan are the principal countries building up today. Pakistan is investing heavily in new fissile material production facilities for its weapons program to try to keep up in its nuclear-arms race with India. North Korea suspended its fissile material production but has now started again. Israel, the only other nuclear weapon state, continues to operate its plutonium-production reactor

The demand to end all production of fissile material for nuclear weapons is over 50 years old. Over ten years have passed since the Conference on Disarmament agreed to negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, as one of the thirteen disarmament steps, the Conference on Disarmament was urged to agree on “the immediate commencement of negotiations on such a treaty with a view to their conclusion within five years.”

The talks have still not started. Pakistan is holding up progress. It is also building new facilities to make fissile materials for nuclear weapons. The longer the delay in starting talks and reaching an agreement, the larger will be its stockpile of nuclear weapons materials. Stockpiles also will grow in India and Israel and North Korea.

To make any contribution to nuclear disarmament, a verified fissile materials treaty will have to both ban all future production for weapons and bring under safeguards all existing civilian stockpiles of fissile material and all the fissile materials that have been declared as excess for weapon purposes. This is the only way to make sure that civilian fissile materials and materials that have been declared excess for weapons are not used to make weapons.

The nuclear weapon states may try to resist any such controls on their civilian and excess stocks of fissile material. They will seek a ban only on future production for weapons. But it is important to remember that one of the NPT Thirteen Steps called for “Arrangements by all nuclear-weapon States to place, as soon as practicable, fissile material designated by each of them as no longer required for military purposes under IAEA or other relevant international verification and arrangements for the disposition of such material for peaceful purposes, to ensure that such material remains permanently outside of military programmes.”

There needs to be new urgency and attention given to the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty.

The First Committee and the May 2010 NPT Review Conference should reaffirm the goal that the Conference on Disarmament begin talks and aim to complete them within five years, on a

verifiable Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty that has both disarmament and nonproliferation objectives.

Pending the completion and entry into force of a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, states should declare a moratorium on all further separation of plutonium and all production of highly enriched uranium and agree to phase out all such production for military and civilian use. This will prevent the stockpiling of weapon-usable fissile material as part of naval propulsion and civilian nuclear energy programs after a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty comes into force.

To assist the process of Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty verification and to lay a basis for the future verification of nuclear disarmament, states should make complete and comprehensive public declarations of their highly enriched uranium and plutonium stockpiles and production histories.

Many other concrete steps are needed towards nuclear disarmament. But they need to be organized into a coherent process. It is not enough to talk about wanting “to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.”

The nuclear weapon states need either to put up or shut up about nuclear disarmament.

How can the nuclear weapon states do this? The nuclear weapon states should be asked to prepare and submit to the United Nations their respective plans for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

This is not an unreasonable demand. In its very first resolution, in January 1946, the United Nations General Assembly called for plans “for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” More than sixty years later, there is still no such plan. It is time for the First Committee and the General Assembly to recall and reaffirm the objective of Resolution 1.1. We have waited long enough.