

INTRODUCTION THE LANGUAGE OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Ray Acheson

*What can be said but not practiced is better not said;
When you utter words, you should always consider their end.¹*

-Zen Buddhist Baiyun

In his April 2009 speech in Prague, US President Obama said he would “seek ... a world without nuclear weapons.” Most people around the world—activists and politicians alike—took these words at face value. They believed the US President had just committed his administration to embarking on a path toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. However, the operative promises of Obama’s Prague speech were of further investment in the US nuclear arsenal, not disarmament.² Obama caveatted his “vision” of a world without nuclear weapons by saying that until all nuclear weapons have been eliminated, the US will “maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to all our allies.”³ However, in reality, “The vain search for an ‘effective’ arsenal that can deter ‘any’ adversary requires unending innovation and continuous real investment, including investment in the extended deterrent to which Obama referred.”⁴

Not surprisingly, the Obama administration’s fiscal year 2011 budget request called for increased funding for nuclear weapons programmes, including “critical infrastructure improvements.”⁵ Darwin BondGraham, co-author of the chapter “Rhetoric vs. reality: the political economy of nuclear weapons and their elimination,” points out that the funding “surge” is unnecessary if the US is planning to reduce its nuclear weapon stockpile. Instead, he argues, “these projects are necessary to lock-in nuclear weapons spending at the labs for many decades, and fully commit the US to nuclear weapons, regardless of how well international treaty discussions might go.”⁶

The budget request came three days after US Vice President Joe Biden wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* explaining that the government

Ray Acheson is the Director of Reaching Critical Will.

would seek an increase of \$5 billion over five years for nuclear weapons.⁷ Biden's article itself came ten days after George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn (the "four horsemen") wrote their third *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, which laid out arguments for why funding for the nuclear weapon laboratories needed to increase.⁸

Led by these "four horsemen," the political and defence intellectual elite in the United States have crafted a new dominant discourse around nuclear weapons. This discourse has spread to the wider international community and is now used by elites in other nuclear weapon states and by those in states that shelter under the US nuclear umbrella. This discourse is couched in terms familiar to nuclear weapon abolition advocates—terms such as disarmament, elimination, and world free of nuclear weapons. It thus appears different than the nuclear weapons discourse created by such elites during the Cold War, which included terms such as mutually assured destruction and strategic stability. Yet, there is one key term present in both discourses: nuclear deterrence.

There is wide recognition among civil society and military strategists alike that nuclear deterrence is irrelevant to the perceived threats facing the world today—such as terrorism, climate change, food, water, and energy shortages, and increasing global economic disparity. Indeed, nuclear weapons are antithetical to mitigating these converging crises, as their development, deployment, and proliferation increases global tensions, disparities, polarizations, and environmental degradation and squanders the economic, political, and human resources that could otherwise be used to confront and solve these crises.

In fact, the only thing that nuclear weapons seem to deter is disarmament—this "contagious doctrine of deterrence"⁹ has been used as a rationale by all the governments that possess nuclear weapons to acquire these weapons originally and to maintain them now.

Yet, the new elite champions of nuclear disarmament around the world continue to emphasize the importance of maintaining an "effective nuclear deterrent" until nuclear weapons are eliminated. Another important aspect of the new mainstream discourse maintains that until non-proliferation is absolutely assured, those who possess nuclear weapons will need to retain theirs. This illogic—we will keep the weapons until we no longer "need" them—illuminates the reality of the elite political establishments' intended

actions behind the rhetoric of their words. These actions seek absolute guarantees that no other states will ever acquire nuclear weapons under any circumstance at any point in the future while in the meantime preserving and enhancing their own nuclear capacities.

Nuclear disarmament in this now-mainstream discourse is in fact “arms control as the pursuit of military advantage by diplomatic means.”¹⁰ In particular, the US, UK, and French governments have issued varying degrees of verbal support for nuclear disarmament, but in terms that describe disarmament “entirely for what it means for the rest of the world—securing nuclear materials and preventing other states from going nuclear or further developing their existing arsenals.”¹¹ Based on reports and statements issued by these governments¹², it appears that the US, UK, and French governments plan to offer some comprehensive rhetoric on their commitment to nuclear disarmament as a future goal while making firm demands on the rest of the world for commitments to nuclear non-proliferation as a present imperative. These states, which already work to maintain an unequal world order of nuclear haves and have-nots through the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and increasingly seek to implement the Treaty’s rules in a discriminatory fashion, have adopted a discourse about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation that advances their own narrowly perceived interests in a way that is detrimental to common security.

A discourse of nuclear weapons that establishes non-proliferation as disarmament—and modernization of and investment in nuclear weapons infrastructure as a necessary precursor to disarmament—serves to further entrench the perception and role of nuclear weapons as instruments of power. In his chapter in this book on “Iran’s challenge to the nuclear order,” Michael Veiluva argues that the “political, ideological, and even theological attributes attached to nuclear weapons” and the resulting *perceptions* of their role and value is a critical component in any decision to obtain and retain them. As the “platinum credit card of state power, influence, and nationalistic pride,” he argues that nuclear weapons are “endowed with more complex and significant political attributes that combine to create units of international exchange as well as conflict.”

Zia Mian of Princeton University, who has written the chapter “Toward a fissile material (cut-off) treaty,” likewise has noted, “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 weapon states.”¹³

This perception of power inevitably attracts others. But part of the value of nuclear weapons is that they offer admittance into a very exclusive club, wherein the powerful can ensure the maintenance of a world order compatible to their interests. Newcomers, unless willing to “play by the rules” and acquiesce to the hegemonic world order, challenge not only the privileged status afforded by nuclear weapons but the very world order that sustains them.

As Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill, and Sara Ruddick argue in the chapter, “The relevance of gender for eliminating weapons of mass destruction,” the concept of proliferation, as used in the mainstream discourse, constructs some nuclear weapons as a problem and turns a blind eye to others. It asserts that there are legitimate possessors “implicitly not only entitled to those weapons, but to modernize and develop new generations of them as well.”

Proponents of this perspective work to prevent proliferation in order to prevent nuclear weapons from “falling into the wrong hands”. They purport that the “problematic” nuclear weapons are only those that “spread” into the arsenals of other, formerly non-possessor states. Cohn, Hill, and Ruddick note that the “legitimate” nuclear weapon possessors consider themselves prudent, mature, restrained, while the unruly others are irrational, unpredictable, incompetent. This discourse serves to further entrench and politicize the differences between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon possessors. It gives these “others”—emasculated by the heavily gendered attributes assigned to them—one more reason to desire nuclear weapons.

The mainstream nuclear disarmament discourse, therefore, does not help close the gaps in a world starkly divided between haves and have nots, powerful and powerless. It is, quite simply, not intended to lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons or reduce their perceived value.

It is thus difficult but imperative to force an examination of the assumptions and language surrounding nuclear weapons and their elimination. Hugh Gusterson, a professor of anthropology and sociology who specializes in nuclear culture, argues that it is necessary to understand “the importance of discourses and practices that permeate all corners of society and whose power may lie in their dispersed and routine ordinariness.”¹⁴ Carol Cohn notes that part of the difficulty in analyzing the discourse arises because as-

sumptions in established discourses are treated as “objective reality” rather than as beliefs stemming from personal identities, values, or position.¹⁵

This book, a collaborative work of several non-governmental researchers, writers, activists, and scholars, critically examines the mainstream discourse of nuclear weapons. It explores some of the most important challenges to nuclear disarmament that governments and civil society will face at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and beyond. The authors of this book strive to cut through the dominant discourse to highlight the prospects and pitfalls for nuclear disarmament in the current world order—and offer some suggestions on how to move beyond this order to a better one, more conducive to nuclear disarmament as well as to social and economic justice for human beings.

Part I of the book highlights several challenges to nuclear disarmament. It begins by further investigating the problems of rhetoric that have been identified here and goes on to examine issues related to nuclear sharing arrangements within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and between the United States and the United Kingdom; the relationship between nuclear weapons and nuclear energy; the implications (and complications) of both nuclear weapons and energy in the contexts of India, the Middle East, and Iran; and the threats from missiles, missile “defence,” and space weapons.

Part II begins again with an examination of discourse, suggesting an alternative analytical framework that includes human security and gender analysis. It lays out some specific recommendations for achieving concrete nuclear disarmament in the near and long-terms and includes chapters on the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention and a fissile material (cut-off) treaty. The final chapter highlights some lessons from other arms control and disarmament processes that could assist along the road to nuclear abolition.

Throughout, the authors demonstrate that nuclear disarmament must be pursued in the context of a broader movement for social, environmental, and economic justice and equality. Abolishing nuclear weapons without affecting change in the systems that sustain, promote, and in fact *require* the existence of nuclear weapons to survive is impossible. The military utility of nuclear weapons may be diminishing in the current world order, but nuclear weapons are still useful to the economic and political elite of many countries and will thus be pursued by others seeking the same elite status. The first step on this road is exposing the doublespeak around nuclear weapons and their elimination.