

UNSG Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters
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I'd like to pick up where John left off, on good faith implementation of Article VI of the NPT. John's reference to the potential creation of a preparatory process for a nuclear weapons convention, which the Secretary-General could support as a tangible effort for the elimination of nuclear weapons, would be an excellent way to concretely implement Article VI.

But as the research and analysis I want to highlight today shows, beginning and successfully concluding a nuclear weapons convention will take more than getting a group of diplomats together in a room. As has been clearly demonstrated by President Obama's struggle to secure the consent of the Senate for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the will of any particular government may not be sufficient in itself for accomplishing nuclear disarmament. There are other, powerful interests at play, which must be considered and dealt with in any process that will successfully lead to nuclear disarmament.

A state's interest in acquiring and retaining nuclear weapons is dispersed institutionally and socially throughout the country. All nuclear-armed states possess these weapons because powerful interests in their governments, militaries, and related corporations and academic institutions benefit from investment in the weapons' production and maintenance.

Although nuclear weapons certainly have unique physical characteristics, prime among these being their untold destructiveness, they are endowed with more complex and significant political attributes that combine to create units of international exchange as well as conflict. Since the invention of nuclear weapons, they have come to be considered the platinum credit card of state power, influence, and nationalistic pride. Nuclear programmes are expensive, requiring the diversion and centralization of technical and military resources and investment of state revenue for the benefit of well-situated elites. As the United States and Soviet Union witnessed in the 1950s, nuclear weapon programmes are typically accompanied by the transformation of political culture to accompany the exponential growth of the both internal and external security apparatus that acquire organic permanence even when the historic rationales for their creation no longer exist—for example, 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—what the Secretary-General has called the “contagious doctrine of deterrence”¹ has been used as a rationale by all the governments

* This presentation draws on a chapter in from a forthcoming collaborative NGO publication that Ray Acheson is currently editing, written by Michael Veiluva from the Western States Legal Foundation, and from research about corporate and political power structures done by a group of young people in the US who are trying to figure out why nuclear weapons still exist.

¹ Ban Ki-moon, “The United Nations and Security in a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World,” Statement to the East-West Institute

that possess nuclear weapons to acquire these weapons originally and to maintain them now.

Yet, military strategists and politicians tied to nuclear weapon laboratories in nuclear-armed states continue to emphasize the importance of maintaining an “effective nuclear deterrent” until nuclear weapons are eliminated. Nuclear deterrence has been turned from an abstract concept into a material object that requires continued investment in the nuclear weapon complexes to survive.

Compounding this reification of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence is the NPT itself. While pursuing the laudable goal of halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons, it also attempted to juridically formalize a two-tiered hierarchy of nuclear weapon haves and have-nots. The NPT requires a mandatory system of controls and verification for non-nuclear weapon states. In exchange, the five nuclear weapon states agreed to participate in the exchange of peaceful nuclear technology with ratifying non-nuclear weapon states and, in Article VI, of the Treaty, promised to undertake good faith negotiations on disarmament.

Since 1970, the global nuclear order under the NPT has not moved further than *making permanent* the preeminent status of nuclear weapon states and their attendant institutions. These institutions thrive on a particular symbiosis between threats and response, dominated in the first half century by the US-Soviet Union rivalry. But the demise of the Soviet Union as the United States’ main nuclear antagonist revealed a remarkable development: the nuclear powers proved unprepared to shed the nuclear war economy established in the 1950s. The vast nuclear infrastructure was institutionally *animate*, capable of transforming and sustaining its own interests regardless of an external threat to which thousands of nuclear warheads had any relevance. These nuclear institutions now operate much the same as large private corporations: serving constituents, seeking new missions, and acquiring political influence. Indeed, the semi-privatization of the US nuclear weapons laboratories earlier in the decade should not go unremarked.

The success of these institutions appears in sustained or increased funding, new appropriations, and stable lifecycles. All of the five NPT nuclear weapon states are engaged in or have plans for modernizing, upgrading, and/or extending the lives of their nuclear weapon systems and related infrastructure. At the same time, the governments of many of these same states have pledged their commitment to eventually eliminating nuclear weapons. It would seem reasonable that one of the first steps toward disarmament is ceasing to invest in and plan for nuclear weapons for the indefinite future.

This is a good example of a clash between the ostensible political will of a state’s government and the interests of its nuclear industrial complexes. It is this type of clash that undermines concrete disarmament measures. New thinking is needed to prevent the powerful industrial and corporate interests from undermining progress toward nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. If a preparatory process for a nuclear weapons convention or some other path towards implementing Article VI in a concrete way is to be successful, we need some innovation.

We could look to the context of bilateral nuclear disarmament for some possible examples. The current US-Russia negotiations on a replacement for START requires both governments to have their larger bureaucratic apparatus approve the agreement. It is anticipated that in the United States, the Senate will demand more investments and modernization of nuclear weapons in exchange for ratifying the new START. The powerful industrial interests in the country will want to assure that they are not economically or politically affected by any strategic reductions treaty. A possible way around this

event Seizing the Moment: Breakthrough Measures to Build a New East-West Consensus on Weapons of Mass Destruction and Disarmament, New York, 28 October 2009.

would be unilateral reductions by both the United States and Russia, done in tandem but without a formalized agreement. This is but one example.

I would urge that the Secretary-General press for such innovation in nuclear disarmament and arms control processes. It would be helpful for the Secretary-General to promote disarmament measures based on the understanding that states are not unified actors but instead consist of many opposing and powerful interests that constrain any particular policies and actions of the government—and that these policies and actions might not match up. Once we can shift mainstream thinking about the obstacles to disarmament through this lens, we will have a better opportunity to develop realistic solutions.

Another needed shift in mainstream thinking is the concept of “national security.” While the *use* of nuclear weapons clearly would not bring anyone security, nuclear weapons nevertheless are a central feature of the “national security” discourse. However, the “national interest,” as it is typically invoked in this sense, does not refer to the well-being of the general population, but of those managing the military-industrial-academic complexes.

Most civil society actors are interested in reframing or redefining this concept of security and power. Many young people who are getting involved in peace and security issues do not see nuclear weapons as a viable component of “national security” and instead prefer to understand these matters in terms of human security. They see the relationship between nuclear weapons and human security as similar to that of the relationship between economic inequalities and social justice: if you have the first, the second is very difficult to obtain.

When the Cold War ended, nuclear disarmament activists and the general public were relieved and believed that the threat of the nuclear holocaust was over. But the military-industrial complexes survived and have even flourished, conjuring up new justifications to protect the nuclear weapons enterprise into the future. This has been disappointing, to say the least, for those who worked for disarmament during the Cold War. It is completely unacceptable to young people getting involved in the issue now, who did not experience the fear of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War. For youth in particular, there is no justification for the existence of 23,000 nuclear weapons or for vast sums of money to spent on building the nuclear threat anew in the 21st century.

This debate about security and nuclear weapons is directly relevant to the NPT because in 2000, states parties unanimously agreed that the role of nuclear weapons should be diminished in security doctrines. Diminishing the role of nuclear weapons also requires shrinking their perceived value. Security doctrines that include a prominent role for nuclear weapons signal the alleged security benefits of nuclear weapons derived by major powers and therefore promote proliferation.

The final report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament argued that in order to eliminate nuclear weapons, perceptions of their role and utility must be changed “to achieve their progressive delegitimation, from a position in which they occupied a central strategic place to one in which their role is seen as quite marginal, and eventually wholly unnecessary as well as undesirable.”

Many researchers have recently sought to identify who benefits from the maintenance of nuclear weapons. They ask, whose security is protect by nuclear weapons? They have determined that the security of human beings is in fact undermined by the creation, existence, and potential use of nuclear weapons. So whose security are they for?

The Secretary-General's support for a human security approach to nuclear disarmament is valuable. In this context, his participation in the 62nd annual DPI/NGO conference in Mexico City in September 2009 was especially helpful. His recognition that the world is overarmed while peace is underfunded is a good analytical lens for seeing through the "national security" / human security divide. This perspective is being used in NGO advocacy in the lead up to the Review Conference to undermine the argument that nuclear weapons are necessary for security.