

Make Disarmament a “Global Enterprise”

Statement by the Leaders of the Arms Control Association, Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, Nuclear Information Project of the Federation of American Scientists, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Union of Concerned Scientists

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We thank the organizers of this conference and all of the participating states and NGOs for their contributions. The conferences on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons have been a useful mechanism to press for progress on disarmament and highlight the enormous risks of the nuclear weapons status quo. We hope they spur further concrete action in the months ahead.

Nearly five years after the successful 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, follow-through on the consensus action plan—particularly the 22 interrelated disarmament steps—has been very disappointing.

Since the entry into force of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2011, Russia and the United States have failed to start talks to further reduce their still enormous nuclear stockpiles, which far exceed any plausible deterrence requirements.ⁱ

Unfortunately, Russia has not taken up U.S. President Barack Obama’s June 2013 proposal to pursue further reductions, by an additional one-third below the ceilings set by New START. Many of the roughly 1,600 strategic warheads deployed by each side remain on prompt launch status.ⁱⁱ

Meanwhile, NATO’s nuclear planning group has been unable to agree on a proposal for transparency and accounting for Russian and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. Russia, for its part, refuses to engage in talks on tactical nuclear weapons.

The numerical nuclear arms race between the United States and Russia may be over, but the two states are busy modernizing their nuclear weapons and delivery systems, as are France and the United Kingdom. China is continuing to modernize and expand its nuclear forces and a technological nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan, is underway.

Progress toward entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is stalled. Negotiations on the fissile material cutoff treaty and other important disarmament proposals have still not begun at the Conference on Disarmament after more than fifteen years.

Creative, practical ideas are needed to overcome the obstacles and excuses. We recognize that some states and civil society organizations endorse the pursuit of a ban on nuclear weapons, while others do not believe this is the next best step. This should not prevent us from working together in the coming months and years to consider, explore, and pursue other worthwhile ideas and initiatives that would help reduce global nuclear dangers and move us closer toward our common goal: the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

We urge all states at this conference and all NGOs to come together around four major objectives, among others:

1. Examine dangerous doctrines. In 2010, all of the NPT nuclear-weapon states committed to “diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons” and “[d]iscuss policies that could prevent the use of nuclear weapons.” Unfortunately, none of them has undertaken demonstrable, concrete steps to do so.

At the 2015 NPT Review Conference and elsewhere, the leaders of the world’s nuclear-armed states should be called upon to explain the effects of their nuclear war plans, if these plans were to be carried out, and how they believe the use of hundreds of such weapons would be consistent with humanitarian law and the laws of war as some nuclear-armed states claim.ⁱⁱⁱ

Given the catastrophic consequences of the large-scale use of nuclear weapons against many dozens if not hundreds of targets, as envisioned in the U.S., Russian, French, Chinese, British, Indian and Pakistani nuclear war plans, it is hard to see how the use of significant numbers of nuclear weapons could be consistent with international humanitarian law or any common sense interpretation of the Law of Armed Conflict.

2. Accelerate U.S.-Russian nuclear cuts and freeze other nuclear-armed nation stockpiles. Further nuclear reductions need not wait for a new U.S.-Russian arms control treaty. The United States and Russia could accelerate the pace of reductions under New START to reach the agreed limits before the 2018 deadline. As long as both sides continue to reduce force levels below the treaty limits, U.S. and Russian leaders could undertake parallel, verifiable reductions well below New START ceilings.

Other countries must get off the disarmament sidelines, particularly China, France, India and Pakistan, which continue to improve their nuclear capabilities. These states are all pursuing new ballistic missile, cruise missile, and sea-based nuclear delivery systems. In addition, Pakistan has dangerously lowered the threshold for nuclear weapons use by developing tactical nuclear weapons capabilities to counter perceived Indian conventional military threats.

These arsenals, though smaller in number than the U.S. and Russian arsenals, are just as dangerous and destabilizing. As we have learned here at this conference, the destructive power of just a few nuclear weapons can produce catastrophic, cross-border impacts. Leaders in Beijing, New Delhi, and Islamabad profess support for nondiscriminatory disarmament and minimum deterrence, but there is little or no dialogue among themselves and with others on how to achieve genuine nuclear risk reduction.

To start, the world’s other nuclear-armed states should pledge not to increase the overall size of their stockpiles as long as U.S. and Russian reductions continue.

A unified push for further U.S.-Russian arms cuts combined with a global nuclear weapons freeze by the other nuclear-armed states could create the conditions for multilateral action on disarmament.

3. Convene Nuclear Disarmament Summits: As Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Shultz argued in an op-ed last year, a new multilateral effort for nuclear disarmament dialogue is needed. In 2009, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon suggested that the UN Security Council convene a summit on nuclear disarmament.

Now is the time for a group of concerned states to invite the leaders of a representative group of 20 to 30 nuclear and nonnuclear weapon states to a one- or two-day summit on the pursuit of a joint enterprise to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

The high-level meeting—ideally held near the August 6 and 9, 2015 anniversaries of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—could be an historic, new, and productive starting point for discussions (not simply speeches) on proposals for advancing nuclear disarmament based on two principles: a clear understanding of the humanitarian impact of the use of nuclear weapons, and an objective assessment of the security concerns of states, including the threats posed by a range of nuclear risks.

All participants should be encouraged to bring “house gifts”—specific actions by states that would concretely reduce the threat of nuclear weapons use, freeze or reduce numbers of nuclear weapons, reduce the role of nuclear weapons, or make their nuclear programs more transparent.

Such a summit would complement existing efforts among the P5 nuclear-armed states to explore common definitions and concepts for disarmament and provide a forum to follow up on the important discussions held in Oslo, Nayarit, and Vienna on the impacts of nuclear weapons use, testing, and production.

4. Follow through on the CTBT. It is often said that nuclear weapons have been used only twice in history. In reality, the nuclear weapon states have undertaken more than 2,000 nuclear weapons test explosions to develop new types of nuclear weapons and to signal to potential target nations the terrible destructive force of nuclear weapons. As we have heard at this conference, the effects of nuclear testing have been widespread and they have been devastating. Millions have been affected.

The vast majority of the world’s nations recognize that nuclear explosive testing is no longer acceptable, but due to the inaction of a few, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has not formally entered into force. In the interest of global security and out of respect for the victims and survivors of nuclear testing, it is past time to act.

Despite statements of support for the CTBT from China and the United States, neither state has taken sufficient action to ratify the treaty. Stronger leadership from Washington and Beijing is overdue and necessary.

Other states must do their part too. Ratification by Egypt, Iran, and Israel—three other key CTBT holdouts—would also reduce nuclear weapons-related security concerns in the Middle East and help create the conditions necessary for the realization of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Neither India nor Pakistan say they want to resume testing, yet their governments have failed to take a serious look at joining the CTBT, which is a non-discriminatory measure that would help reduce nuclear tensions throughout Asia.

As President Obama said last year, “[S]o long as nuclear weapons exist, we are not truly safe. Complacency is not in the character of great nations.”

In the coming months and years, creative, bold approaches will be needed to overcome old and new obstacles to the long-running effort to eliminate the potential for nuclear catastrophe.

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ⁱ Analyses published in 2001-2002 by Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Natural Resources Defense Council shows that a Russian attack involving 300 thermonuclear warheads hitting targets in the United States would kill more than 70 million Americans from blast effects and firestorms in the first half hour. A U.S. attack of similar size would have the same devastating impact on Russia. Even a more “limited” nuclear exchange would destroy national communications and transportation networks, public health and sanitation systems, and food distribution systems. In the months following this initial assault, tens of millions more would die from starvation, exposure, radiation poisoning, and infectious disease. Each of the strategic nuclear missile submarines in the U.S. or Russian fleet is capable of triggering such a global disaster.

ⁱⁱ In 2008, President-elect Barack Obama said: “Keeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War. Such policies increase the risk of catastrophic accidents or miscalculation.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The June 2013 Report on the Nuclear Weapons Employment Strategy of the United States claims that “[t]he new guidance makes clear that all plans must also be consistent with the fundamental principles of the Law of Armed Conflict. Accordingly, plans will, for example, apply the principles of distinction and proportionality and seek to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects. The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects.”