

Urgent Appeal for a Nuclear Weapon Free World

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"Urgent Appeal for a Nuclear Weapon Free World"

Thomas Countryman, board chairman

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It is an undeserved honor for me to be here with such distinguished women and men, not because they are distinguished, which they are, but because they are passionate and active.

Our previous speaker, Dr. Ira Helfand gave us a clear diagnosis: nuclear weapons present a fatal, catastrophic threat to human civilization. The human cost of nuclear weapons is unconscionable, and a world without nuclear weapons is a world that we must all actively pursue. This is the reason that we must constantly repeat the words of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev who said: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

To be brief, the prognosis is grim. The risk that the world will stumble into nuclear war is higher than it has been since the end of the Cold War, and I will try to explain why.

I am not a physician, but I think I am correct in saying that the prognosis is not helped when the patient is unable to acknowledge that he is at risk. The human capacity for denial, and for generational amnesia, is nearly limitless. After 74 years during which nuclear war has not occurred, too many humans assume that something that hasn't happened in their lifetime will never happen, whether it is a flood, an earthquake, or nuclear war.

People are not reminded of the risk of nuclear war on a daily basis, as they were during the Cold War, nor are mass media covering the risk with the seriousness it deserves. It is positive that so many people are concerned about the more visible effects of climate change, but to an extent, it diverts public attention from the issue of nuclear conflict, which would amount to climate change at supersonic speed. Without detracting from the world's focus on climate change, we must do more to raise public consciousness about the nuclear risk, to make the patient aware of the true prognosis.

Let me highlight four particular reasons that contribute to a higher risk of nuclear conflict.

First, we live in a time in which there are a number of potential geographic flashpoints at which a conventional conflict could escalate rapidly into a nuclear confrontation:

- North Korea and Iran attract the most attention from the U.S. administration, but they are not what Concern me the most. Despite its worrying actions, Iran remains years away from a weapons capability. And while the US and DPRK seem incapable of advancing peace, they have at least backed off their mutual threats of fire and fury.
- Of greater concern is the risk of nuclear war between India and Pakistan, which I consider the most likely arena to see the first use of nuclear weapons since 1945. In February we saw the first case in modern history of two nuclear-armed states flying combat missions over each other's territory. Even worse, journalists, social media and officials considered to be 'responsible' on both sides were publicly advocating the use of nuclear weapons. And in the weeks following, India's defense minister seemed to reverse the country's no first use policy.
- The risk of nuclear conflict between Russia and the United States is, in my opinion, lower

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than it is between Pakistan and India, but it is still higher than it has been since the end of the Cold War, and perhaps the highest it has been since 1962. And of course, an all-out Nuclear confrontation between the US and Russia would be virtually certain to spell the end of our civilization. The U.S.-Russian arms control relationship is severely fractured, with the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in August and no clear prospect for a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or New START. The treaty is scheduled to expire on February 5, 2021 but can be extended if the U.S. and Russian presidents both agree.

Moscow has expressed its willingness to extend the treaty, but Washington has failed to engage. [If New START does expire, the world's two largest nuclear arsenals will be without limits for the first time in nearly 50 years.](#)

Russia's continued military occupation of two of its neighbors, and its interference in other countries, must raise concerns about a conventional military confrontation in Europe. And the military doctrine of both nations makes it quite possible that a conventional conflict can escalate in a series of steps to an all-out nuclear exchange. A new simulation developed by Princeton University estimates that if, in a NATO.-Russian confrontation in the Baltics, one side resorts to the "tactical" use of nuclear weapons and the other responds, their current war plans could lead to an escalatory exchange involving 1,700 nuclear detonations against military and civilian targets. Within just the first five hours, nearly 100 million people would be killed or injured. (I urge you to watch the video simulation created by the [Princeton Program on Science and Global Security titled: "Plan A."](#))

Second, words matter. Rhetoric matters. Doctrine matters. For twenty years after the Cold War, most national leaders avoided talking about nuclear weapons as what made their country 'great'. But more recently, first the Russian President and now the American President have reverted to the kind of language we once heard mainly from North Korea.

More worrying is that military leaders in both countries have gone back to the Cold War practice of imagining that a nuclear war can be 'limited' 'contained' or 'won'. Russia maintains a stockpile of 2000 non-strategic nuclear warheads, a number that is impossible to reconcile with its declared nuclear doctrine. And the US is expanding its delivery options for so-called 'low-yield' warheads. Planning for the unthinkable has long been the job of military planners. But the current discussion in Moscow and Washington is not just about sustaining deterrence in extreme situations - it is actually making the unthinkable more likely to occur.

Most experts agree that it would be stabilizing if states in possession of nuclear weapons would declare a 'No First Use' policy and adapt a posture consistent with that policy. Unfortunately, neither Russia nor the US have declared such a policy, nor have most of the other nuclear-capable states. What these countries refuse to acknowledge is that there is absolutely no guarantee that a nuclear war can be controlled. There is no such thing as a "limited" nuclear war.

Third, the nuclear strategies that could lead to the firing of hundreds of nuclear weapons remain susceptible to false alarms. This risk has not diminished with the passing years. Others have documented the several cases in which human error caused national alerts and brought leaders in Moscow or Washington within minutes of making a civilization-ending decision.

Consider just one such event. In 1995, the Russian early warning system interpreted the launch of a scientific rocket from Norway as a nuclear missile from an American submarine. In the absence of any tension between Russia and the US, President Yeltsin did activate the mobile nuclear command center, but did not authorize a launch of Russian weapons. In 2019, with the current deep distrust in the great power relations, can we have any confidence that the current leaders would react as calmly and deliberately?

As argued convincingly by former Secretary of Defense William Perry, the continued reliance by both major nuclear powers on intercontinental missiles for the bulk of their deterrent is a major factor in the hair-trigger nature of their nuclear postures. The pressure of 'use it or lose it' is what causes both to consider that they have only a few minutes to distinguish between an actual attack and a false alarm.

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And fourth, new and emerging technologies offer some potential for reducing the risk of accidental nuclear war. But the downside risk is greater. Hypersonic vehicles, cyber technology, artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons systems all could upset the delicate assumptions upon which bilateral stability has rested. To take just one example, cyber ‘probing’ by one nation against another nation’s military command and control systems could be interpreted as a prelude to a nuclear attack, and lead to a pre-emptive launch of nuclear weapons.

Others will discuss the appropriate therapy to address this risky situation but let me offer a few quick thoughts on the way forward.

The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a powerful moral statement and – we can hope – will be seen by historians as a crucial ethical turning point for humanity, worthy of a Nobel prize. In my view, the more urgent need now is for leading nuclear and non-nuclear states to halt and reverse the arms race, reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, and eliminate the most destabilizing types of weapons.

This means that decisions that can make nuclear war more or less likely cannot be left only to Presidents Trump and Putin. NATO members must show leadership in implementing the alliance’s declared policy of reducing reliance on nuclear deterrence and moving toward a nuclear-free world. I especially welcome the fact that the parliaments of the Netherlands and Canada have actively pushed their governments to articulate and press for policies in this direction, and that those governments have responded.

In the environmental movement, we say “Act locally, think globally”. What I hope to see from Netherlands and other Allies is that they work within NATO, but that they not limit their creative thinking and policy initiatives to the strictures of NATO doctrine.

Specifically, NATO members must use summit-level contacts, such as the NATO Summit next week in London, to convince the US President of the importance to the Alliance of New Start extension. And if we are to avoid a repetition of the nuclear Euromissile race of the 1980s, practical ideas will not come from Washington or Moscow – they must come from Europe.

And non-nuclear states must speak clearly: that they do not accept the efforts by Washington and Moscow to RE-define and walk away from their legal obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament. If great powers will not lead, others must.

Furthermore, genuine strategic stability talks between the United States and Russia are urgently needed, with the main point of conversation being the extension of New START. The lapse of this treaty would potentially spark a new global arms race and increase the chances of a nuclear war—whether that war is on purpose or accidentally.

After all, the Cold War had a handful of close calls, incidents in which the United States or the Soviet Union believed the other had launched a nuclear attack only for it to turn out to be a false alarm. More recently, there was an incident in Hawaii in January 2018, when an alert went across the state warning of an impending ballistic missile attack only to be revoked nearly 40 minutes later. Though the alert was not for a nuclear attack specifically, it nevertheless reminded us all that the real risk of a war with devastating weapons remains to this day, and there is a true possibility of a so-called “limited” war escalating to include the use of nuclear weapons. Such a situation, as I said before, cannot be controlled and will only lead to absolute devastation.

And the last suggestion for informing our approach is for allies, in particular the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, to play a more active and nuanced role in reducing the role of nuclear weapons in war plans and moving towards a world free from nuclear weapons.

NATO supported the United States’ withdrawal from the INF Treaty, but has expressed support for New START, highlighting that the treaty makes the world a safer place. Such statements now demand action, as the future of New START becomes increasingly ill-fated every passing day.

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The prognosis is that a full-scale nuclear confrontation—given the current potential hot flashpoints, risky doctrines governing nuclear use, the continued possibility of false alarms in early warning systems, and emerging game-changing technologies - remains a distinct possibility.

As I have outlined, however, there are steps to be taken by both nuclear and non-nuclear powers and by allies. But the task of building a world without nuclear weapons is not limited to governments and national leaders.

[As Pope Francis stated this week in Japan](#), when he reiterated the immorality of the possession of nuclear weapons: “Turning this ideal into reality requires the participation of all: people, religious communities, civil society, states that possess nuclear weapons and those that do not possess them, military and private sectors, and international organizations.”

Now, the Holy Father did not specifically mention doctors, so let me thank the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Medische Polemologie for organizing this event, and say that it is the activism of doctors focused on the health and survival of the human species, of educators teaching the hard realities to the next generation, of elder statesmen, of civil society activists, of pragmatists, of radicals, and of pragmatic radicals. These are the ones who inspire each of us to teach individuals, to motivate society and to move governments to a more peaceful path.

Thank you, and God bless.

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