Preventing Nuclear Disaster

Presentation by ACA Research Director to Brainstorming Session on "Promoting Disarmament and Nonproliferation: Exploring New Perspectives and Evolving Consensus"

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Nuclear disarmament is crucial to diminishing nuclear risks, preventing nuclear disaster, and achieving international peace and security. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that nuclear disarmament, like nonproliferation, is a means toward an end and not a goal in and of itself. As I am sure all of you would agree, nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament must proceed in tandem or else they will both stall and peace and security for all will remain elusive. This presentation focuses on how we at the Arms Control Association believe we can best advance nuclear disarmament in the coming years with the implicit understanding that progress must also be made on meeting nonproliferation challenges. Obviously, considerable overlap exists between them.

By all accounts, recent years have not been kind to nuclear disarmament. Indeed, this past year has been particularly egregious: the nuclear-weapon states continued to shun the "13 steps" agreed to at the 2000 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference; the 2005 NPT Review Conference ended empty-handed; the Conference on Disarmament strung its stretch of sterility to seven years without any actual negotiations; and the final document of the United Nations Millennium+5 Leaders Summit had all references to disarmament and nonproliferation purged from it. To top it off, French President Jacques Chirac in January declared nuclear arms as the newest weapon to counter terrorists.

Still, the past does not have to portend the future. To be sure, great strides are unlikely in the near term, at least until 2009. It is no secret that the current U.S. administration is no fan of disarmament and claims it has already done more than enough in this field. As then-Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton asserted April 27, 2004, "We cannot divert attention from the violations [of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)] we face by focusing on [disarmament] issues that do not exist."

Nevertheless, small steps forward are possible. It is critical that forward momentum be maintained so that when the opportunity arrives the pace can be picked up. It’s also just as important to keep trudging ahead to avoid backsliding.

Toward this end, let me volunteer four general themes to guide future action and then explore specific recommendations to advance each of them:

- Work to reduce the role and salience, not just the numbers, of nuclear weapons;
- Focus on areas where non-nuclear-weapon state interests align with those of the nuclear-
weapon states;
- Expand sights and efforts beyond the big two nuclear-weapon states; and
- Create conditions for progress in the coming years.

More Than Numbers
The sheer number of nuclear weapons today—approximately 27,000 spread out among eight, possibly nine, states—is staggering. Elimination of these weapons is the only sure guarantee that they will not be used to destroy human life or blackmail or bully other states. But, short of elimination, there are other measures, such as de-alerting and negative security assurances, to reduce the risk of use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons.

The power and value of such measures should not be underestimated. As more time passes without the use of nuclear weapons, the norm against their use will grow stronger and their military utility will diminish even further in the eyes of military and political leaders around the world. As specific weapons systems age and outlive their supposed usefulness, they will be retired. Last September’s retirement of the final U.S. 10-warhead MX is just one example. Similarly, Russia scrapped its last rail-based SS-24 system last year.

Of course, the institutions and people who are invested in supporting these weapons will latch on to new purposes to justify their retention or propose alternative or new arms to address changing circumstances. We have seen recent examples of this in the United States with the proposal to develop a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) and more recently the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW). Yet, sanity prevailed. RNEP has been abandoned and RRW has been constrained by Congress and is under heavy scrutiny.

Still, the United States is exploring ways to create what it calls a more “responsive” nuclear weapons infrastructure to enable the faster production of nuclear weapons in the future if technical problems impair existing warheads or new threats emerge. In addition, Russia continues to assert that nuclear weapons may have some tactical value, India is pursuing a military strategy that entails expanding its nuclear arsenal, France is working to upgrade its nuclear weapon systems, China is continuing with a strategic military modernization toward an uncertain end, and Pakistan values its nuclear weapons as a counter to India’s larger conventional military forces.

Thus, reducing the roles and the salience of nuclear weapons would play an important part of nuclear disarmament. There are several specific measures that can be promoted in this regard.

**De-alerting**
The United States and Russia maintain thousands of nuclear warheads on high-level alert. These weapons could be launched within 15 minutes with no hope of recall. The continuation of this Cold War-era posture is unjustified, particularly at a time when Russia and the United States claim that they are no longer enemies, but friends. This heightened and unnecessary state only serves to perpetuate the possibility of accidental, miscalculated, or unauthorized launch.

Other states should also refrain from copying such dangerous and short-sighted quick-launch postures. In regions of tension, such as South Asia, crisis management would be significantly jeopardized by systems primed for rapid use.

**Negative Security Assurances**
Non-nuclear-weapon states should continue to press the nuclear-weapon states to reaffirm, or better yet codify, past assurances that nuclear weapons will not be employed against states without such arms. Past negative security assurances of 1978 and 1995 have been eroded by Chirac’s recent statement and the Bush administration’s September 2002 adoption of the secret National Security Presidential Directive 17 that specifically stated nuclear weapons are an option for responding to a chemical or biological weapons attack. These self-declared exemptions should not be allowed to go unchallenged because nuclear weapons are not a legitimate or proportionate response to either terrorism or the use of chemical and biological weapons, notwithstanding the fact the use of chemical or biological weapons themselves is illegal and morally repugnant. In this connection, non-
nuclear-weapon states possessing or suspected of having such arsenals should eliminate and renounce them and, thereby, remove this flimsy U.S. rationale for nuclear use. In addition, non-nuclear-weapon states, where possible, should sign and ratify or accede to relevant nuclear-weapon-free zones.

**No First Use**
Nuclear weapons possessors should be pushed to adopt no-first-use policies. At this time, China and India are the only two states that have renounced the first use of their nuclear arms.

In the absence of ending its nuclear deployments, the 26-member NATO alliance also should forswear the first use of their nuclear weapons. In its 1999 Strategic Concept, NATO declared that the possible use of nuclear weapons is "extremely remote." But even this is an overstatement given today's political and geo-strategic realities. Moscow's overwhelming superiority in conventional forces that gave rise to NATO's nuclear policy disappeared long ago and so should NATO's readiness to introduce or employ nuclear weapons in a conflict.

Universal adoption of a no-first-use option should particularly appeal to the United States, which possesses the world's most advanced and powerful conventional military. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate equalizer so it is hard to imagine a situation in which the United States would open the door to the only weapon that would moot U.S. conventional superiority. For this reason, as well as others, there really is not much affinity among the uniformed U.S. military for nuclear weapons.

U.S. political leaders also find it difficult to fathom scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used first, particularly preemptively. Ambassador Linton Brooks, who heads the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration stated November 8, 2005, "While nobody will tie the hands of a president, I can't conceive of circumstances where nuclear pre-emption makes sense...The decision to use nuclear weapons is so apocalyptic that I can't imagine that any president would ever make it lightly." Although Brooks noted that the president's hands should not be tied, they should also not be tethered to nuclear weapons. The president would be liberated, not limited, by removing an option that carries such profound and immeasurable consequences. This holds true for other world leaders as well.

As long as nuclear weapons exist, their role should be confined to deterring a nuclear-weapons attack by another state. Anything more is unjustified. As former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote last year in Foreign Policy, "I would characterize current U.S. nuclear weapons policy as immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous."

**No New Capabilities**
In addition to pursuing a fissile material cutoff treaty to quantitatively cap existing nuclear arsenals, non-nuclear-weapon states should urge all states with nuclear weapons to eschew qualitative improvements to their weapons capabilities. Specifically, the manufacture of new types of nuclear warheads and the modification or upgrade of existing nuclear warheads to imbue them with different performance capabilities for new missions should be prohibited, or in the very least strongly discouraged. The addition of new warhead or delivery system capabilities would dangerously signal to the rest of the world that not only are nuclear weapons needed for the future, but that the roles for them are expanding. The U.S. RNEP program was blocked by Congress for this very reason and similar opposition should be rallied against any nuclear power that seeks to expand or enhance its nuclear capabilities, such as India's plans to add a sea-based leg to its nuclear deterrent and Russia's investment in a new maneuvering nuclear delivery system. The immense damage that would be incurred by the nonproliferation and disarmament regime from any one country's efforts to enhance its nuclear capabilities would far outweigh any marginal-not to mention questionable-military gain that it hoped to achieve.

**Exploiting Common Interests**
The gulf between the nuclear-weapon haves and have-nots may appear unbridgeable at times. Yet, there are issues where common cause exists between the two groups, or at least among countries on both side of the nuclear weapons divide.
Strategic Weapons Verification
The landmark U.S.-Russian START I Treaty is scheduled to expire on December 5, 2009. Although Moscow and Washington successfully met their reduction obligations under the accord in 2001, the treaty continues to play a vital role through its extensive verification regime. The implementation of this regime permits both capitals access and insights into each other's nuclear complex that would not otherwise be possible. In the process, it helps build confidence that neither is cheating in a way that could jeopardize the other's security and it develops regular contacts and relationships between the two government bureaucracies and militaries. But this valuable tool is in danger of disappearing if the START I Treaty is not extended or new verification measures are not appended to the May 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which was negotiated without any verification provisions. Indeed, Russia and the United States said they would rely on the START verification regime to monitor activities under SORT even though this latter agreement's single implementation benchmark is December 31, 2012.

U.S. and Russian officials should be encouraged to begin serious talks soon on either extending the START Treaty and/or developing verification measures for SORT. It is in both countries' interests to preserve, and increase if possible, the existing level of openness that they share when it comes to their strategic forces. If lost, such transparency may never be regained, particularly if relations take a turn for the worse in the future. Neglecting this crucial aspect of their relationship could condemn the two former foes to return to the days of mistrust and miscalculation, as well as a revived strategic arms competition. This danger is particularly acute given Russia's growing sense of being hemmed in by the West as NATO expands and U.S. military bases proliferate on its periphery. Expansive U.S. missile defense plans and declining Soviet strategic forces also are combining to increase the Kremlin's unease. The strategic verification regime must be perpetuated to prevent both nuclear complexes from slipping back behind shrouds of secrecy.

Moreover, shrouds of secrecy still obscure the arsenals of the other nuclear weapon powers with the exception of the United Kingdom. Non-nuclear-weapon states should demand that other nuclear weapons power replicate the British practice of reporting on its arms holdings and policies as a means of reducing tensions. Increasing transparency could prove particularly useful in alleviating the possibility of nuclear miscalculation in Asia.

Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty
One of the top priorities of the United States, as well as many other states, is to stop the spread and growth of fissile material stockpiles that can be used to construct nuclear weapons. Nuclear disarmament cannot succeed if the amount of material available for bombs is growing.

The ideal mechanism for capping the world's nuclear weapons potential is a fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT). However, prospects for an FMCT appear dim given the continuing stalemate in the 65-member Conference on Disarmament over negotiating priorities. U.S. opposition to negotiating a "verifiable" FMCT on the basis that the premise is infeasible because cheaters will cheat has further soured expectations for an agreement. If the deadlock on a work program can be overcome, it might be in all countries interests to agree to an FMCT mandate that declares negotiations can begin without prejudice to the question of verification.

Pending completion of this treaty, a voluntary fissile material cutoff for weapons purposes should be actively promoted. France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all halted such production and China reportedly has as well. China should make what is understood official and India and Pakistan should follow suit.

In light of the recent proposal by the United States to try and exempt India from U.S. law and international rules so it can participate in global civil nuclear commerce, it is particularly important that India be called upon to cease fissile material production for weapons pending the completion of negotiations on a global FMCT. Without such a move, suppliers cannot be assured that their nuclear exports to India will not indirectly assist India's nuclear weapons program.
Progress on disarmament is dependent upon the resolution of underlying security concerns and intra-state tensions. The current international debate over the nature and purpose of Iran's nuclear program requires more creative diplomacy that recognizes Iran's Article IV NPT access to "peaceful nuclear energy," but also addresses international concerns about Iran's ability and motivations to use uranium enrichment and plutonium separation technologies to build nuclear bombs.

The February 4 IAEA Board of Governors resolution points out that the resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis could contribute to the realization of a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East. A resolution of the Iranian situation cannot wait on a WMD free zone in the region, but signs of progress toward such a zone could help persuade Iranian leaders that their security would be better served without an active, indigenous uranium enrichment program that invites suspicion.

In the context of the current debate over Iran's nuclear activities, nonaligned states should actively work to revive long-stalled efforts to bring key states in the region, including Israel, together to explore how to advance a WMD-free Middle East.

Expanding Sights
It is understandable why the United States and Russia are the focus of most nuclear disarmament discussions and initiatives: they account for approximately 97 percent of the world's nuclear armament. But to focus almost exclusively on these two states lessens the nuclear accountability of other states. Ultimately, all states that possess or are complicit in the deployment of nuclear weapons must become involved in the nuclear disarmament process and that time should start sooner rather than later.

Tackling Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe
Today, NATO continues to deploy up to 480 nuclear gravity bombs on the territories of six European countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). Russia's tactical nuclear weapons are estimated to total around 3,000, but this figure could be larger. Neither of these Cold War-era leftover arsenals serves any purpose today. Yet, the dangers they pose are very real, particularly in the case of Russia where great uncertainty exists about the location, quantity, and security of these arms. It is in the world's interest to help Russia secure and eliminate these weapons, which are probably most attractive to and vulnerable to terrorist theft. But Russia refuses to engage on this issue, citing the continued deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Hence, NATO's 26 members, particularly the six hosting U.S. arms, should be the focus of an intensive campaign to end the alliance's deployment of nuclear weapons. Returning these relics to the United States would not be detrimental to alliance security, but a boon because it would pave the way to begin the process of accounting for, securing, and eliminating Russia's tactical nuclear weapons.

It is imperative that this effort to discontinue NATO's archaic nuclear posture be aimed at European capitals. There is minimal support in the United States for maintaining these weapons in Europe. Indeed, the Pentagon several years ago concluded that they served no military purpose. The weapons remain out of political reasons and this motivation is strongest on the European side of the Atlantic Ocean. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Stephen Rademaker have both dismissed the possibility of withdrawing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe by contending that no single European country is raising the issue. This needs to change.

Initiating this debate in NATO could also serve to spark a wider debate in the United States about the utility of nuclear weapons. Some, including members of Congress, are trying to get this conversation started. Representative David Hobson (R-Ohio) stated in February 2005, "I think the time is now for a thoughtful and open debate on the role of nuclear weapons in our country's national security strategy."
Holding Friends Accountable
Any increase in nuclear weapons is a setback for disarmament. The enormous size of the U.S. and Russian stockpiles does not mean that other nuclear weapons possessors' buildups of their smaller arsenals should be accepted with a shrug. All should be held similarly accountable as the United States and Russia in the eyes of non-nuclear-weapon states when it comes to advancing nuclear disarmament.

India, as part of the U.S.-Indian civil nuclear cooperation plan, has pledged to accept all the same obligations of the recognized nuclear-weapon states. These five states have all signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). India has not. Both New Delhi and Islamabad should be urged to sign this important agreement as soon as possible. In addition, more pressure should be put on Beijing to ratify the accord. The irresponsible and misguided October 1999 Senate rejection of the treaty should not serve as an excuse or provide cover for others, including Indonesia and other members of the Nonaligned Movement, to neglect what is an essential nuclear disarmament step. Without continued expression of support for the treaty, opponents of the CTBT in the United States and elsewhere may gain the upper hand.

British Trident Decision
A debate is beginning in the United Kingdom on whether it should develop a successor to its sole nuclear delivery system, the Trident ballistic missile submarine, which is set to reach the end of its lifespan in less than 20 years. The United Kingdom should not be permitted to approach this question as if it is solely a technical question about extending the status quo. At its core, it is a matter of whether the United Kingdom sees nuclear weapons as necessary for its future security. It is incumbent upon non-nuclear-weapon states, particularly those who had weapons or weapons programs and gave them up, such as Brazil and South Africa, to share with the United Kingdom about how their security has not been negatively impacted by the decision to forswear nuclear weapons.

Creating Conditions for Progress
None of the measures mentioned above are necessarily easy or likely to move swiftly. Today's political climate may not be conducive to some of them. However, that does not mean that they should be shelved until circumstances are perceived as favorable. Now is the time to start creating the conditions that will allow for progress when the political will exists. Keep in mind that in 2009 a new government will be seated in Washington and will review most current nonproliferation and disarmament policies. The time to offer practical ideas and create expectations is now.

Speak Up
The current political climate should not dissuade non-nuclear-weapon states and civil society from speaking up. It often takes time for good ideas to take hold. India's early advocacy of a nuclear testing ban and Ireland's support for a nonproliferation treaty are two prime examples.

Cultivate Relationships and Understanding
More effort needs to be expended to engage with those not currently in the seat of power, particularly in Washington. The White House does not hold a monopoly on U.S. nuclear policy. Congress plays a very important role as evidenced by its refusal to fund several Bush administration nuclear weapons initiatives, such as RNEP, a modern pit facility, and initiatives to reduce the amount of time needed for the United States to resume nuclear testing. Congress can serve as an important bulwark against proposals that could undermine nuclear disarmament and it can serve as an important advocate as well, such as when it helped lead the nuclear freeze movement in the early 1980s.

Applaud Once in a While
Although the nuclear-weapon states recent record of mostly inaction and missed opportunities leaves one disappointed, there have been successes that should be applauded. President Bush's June 2004 decision to cut the nuclear arsenal in half by about 2012 is one. Clearly, the United States could and should do more, but a reduction of some 4,000 thousand nuclear weapons is not something to sneeze at. Instead, non-nuclear-weapon states should take the time to commend such
moves before asking for more. Nobody reacts well to a steady dose of criticism, even if well-deserved.

*Take the Universal Approach*
Non-nuclear-weapon states should not fall into the trap of the current White House approach of seeing the world through the prism of regimes instead of weapons. The reaction to a country's nuclear weapons policies and practices should not be determined by whether the state is a friend or not or the relative size of its arsenal. Relativity is not a factor when one considers how much destruction a single nuclear weapon can wreak. China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom should all be held to the same standard applied to that of the United States and Russia. When talking of nuclear disarmament, the case must be made on the dangers posed by the weapons themselves and not who owns them.

- [Nuclear Nonproliferation](https://www.armscontrol.org/events/20060325_Boese_NuclearDisaster)
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