The Future of Nuclear Arms: A World United and Divided by Zero

By Randy Rydell

Arms Control Today

Getting to Zero: Some Recent Initiatives

Ever since nuclear weapons were first used in World War II, there have been proposals to eliminate them. The world today is largely united on the merits of this goal but remains deeply divided over how to achieve it. Some commentators call for mass popular movements. Some urge the states with the largest nuclear arsenals to lead the way. Some have sought to redefine what "zero" means, saying that "virtual" arsenals or nondeployed weapons are okay. Some insist on absolute preconditions. Some address disarmament as merely a "vision" or "ultimate goal." A few seem to believe that achieving this goal will require nothing less than world government.

Now that "global nuclear disarmament" is finally receiving the attention it deserves, this is a good time to examine some of the recent proposals for achieving it, their antecedents, and some of the challenges that such efforts will need to address if they are to prove successful.

The Renaissance of Nuclear Disarmament

If Rip van Winkle had awoken on January 4, 2007, and read his Wall Street Journal, he could well have concluded that former U.S. Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) had just invented the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons.1 He would not have known that "disarmament" appeared in the UN Charter, which was adopted before the first nuclear test, and that the General Assembly had identified the goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons and other "weapons adaptable to mass destruction" in its first resolution, adopted in London on January 24, 1946. This was the same year that the U.S. government produced the Acheson-Lilienthal report and Baruch Plan and the Soviet Union offered what came to be called the Gromyko Plan, all ostensibly aimed at achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world.

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He would not have known that near miss in May 1955, when the nuclear powers came very close to agreement on a plan for nuclear disarmament in Geneva. Nor could he have known that the General Assembly put "general and complete disarmament" (GCD) in its first resolution, adopted in London on January 24, 1946. This was the same year that the U.S. government produced the Acheson-Lilienthal report and Baruch Plan and the Soviet Union offered what came to be called the Gromyko Plan, all ostensibly aimed at achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world.

He would not have known about the near miss in May 1955, when the nuclear powers came very close to agreement on a plan for nuclear disarmament in Geneva. Nor could he have known that the General Assembly put "general and complete disarmament" (GCD), aiming at the elimination of weapons of mass destruction and the limitation of conventional arms, on its agenda in 1959, where it has been ever since. He would not have known that President John Kennedy introduced his own detailed GCD proposal in the General Assembly on September 25, 1961, nor that the United States and Soviet Union released that month the McCloy-Zorin statement of "agreed principles" for achieving GCD, a concept that would later be incorporated in a dozen multilateral treaties.

He would not have known about the conclusion of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, which addressed nuclear disarmament and GCD. A decade later, the General Assembly would convene its first special session on disarmament and agree that although GCD was the world community's "ultimate objective," nuclear disarmament would be its top priority. He would not have known about the Reykjavik summit in 1986, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev discussed the elimination of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.
He would also not be aware of the five treaties creating regional nuclear-weapon-free zones that also address GCD, nor the hundreds of resolutions that the General Assembly had adopted over six decades for global nuclear disarmament. He would not have heard of the 1996 advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, which held that the NPT parties had a duty not just to negotiate to achieve this goal, but to bring such negotiations to a conclusion.

Although these combined activities have not yet produced a nuclear-weapon-free world, they did play a key role in shaping a global political environment that has been conducive to stockpile reductions over the last 20 years, to the gradual delegitimization of such weapons (still a work in progress), and to the generation of practical proposals for achieving nuclear disarmament.

A Cascade of Disarmament Proposals

Nonetheless, nobody disputes that the 2007 op-ed stimulated public interest in disarmament as a serious response to nuclear weapons threats. Since its publication and a follow-on piece a year later, there has been a cascade of disarmament proposals. The world may well be closer to a tipping point for new progress in nuclear disarmament than it is for the demise of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime as some have feared (table 1).

These nuclear disarmament initiatives have come from many diverse sources. The approach of having former officials or statesmen publish op-eds on this issue has now been replicated in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. More will likely follow. Newspapers around the world have published countless editorials in support of this goal. It was endorsed by both leading candidates in the recent U.S. presidential campaign, as well as by senior officials in virtually all other states that possess such weapons. Several nuclear-weapon states have taken some steps in the right direction, if not always officially linking this progress to their legal commitments under Article VI of the NPT. The French government has announced a significant cut in its arsenal, after having already shut down its nuclear test site along with its plants to produce fissile material for weapons. The British government has proposed a conference of experts from the nuclear-weapon states to examine the challenge of verifying nuclear disarmament. In the context of their deliberations over the future of START and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, Russia and the United States are discussing substantial new reductions in their nuclear arsenals, as well as specific problems relating to verification. These are just some of the efforts that are underway by states with nuclear weapons, efforts that by no means will alone produce global nuclear disarmament but that may help in achieving further reductions.

Other initiatives have come from diverse coalitions of states. The New Agenda Coalition (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, and South Africa) continues to advance its joint proposals for progress in nuclear disarmament, notably by means of annual resolutions in the General Assembly. The states behind the Norwegian initiative (Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Norway, Romania, South Africa, and the United Kingdom) have been advancing their own set of disarmament and nonproliferation proposals since 2005.

Several international coalitions of nongovernmental actors have also emerged in recent years to champion this cause, including long-standing efforts by Pugwash Conferences, which won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work on nuclear weapons in 1995. Other groups offering steps for disarmament include the Global Zero initiative, the International Luxembourg Forum on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe, and the Middle Powers Initiative and its Article VI Forum (organized by the Global Security Institute), as well as other coalitions focused more on building support at the grass-roots level, such as ICAN (the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons), Mayors for Peace, Abolition 2000, and others too numerous to list here.

Various international commissions have also focused on the disarmament challenge, building on the earlier work by the Palme and Canberra Commissions (1982 and 1996, respectively). In 2006 the international Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission chaired by Hans Blix issued a report with 30 recommendations dealing just with nuclear weapons. Australia and Japan recently have jointly launched the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament in a common effort to reinvigorate global efforts in these fields.
In 2008 the European Union sent a proposal to the UN secretary-general, outlining an eight-point initiative to address several nuclear-weapon challenges, including disarmament. In December 2008, Javier Solana, the EU high representative for common foreign and security policy, addressed the EU disarmament and nonproliferation proposals at a conference held at the European Parliament.

The United Nations has also kept up its many efforts to advance the goal of achieving a world with zero nuclear weapons. On October 24, 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon delivered a major address devoted just to nuclear disarmament, the first such address by a UN secretary-general exclusively on this subject in many years. He has also raised this issue in his official remarks at many multilateral gatherings, inside and outside the UN.

Meanwhile, efforts are continuing in the General Assembly to advance specific nuclear disarmament proposals, although they seldom receive the credit they deserve for their persistence and level of detail. These include specific resolutions on nuclear disarmament offered by Japan, Myanmar (on behalf of a majority of the Non-Aligned Movement), the New Agenda Coalition, and Malaysia (on a nuclear weapons convention). These resolutions are debated and adopted year after year by overwhelming majorities.

Nuclear disarmament is what Dag Hammarskjöld used to call a "hardy perennial" at the UN. It has also been a specific focus of meetings that take place in NPT arenas, as registered, for example, in the 13 "practical steps for the systematic and progressive efforts" to implement Article VI of the treaty, agreed at the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference politically tied the indefinite extension of the treaty to a package deal of commitments that included a "programme of action" relating to Article VI of the treaty and the Middle East Resolution, which called for efforts to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region.

Assessing the Road Maps to Zero

Several points emerge from this brief survey of only a few of the many nuclear disarmament proposals that have emerged in recent years. First, these proposals come from a wide variety of sources, including very different types of countries—nuclear-weapon states, coalitions of heavily industrialized and developing states, and regional entities—as well as a growing number of diverse nongovernmental organizations. The champions of nuclear disarmament are not only non-nuclear-weapon states and peace groups; literally all states profess to support this goal, as do growing numbers of current and former leaders of government and former military experts. The constituency of nuclear disarmament has significantly expanded in recent years to include the world's religions, women's groups, environmentalists, scientists, scholars, lawyers, human rights advocates, mayors, and legislators.

Second, although anti-nuclear-weapon movements have historically placed a very heavy emphasis, best documented by Lawrence Wittner, on the threats posed by such weapons and fears of their possible use, recent proposals are stressing such themes as the positive security benefits that would result for all countries from the elimination of such weapons. Meanwhile, more commentators are also stressing the military disutility or irrelevance of nuclear weapons in addressing security concerns in the 21st century, including terrorism, proliferation, the prevention of armed conflict within and between states, as well as many other emerging issues relating to cybersecurity, space weapons, and the development and transfers of conventional weaponry. Although appeals to fear and basic morality persist in many of these initiatives, there is also more of an emphasis on hope and the prospects for a safer world without nuclear weapons.

Third, there is much cross-fertilization among these various proposals. Many of their "steps toward zero" have long appeared in General Assembly resolutions. The four most fundamental criteria for assessing future nuclear disarmament initiatives, that they should be verifiable, transparent, irreversible, and legally binding, have appeared for many years in these resolutions and in consensus documents agreed at meetings of NPT states-parties. Many of these criteria were addressed by groups of governmental experts in reports requested by the General Assembly decades ago.
This process of cross-fertilization goes far beyond these basic principles and encompasses some very specific proposals. These include deep cuts in the largest nuclear arsenals, held by the Russian Federation and the United States; reductions in nuclear-weapon delivery systems; the destruction of nondeployed weapons; the safeguarding of fissile material recovered from such weapons; the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the start of negotiations on a fissile material treaty; disarmament actions by other states with nuclear weapons; the no-first-use doctrine; the withdrawal of nonstrategic nuclear weapons deployed outside national territories; de-alerting; security assurances for non-nuclear-weapon states; adherence by the nuclear-weapon states to the protocols of nuclear-weapon-free-zone treaties; parallel efforts to eliminate other types of weapons of mass destruction while limiting conventional arms; and numerous other confidence-building measures to facilitate the process of nuclear disarmament.

Fourth, a great weakness in these proposals—virtually all of them—is that they only go so far in specifying what must be done in specific circumstances and in specific states. Such proposals seldom, if ever, get into the weeds of the domestic politics of states to identify what new laws and regulations must be created to give greater weight to international commitments or how specific governmental institutions need to be adapted to meet this challenge. Some proposals recognize the need to integrate international disarmament commitments into the domestic policies, laws, regulations, and bureaucracies of states, but they are typically silent on precisely how this is to be achieved. International commissions understandably have been reluctant to prescribe such reforms in specific states. More surprising is the reluctance of nongovernmental proposals to address these challenges. In short, the proposals are much stronger on what needs to be done (the macro) than on how to do it (the micro).

Fifth, future proposals for global nuclear disarmament must do a better job of responding to criticisms that have been raised about the wisdom of pursuing zero.[8] Critics say that the goal is utopian or impractical; that it is dangerous, encouraging states once covered by foreign nuclear umbrellas to seek their own nuclear deterrents; that it is irrelevant, because a given set of "bad countries" will inevitably seek nuclear weapons regardless of what the rest of the world does; that it is unenforceable (what would the world community really do if, in a nuclear-weapon-free world, a state cheated and developed its own clandestine nuclear arsenal); that it would open the door to large-scale conventional war; that it is unverifiable; that it fails to understand that nuclear weapons are only dangerous when they are in the "wrong hands." Also, most commonly, it must respond to the dictum that such weapons "cannot be dis-invented."

All of these arguments have sound rebuttals. Former military leaders and nuclear-weapon policymakers have potentially much to contribute in clarifying the positive security benefits from disarmament and in exposing the many frailties of its alternatives.

Sixth, many of these zero initiatives suffer from zero follow-up. Meetings are held, various pieces of paper are issued, and that is that. The act of making such proposals has become an end in itself in some ways. Given that many of the proposals are quite similar, disarmament proponents might well examine more closely what has happened to past proposals, why they have not been implemented, or how they could be advanced through additional actions by governments and international organizations.

To promote accountability and compliance with past policy commitments, various public arenas already play important roles and could well become even more relevant in the years to come as the nuclear arsenals continue to decline. With respect to nuclear disarmament, these especially include the various sessions of the NPT preparatory committees and once-every-five-years review conferences, which together comprise the entire NPT review process.[9] One of the key decisions leading to the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 provided that the treaty review process "should look forward as well as back."[10] This is how accountability occurs in a multilateral treaty setting. Another such multilateral arena is in the work of the First Committee of the General Assembly, which annually considers about 50 resolutions, many of which deal with very specific measures to promote global nuclear disarmament. Additional follow-up efforts can occur within the governmental processes of individual states, especially through the oversight, speech, and debate functions of the legislatures.
The seventh and final point about these proposals is their common tendency to ignore issues relating to the UN disarmament machinery (including the Conference on Disarmament), reforms that are needed, and its past contributions and successes in advancing disarmament. The UN serves as an indispensable arena for deliberating disarmament norms, for converting such norms into multilateral treaty obligations, and for promoting their universality and legitimacy.

Looking Ahead

Ultimately, future efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons will succeed or fail depending on the outcome of two parallel trends. The first is the achievement of an international consensus on certain substantive issues relating to nuclear weapons, namely their irrelevance as military instruments, the security hazards posed by their very existence, their cost, the human and environmental consequences of their production and use, and their widespread identification as an anathema rather than as a source of prestige or status. The second is a multidimensional political process to build and sustain such a consensus, a process involving, in various ways, the participation of individual citizens, nongovernmental groups, political parties, mayors, national legislators, regional organizations, and international organizations. Navigating to zero, in short, requires both an anchor and a sail.

Zero will not be achieved strictly by the action of elites nor by an exclusive reliance on many other worthy but insufficient measures, including those relating to nonproliferation, safeguards, physical security controls over nuclear materials, and other such activities. Together, these are better viewed as complementary means to advance the disarmament. The advantage of this approach is that disarmament offers a universal, nondiscriminatory standard, which makes it far more likely to obtain international cooperation and consent.

Many still believe that nuclear weapons will be around forever. Perhaps George S. Patton had the best response for them. He wrote in a 1933 paper on military tactics:

When Samson took the fresh jawbone of an ass and slew a thousand men therewith he probably started such a vogue for the weapon...that for years no prudent donkey dared to bray.... History is replete with countless other instances of military implements each in its day heralded as the last word-the key to victory-yet each in its turn subsiding to its useful but inconspicuous niche. Today machines hold the place formerly occupied by the jawbone, the elephant, armor, the long bow, gun powder, and latterly, the submarine. They too shall pass.[11]

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<th>Table 1: Getting to Zero: Some Recent Initiatives</th>
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<td>In the last few years a number of private groups and governments have offered proposals for moving toward nuclear disarmament. Some of the most prominent are listed below.</td>
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<td>Private Sector</td>
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<td>Article VI Forum [Middle Powers Initiative]</td>
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<td>Global Zero (2008)</td>
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<td>Hoover Plan [Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, Nunn]</td>
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<td>ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) (2007)</td>
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International Luxembourg Forum on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe (2007)


Public Sector


Five-point proposal by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2008)

Follow-up to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice [Malaysia, UNGA Res 63/49] (2008)

International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament [Australia and Japan] (2008)

Norwegian initiative (2005)


Nuclear disarmament (Myanmar for majority of Nonaligned Movement, UNGA Res 63/46), 2008

Renewed determination towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons (Japan, UNGA Res 63/73), 2008

Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world (South Africa, for New Agenda Coalition, UNGA Res 63/58), 2008


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This article was corrected online April 8, 2009. The word "world" as the second word in the second sentence was left out when first published and now has been corrected.

ENDNOTES


5. On January 18, 2007, and on the request of Malaysia and Costa Rica, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon circulated their draft Model Nuclear Weapons Convention to member states as an official UN document, A/62/650.


9. For a further discussion of the NPT's review process and accountability, see Jayantha Dhanapala with Randy Rydell, "Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT: An Insider's Account," UNIDIR/2005/3, 2005, ch. 8 ("The Road Ahead").


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