

The Realism of Nuclear Disarmament

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All of us here are working to make the world more sustainable. Whether you are working on making the environment more sustainable for the life that exists on the planet, or on economic development so that all human beings have the opportunity to live free from want, this is our common objective here at the United Nations: to create a more equitable, peaceful world that is sustainable. And this task of ours requires cooperation at levels heretofore unprecedented.

How many of us have been called idealists and had our calls dismissed as unrealistic? “Idealist” may not be an insult to a lot of us—we know that it took the courage and vision of idealists to attain some of the most important achievements in the development of the human race—the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, decolonization. The truth, however, is that *we* here in this room are the realists. (Now lest there be any academics or pedants in the room, by “realism” I am not implying the Clausewitzian school of thought which sees nation-states, the only powerful actors in the world, as motivated only by military and economic power. By “realist” I mean a little “r”, one who is realistic, who understands the reality of the world around them.)

We understand that we live in an integrated world. We don’t *wish* it were so—it simply *is*. Our economies are integrated, our environment is shared, and the security of our neighbor is a requisite for our own security. We understand this. Even the bankers of the world understand this. There is a small group of people, whose job is to perpetuate the “Great Game” of playing countries off each other in a zero sum calculation, that fail to comprehend this.

We understand that progress on economic development requires progress on disarmament. It’s been twenty two years since the first UN conference on Disarmament and Development, and we have a slew of GA resolutions recognizing the link, reports of Groups of Governmental Experts and an uncountable number of non-governmental studies on the

linkages. It seems obvious to most: trillions of dollars¹ are spent on nuclear arms alone—to say nothing of conventional weapons—yet we seem hard-pressed to meet the relatively modest Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), such as halving the number of people who subsist on less than a dollar a day. In a reverse equation way of viewing the relationship between disarmament and development, scientists at Rutgers University and the University of Colorado-Boulder show us the effects of a so-called “limited” nuclear war (several dozen Hiroshima-sized bombs exploding in South Asia) on global food supplies and, ergo, the well-being of billions of people.²

We understand that nuclear weapons cannot exist in perpetuity, that despite our efforts at forging a non-proliferation regime, their mere existence serves as a stimulus for some to develop them. We understand that, if you are pointing nuclear weapons at someone, you are ensuring that somebody else will point them at you. The military planners who cling onto the antiquated notion of deterrence, including extended deterrence, are the idealists longing for a simpler time, when nuclear weapons arguably brought stability to a world precariously at “peace” through a delicate balance of power. There are no longer two superpowers able to maintain the balance between them; there now exists a multiplicity of centers of power, a networked system of governance and influence. In such a world, a nuclear apartheid regime, where the perceived source of “security” for some is denied to others, is simply unsustainable. This is reality.

The problem is that we lack a clarity of purpose, of the values that determine what we should be striving for as individuals and as society. That state security is valued by some to take precedence over human security is a symptom of our greater, global insecurity, created through a distortion of our values. We even lack the language to articulate new guiding principles. Nuclear proponents believe they are maintaining a status quo, a concept that itself is false; *status quo* presumes that things remain static, a falsehood made all the more

¹ See Schwartz, Stephen: [Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of US Nuclear Weapons Since 1940](http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/1998/atomic.aspx). Brookings Institution Press, 1998: <http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/1998/atomic.aspx>

² See the summary of the Robock et al study on nuclear war and climate change by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: <http://www.ippnw.org/Programs/ICAN/Famine.htm>.

impossible in the present information age, where leaps of knowledge are forcing a re-conceptualization of what it means to be human and exist on this planet.

A glaring example of this misdirection of values and resources has been in the newspapers of late. North Korea, whose people are not fed properly and who do not have enough power to heat their homes, has felt compelled to divert their precious resources towards outrageously expensive weapons programs as a way to arm-twist the world into giving them respect and recognition. That they felt compelled to make this decision is not a commentary on their “craziness” as some of the Fox News commentators would have us believe; this is a symptom of the misguided priorities strife throughout the international order. The P5, after all, have also chosen to maintain their nuclear weapons systems at the expense of fulfilling their pledges to meet the MDGs, or even ensuring that their own people are fed and cared for. They’re not crazy. They’re just misguided. Without clarity of purpose, one can lose one’s way.

What is needed now is an articulation and agreement on the values that we hold most important. Policies then must be weighed against these values; if the policy in question is in line with these values then it can and must be implemented. If it contravenes these principles, then it must be rejected.

For instance, President Obama has asserted unequivocally America’s commitment to achieving a world without nuclear weapons. The President, like us, understands the interconnectivity of the world; he said: “One nuclear weapon exploded in one city -- be it New York or Moscow, Islamabad or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague – could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences might be – for our *global* safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.”(emphasis added) ³

³ Read the entirety of President Obama’s Prague speech at:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/

While the US administration is already taking some steps to advance the President's stated aspirations—just this week, for instance, negotiations have begun on a new bilateral arms reduction treaty with Russia—there are still powerful voices in Washington threatening to curb our progress, such as, for example, “trading” the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty with a program to “modernize” the existing arsenal. President Obama must put all nuclear weapons-related proposals to his own metric: does a proposed policy advance his vision of a nuclear weapons-free world or does it detract from it? Modernization plans fall into the latter, and should thus be firmly rejected.⁴

Policy without clear principles is confusing and ineffective. A prime example of this can be found in the recent report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. While on the one hand the Commission commended the Administration for seeking to further reduce its arsenal through a legal commitment with Russia, it also extolled the virtues of maintaining a policy of extended deterrence. The opening line of its Executive Summary illustrates the confusion: “U.S. nuclear strategy begins with the central dilemma that nuclear weapons are both the greatest potential threat to our way of life and important guarantors of U.S. security.”⁵ Even if this statement were true, such an oxymoron is not sustainable: there is no such thing as a static *status quo*. Something has got to give.

As I alluded to in the beginning, an effective international security regime, based on the rule of law, will require global levels of cooperation heretofore unprecedented. The President of my organization, the Global Security Institute, often says that nuclear weapons are walls where bridges of cooperation must be built. We must work together to address the challenges that we face together: of the changing climate, of economic development and prosperity, of social development and prosperity for men, women and children alike, of the global networks of guns and drugs that fuel transnational networks of hatred, violence and terror. Perhaps it is time that I stop saying I'm working for nuclear abolition. Perhaps you need to stop saying

⁴ For more on the ways in which “modernization” contravenes the intention of the CTBT, as well as political commitments contained in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, see the GSI Brief by Jonathan Granoff and Rhianna Tyson: “Achieving the Entry-Into-Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty: What UN Member States Can Do Now,” available at: http://www.gsinstitute.org/gsi/pubs/04_03_09_CTBT.pdf.

⁵ “America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States,” published by United States Institute of Peace, 2009: http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf

you're working on climate change, or women's rights, or disability rights, or small arms, or peacekeeping. Because the progress that I make in "my" area of nuclear disarmament is absolutely contingent upon the success we muster in engendering the cooperation needed to ensure its success, and the same condition applies to your success in your field. We are all working on *strengthening cooperation*, on helping our international political institutions play catch up with the international financial institutions, which have long been working in tandem, who knew years and years ago that borders mattered little any longer, and the success of one financier was inextricably linked up with the success of their contemporaries across the globe. They have simply been responding to the reality of the day. (How embarrassing that we have to play catch up to bankers, to the ones who dragged us into our current financial mess.) Let those of us working on sustaining our planet be the new realists, to deliberate, formulate and advance policies based on the needs of the new century, and ensuring the existence and sustainable prosperity of future generations.