

January 31, 2007

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The Nuclear Threat

By Mikhail Gorbachev

The essay "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," published in this newspaper on Jan. 4, was signed by a bipartisan group of four influential Americans -- George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn -- not known for utopian thinking, and having unique experience in shaping the policies of previous administrations. It raises an issue of crucial importance for world affairs: the need for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

As someone who signed the first treaties on real reductions in nuclear weapons, I feel it is my duty to support their call for urgent action.

The road to this goal began in November 1985 when Ronald Reagan and I met in Geneva. We declared that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." This was said at a time when many people in the military and among the political establishment regarded a war involving weapons of mass destruction as conceivable and even acceptable, and were developing various scenarios of nuclear escalation.

It took political will to transcend the old thinking and attain a new vision. For if a nuclear war is inconceivable, then military doctrines, armed forces development plans and negotiating positions at arms-control talks must change accordingly. This began to happen, particularly after Reagan and I agreed in Reykjavik in October 1986 on the need ultimately to eliminate nuclear weapons. Concurrently, major positive changes were occurring in world affairs: A number of international conflicts were defused and democratic processes in many parts of the world gained momentum, leading to the end of the Cold War.

As U.S.-Soviet arms negotiations got off the ground, a breakthrough was achieved -- the treaty on the elimination of medium- and shorter-range missiles, followed by agreement on 50% reduction in strategic offensive weapons. If the negotiations had continued in the same vein and at the same pace, the world would have been rid of the greater part of the arsenals of deadly weapons. But this did not happen, and hopes for a new, more democratic world order were not fulfilled. In fact, we have seen a failure of political leadership, which proved incapable of seizing the opportunities opened by the end of the Cold War. This glaring failure has allowed nuclear weapons and their proliferation to pose a continuing, growing threat to mankind.

The ABM Treaty has been abrogated; the requirements for effective verification and irreversibility of nuclear-arms reductions have been weakened; the treaty on comprehensive cessation of nuclear-weapons tests has not been ratified by all nuclear powers. The goal of the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons has been essentially forgotten. What is more, the military doctrines of major powers, first the U.S. and then, to some extent, Russia, have re-emphasized nuclear weapons as an acceptable means of war fighting, to be used in a first or even in a "pre-emptive" strike.

All this is a blatant violation of the nuclear powers' commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Its Article V is clear and unambiguous: Nations that are capable of making nuclear weapons shall forgo that possibility in exchange for the promise by the members of the nuclear club to reduce and eventually abolish their nuclear arse-

nals. If this reciprocity is not observed, then the entire structure of the treaty will collapse.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty is already under considerable stress. The emergence of India and Pakistan as nuclear-weapon states, the North Korean nuclear program and the issue of Iran are just the harbingers of even more dangerous problems that we will have to face unless we overcome the present situation. A new threat, nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists, is a challenge to our ability to work together internationally and to our technological ingenuity. But we should not delude ourselves: In the final analysis, this problem can only be solved through the abolition of nuclear weapons. So long as they continue to exist, the danger will be with us, like the famous "rifle on the wall" that will fire sooner or later.

Last November the Forum of Nobel Peace Laureates, meeting in Rome, issued a special statement on this issue. The late Nobel laureate and world-renowned scientist, Joseph Rotblat, initiated a global awareness campaign on the nuclear danger, in which I participated. Ted Turner's Nuclear Threat Initiative provides important support for specific measures to reduce weapons of mass destruction. With all of them we are united by a common understanding of the need to save the Non-Proliferation Treaty and of the primary responsibility of the members of the nuclear club.

We must put the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons back on the agenda, not in a distant future but as soon as possible. It links the moral imperative -- the rejection of such weapons from an ethical standpoint -- with the imperative of assuring security. It is becoming clearer that nuclear weapons are no longer a means of achieving security; in fact, with every passing year they make our security more precarious.

The irony -- and a reproach to the current generation of world leaders -- is that two decades after the end of the Cold War the world is still burdened with vast arsenals of nuclear weapons of which even a fraction would be enough to destroy civilization. As in the 1980s, we face the problem of political will -- the responsibility of the leaders of major powers for bridging the gap between the rhetoric of peace and security and the real threat looming over the world. While agreeing with the Jan. 4 article that the U.S. should take the initiative and play an active role on this issue, I believe there is also a need for major efforts on the part of Russian and European leaders and for a responsible position and full involvement of all states that have nuclear weapons.

I am calling for a dialogue to be launched within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, involving both nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states, to cover the full range of issues related to the elimination of those weapons. The goal is to develop a common concept for moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons.

The key to success is reciprocity of obligations and actions. The members of the nuclear club should formally reiterate their commitment to reducing and ultimately eliminating nuclear weapons. As a token of their serious intent, they should without delay take two crucial steps: ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty and make changes in their military doctrines, removing nuclear weapons from the Cold War-era high alert status. At the same time, the states that have nuclear-power programs would pledge to terminate all elements of those programs that could have military use.

The participants in the dialogue should report its progress and the results achieved to the United Nations Security Council, which must be given a key coordinating role in this process.

Over the past 15 years, the goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons has been so much on the back burner that it will take a true political breakthrough and a major intellectual effort to achieve success in this endeavor. It will be a challenge to the current generation of leaders, a test of their maturity and ability to act that they must not fail. It is our duty to help them to meet this challenge.

Mr. Gorbachev was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991.