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Abolishing Nuclear Weapons: Why the United States Should Lead

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SUMMARY

- The next American president should emphasize the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and really mean it.
- The verification and enforcement mechanisms that would be required to achieve this would augment U.S. and global security at a time when the nuclear industry will likely expand globally.
- Without a clearer commitment to the elimination of all nuclear arsenals, non–nuclear-weapon states will not support strengthened nonproliferation rules, inspections, and controls over fissile materials.
- The accounting and control over nuclear materials that would be necessary to enable nuclear disarmament would greatly reduce risks that terrorists could acquire these materials.
- If nuclear deterrence would work everywhere and always, we would not worry about proliferation. If nuclear deterrence is not fail-safe, the long-term answer must be to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons to zero.

Nuclear disarmament is higher on the U.S. and international agenda than it has been since the beginning of the nuclear age. George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn have urged "turning the goal of a world without nuclear weapons into a practical enterprise among nations." Barack Obama has pledged to "renew the goal of a world without nuclear weapons." John McCain has said "the time has come to take further measures to reduce dramatically the number of nuclear weapons in the world's arsenals." British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has expressed the need "to accelerate disarmament amongst possessor states, to prevent proliferation to new states, and to ultimately achieve a world that is free from nuclear weapons." Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said that "India is fully committed to nuclear disarmament that is global, universal, and nondiscriminatory in nature."

These are leaders of states that have nuclear weapons. People in the vast majority of countries that don't have them say, "It's about time, but is this talk of nuclear disarmament merely public relations?"

Of course, not all American leaders agree that a world without nuclear weapons is desirable. Former Democratic cabinet secretaries Harold Brown and John Deutch argue that "the goal, even the aspirational goal, of eliminating all nuclear weapons is counterproductive." Republican Senator John Kyl insists

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that "U.S. national security—and that of our friends and allies—will not permit a nuclear-weapons-free world in the foreseeable future." Thirty-five senators are sufficient to block the United States from ratifying a comprehensive test ban treaty or treaties for further reductions of nuclear arsenals, necessary steps on a road to zero. Therefore, the case needs to be made for seriously seeking the global abolition of nuclear arsenals.

The next American president must decide whether to emphasize the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and, importantly, whether to really mean it. (False promises of effort will only weaken U.S. standing and power.) This Policy Brief makes the case for both. It does so from the perspective of U.S. national interests. Russia, China, France, Pakistan, and Israel have less confidence than the United States that their security and political interests could be preserved without nuclear weapons. Their considerations are explored in a September 2008 Adelphi Paper, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, by the author and Carnegie Associate, James Acton.

This Brief summarizes four security interests that would be served by making the long-term project of abolishing nuclear weapons a central purpose of U.S. policy: preventing proliferation; preventing nuclear terrorism; reducing toward zero the unique threat of nuclear annihilation; and fostering optimism regarding U.S. global leadership.

Each of these objectives can be (and has been) pursued without the larger purpose of eliminating nuclear weapons. However, the chances of success will steadily diminish if the few nuclear-armed states try to perpetuate a discriminatory order based on haves and have-nots and if they enforce it firmly against some states and hollowly against others. Such inequity breeds noncooperation and resistance when what is needed now is cooperation to prevent proliferation, nuclear terrorism, and the failure of deterrence. Why should everyone cooperate in enforcing a system that looks like it was designed to favor just a few?

Nonproliferation in a World With More Nuclear Industry

The challenge of strengthening protection against proliferation is growing just as prospects are rising for a major global expansion of nuclear industry. These two objectives—nonproliferation and the secure expansion of nuclear industry—are shared by the United States and many other countries, but there is tension between these objectives. If the number of nuclear power reactors and states that host them grows dramatically, so too will the number of facilities for enriching uranium and, perhaps, for separating plutonium from spent reactor fuel. The same technologies and people that produce fissile materials for civilian purposes can be employed to produce weapons. More broadly, as nuclear know-how, equipment, and materiel spread around the world, so too does the wherewithal to develop nuclear weapons. The difficulty of detecting weapons proliferation rises as the overall density of nuclear commerce, training, and cooperation increases.

The United States and other states and entities that care greatly about nonproliferation, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), have identified three major policy innovations that could reduce proliferation risks.

The IAEA is charged with ensuring that nuclear materials and related activities are used for exclusively peaceful purposes. The discovery of Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons efforts in the early 1990s compelled the 40-plus states on the IAEA's board of governors to acknowledge that its safeguards system needed to be strengthened. Years of negotiations resulted in a new model for safeguards in 1997, called the Additional Protocol. It requires states to notify the IAEA of plans to build new nuclear facilities, to provide blueprints in

advance, to declare nuclear fuel-cycle-related research and development activities, and to require reports on all trade in sensitive nuclear technology and materiel. The Additional Protocol also grants IAEA inspectors greater access to nuclear facilities on short notice and allows them to take environmental samples to better detect possible violations.

While the Additional Protocol is not as robust as most nonproliferation experts wish, it is a major advance, which is why it would be an important innovation. Unfortunately, 104 (of 194) states still have not implemented this protocol. Among them are Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United States, Venezuela, and Vietnam. These states, as all others, are entitled to nuclear cooperation as long as they remain compliant with their safeguards and general nonproliferation obligations. They should not be presumed to harbor ill intent. Yet, their refusal to implement the Additional Protocol weakens overall confidence that proliferation threats can be detected in time to mobilize responses to protect international peace and security. The United States, the European Union, Turkey, Australia, South Korea, and other states have proposed that the providers of nuclear technology and materiel in the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group should establish a rule requiring that any state receiving their cooperation must implement the Additional Protocol. The U.S. capacity to lead this important campaign is hampered by the Senate's refusal to place the United States under the protocol. The next administration should work with the Senate to correct this untoward situation.

A second innovation needed is the clarification of terms under which a state may withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Article X of the treaty permits a state to withdraw "if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interest of its country." Negotiating in 1968, the authors of the treaty did not specify what sort of events and interests would justify withdrawal or how the treaty's ultimate enforcement body, the United Nations Security Council, should treat a bid to withdraw. In

BOX 1 ■ Rebutting the Arguments Against the Vision

The desirability and feasibility of achieving the secure, verifiable elimination of all nuclear weapons deserves wide and serious debate. However, several of the most common negative reactions to the idea do not withstand analysis.

"Nuclear weapons cannot be 'disinvented.'" True, but beside the point. No human creation can be "disinvented." Civilization has nevertheless prohibited and dismantled artifacts deemed too dangerous, damaging, or morally objectionable to live with. Mass-scale gas chambers such as those used by Nazi Germany have not been "disinvented," but they are not tolerated. The issue is whether the means could exist to verify that a rejected weapon of mass destruction had been dismantled in all cases, to minimize the risk of cheating, and to build confidence in enforcement measures against cheaters. These challenges, not "disinvention," should be the focus of debate.

"The United States should not disarm unilaterally." True, but that is not what Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, Nunn, and others advocate; nor is it what the NPT and other commitments require. The germane issue is whether and how *all* nuclear-armed states could mutually, reciprocally reduce their nuclear arsenals to zero, and whether and how they and other states could implement the verification and enforcement measures necessary to prevent cheating against a ban on nuclear weapons. If the United States and other states do not have the necessary confidence, they will not eliminate their last weapons.

"If the United States removes the nuclear deterrent umbrella it extends over its NATO allies (Japan, South Korea, and others), these states will develop their own nuclear weapons." Probably not. The United States (and other powers) will always insist on retaining deterrent capabilities. But these capabilities need not include nuclear weapons if all others who possess these weapons implemented verifiable and enforceable commitments to eliminate them. If Russia, China, Pakistan, et al. eliminated or greatly reduced their nuclear arsenals and Iran and North Korea no longer posed acute nuclear threats, it would be politically and strategically unrealistic for Japan, South Korea, Germany, and Turkey to counter such a trend and acquire nuclear weapons on their own. Indeed, these key non–nuclear-weapon states have longstanding traditions favoring the global elimination of nuclear weapons. They would welcome being enlisted in the deliberations over how to proceed incrementally toward this objective in ways that buttress their security ties with the United States. Enlisting them is something the next administration should do in any case.

2003 North Korea exercised this option—the only state to do so thus far. The Security Council did not weigh in on the matter; this was partly at the insistence of the Bush administration, which wanted to avoid precedents against withdrawal from arms control treaties. Subsequently, France, Germany, and other states have proposed that NPT parties or the UN Security Council clarify, at the very least, that a state found not in compliance with any of its obligations may not withdraw from the treaty. A noncompliant state attempting to do so should be made to forfeit use of nuclear facilities, equipment, and materiel acquired through cooperation obtained on the basis of its membership in the treaty.

A nuclear order based on a double standard—a handful of states determined to keep nuclear weapons and also trying to prevent 185 from getting them—is inherently unstable.

Measures to limit acquisition of uranium enrichment and plutonium separation have received the most high-level attention among all the innovations needed to strengthen protection against proliferation and facilitate the expansion of nuclear industry. Because a state that operates enrichment or reprocessing facilities could readily produce fissile materials for weapons—clandestinely and/or after withdrawing from the NPT—nonproliferation confidence would grow greatly if states that do not now have these facilities do not acquire them. From the nonproliferation perspective, a binding rule would be optimal; the next best thing would be for states to voluntarily forego acquisition of fuel-cycle capabilities. In either case, states that need nuclear fuel would have to be guaranteed that as long as they comply with their safeguards obligations, they could purchase the fuel at competitive prices (or better) in return for not producing it themselves.

Key non–nuclear-weapon states resist two or more of these innovations. The clearest objection is that each of these proposals in some way constricts their rights or imposes new burdens on them. Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia lead this resistance. On the vital question of curtailing access to fuel-cycle capabilities, Algeria, Canada, Malaysia, South Korea, Switzerland, and Turkey join them. In some cases, resistance to nonproliferation may reflect a desire to keep options open to move toward military nuclear programs in the future. But one argument is clearly stated: the nuclear-weapon states have failed to live up to their promises to seriously pursue nuclear disarmament. While U.S. nuclear weapons do not *cause* most of the proliferation ambitions Americans worry about today, the high value the United States and other nuclear-armed states put on these weapons makes others increasingly reluctant to cooperate in action to prevent proliferation and punish those caught cheating.

Discussions of the fuel-cycle issue in the United States indicate that the national security establishment generally does not yet comprehend the political realities of the situation with the developing countries whose agreement must be obtained. Former U.S. secretary of defense Harold Brown and CIA director John Deutch, both Democrats, wrote in a November 19, 2007 *Wall Street Journal* opinion-editorial that "there are several critical nonproliferation objectives that should be pursued, but they do not require any unattainable vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world to justify them." Among these objectives is the "urgent need to put into place new means for controlling the aspects of the fuel-cycle—enrichment and fuel reprocessing—that present the greatest proliferation risk."

These eminent Americans, along with others from France and Russia, act as if they are merely requesting an upgrade of the nuclear order's software from version 1.0 to 2.0.

They fail to appreciate that key developing countries feel that the original software did not work well for them and that they received comparatively poor, indeed unfair, service from the original vendors. Dissatisfied with its performance under the original bargain, these developing countries have little interest in a new contract for the purported upgrade they are being offered. As they seek greater multipolarity in the international system, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Africa, and others will join China and Russia in driving much harder bargains. The developing countries will not accept stronger nonproliferation rules without much more reliable commitments to nuclear disarmament and major additional steps toward it.

U.S. officials, occasionally joined by their French counterparts, sometimes invoke lawyerly arguments either to dispute the nature of the disarmament obligation under the NPT or to argue that it is being met. But non–nuclear-weapon states would not have agreed to extend the NPT indefinitely in 1995, as the United States and the other four nuclear-weapon states pressed them to do, if the weapon states had disavowed an obligation to pursue the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Five years later, in the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the nuclear-weapon states affirmed their "unequivocal undertaking… to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals" and agreed on the so-called "13 Steps" to serve as benchmarks of their progress. Of these, four, at most, have been fulfilled.

With this record and in this new global environment, the reforms necessary to strengthen nonproliferation bulwarks cannot be imposed—they must be negotiated. A serious commitment to seek conditions for the verifiable, enforceable elimination of all nuclear arsenals is not necessary to *justify* stronger controls on fuel-cycle technology and other nonproliferation innovations, but it is absolutely necessary to create conditions for *achieving* them.

Preventing Nuclear Terrorism

American leaders frequently describe nuclear terrorism as the most catastrophic security threat to the United States today. It is widely recognized that the most effective way to protect against this threat is to prevent terrorists from acquiring highly enriched uranium or plutonium.

This challenge is well understood. The United States, with European backing, has undertaken national and international efforts to remove nuclear weapons materials from inadequately secured facilities around the world and to heighten security where materials are located. What is needed most in this domain is greater political will and sustained attention of high-level officials. It is tempting for working-level officials in states whose cooperation is sought by the United States to seek concessions on other issues. The next U.S. administration will have to raise these

The elimination of all nuclear arsenals is not an end in itself. It is a means to global security.

BOX 2 ■ A Consortium of International Think Tanks to Map the Road to a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World

Ideally, governments of both nuclear-armed and non–nuclear-weapon states would take up this combined nonproliferation–disarmament challenge in the near term. If they are unwilling to do so directly and are chary of undertaking ambitious negotiations, they would earn political credit for themselves and advance this important international agenda by facilitating an international think tank collaboration to explore the conditions necessary for the secure prohibition of nuclear weapons. Governments could encourage private foundations to initiate such a project by making available relevant experts in nuclear weapons and arms-control as well as military strategists. These projects would inform and appraise the deliberations of analysts from think tanks and academia, who in some states are government employees. Going further, governments could then invite participants in such a collaboration to present their conclusions to NPT review meetings, national governments, the Conference on Disarmament, or the UN General Assembly.

issues to the cabinet or head-of-state level, where its counterparts will not want to look indifferent or mercantile in matters of such dire consequence.

A clearer commitment to the goal of nuclear disarmament would not be decisive here, but it could help. Terrorists might not be influenced, but a clearer commitment to seek conditions for the elimination of nuclear arsenals can help motivate other states to support strengthened nonproliferation rules, inspections, and controls over fissile materials. It could also strengthen popular revulsion over the use of these weapons, including by terrorists. The stronger the global effort to disavow nuclear weapons as a viable tool of statecraft and symbol of power, the greater the leverage that can be exerted on states and other actors who might facilitate terrorist acquisition or use of nuclear weapons, either by acts of commission or omission. Terrorists may not be deterrable or persuadable, but they can be impeded by the denial of sanctuary, technology, and materiel they seek from states and vendors.

If nuclear deterrence is too uncertain to protect civilization forever from the dangers of mass destruction, then the goal of creating the conditions for the secure, verifiable, and enforceable elimination of these weapons must be elevated.

Eliminating the Threat of Nuclear Annihilation

The end of the Cold War and the threat of U.S.–Russian nuclear war greatly reduced the specter of nuclear annihilation. Yet the continued existence of nuclear weapons and the possible diffusion of fissile materials mean that the risk of mass destruction remains. Recent studies by atmospheric scientists using advanced computer models indicate that a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan involving 50 Hiroshima-strength weapons each (less than one percent of the global arsenal and one-half of what India and Pakistan possess) could produce a nuclear winter with climate change unrecorded in human history.

Belief in nuclear deterrence provides some comfort. Indeed, it is a primary source of resistance to seriously pursuing nuclear disarmament. Yet this belief is rational only insofar as one thinks that nuclear deterrence will not fail. If that thought or assumption is valid, then nuclear proliferation should not be such a concern. If additional states or terrorists acquire nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence will not fail, then why worry?

If, on the other hand, nuclear deterrence is too uncertain to protect civilization forever from the dangers of mass destruction, then the goal of creating the conditions for the secure, verifiable, and enforceable elimination of these weapons must be elevated. As long as nuclear weapons remain, deterrence will need to be managed with great care. It is indefensible to prefer an international order based heavily on threats to use nuclear weapons over an alternative in which these weapons are collectively reduced to very low numbers and salience.

Fostering Optimism in U.S. Global Leadership

Optimism will be difficult to cultivate in a world in which nuclear proliferation appears likely and progress toward nuclear disarmament doubtful. Since 1945, nuclear weapons have been a central symbol of the international order. The unrivalled, speedy, and destructive power of these weapons darkens imaginations. If it were possible to confine nuclear weapons to states whose stability, peacefulness, and judiciousness were widely trusted, optimism could flourish nonetheless. But this is an unlikely prospect in the near or medium term. Leaders and populations in states that could acquire nuclear weapons may not agree on which other states are trustworthy with

these weapons. This is one reason why a nuclear order based on a double standard—a handful of states determined to keep nuclear weapons and also trying to prevent 185 from getting them—is inherently unstable.

Conversely, if the nuclear-armed states genuinely committed themselves to the project of trying to eliminate these weapons, optimism about the direction of the international order could grow. A hint of this potential emerged in positive international reactions to the call by Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, and Nunn for pursuing a world without nuclear weapons. The project could fall short of success for myriad reasons. Russian and Chinese wariness of U.S. conventional military power and what they see as the U.S. proclivity to interfere in what they regard as their spheres of influence could make Moscow and Beijing rely even more on nuclear weapons to deter the United States. India and Pakistan could remain unable to resolve their security dilemmas, with the situation exacerbated by Pakistan's internal turmoil and preoccupations. Israel and its neighbors are a long way from establishing a stable peace that would facilitate Israel's nuclear disarmament. Iran could acquire nuclear weapons and refuse to join a disarmament process, proving the unreliability of the UN Security Council as an enforcement body.

Yet, if the leaders of the major powers established as an organizing principle of their diplomacy the goal of creating the conditions for eliminating nuclear arsenals, it is highly probable that majorities of their citizens and the rest of the world would feel a charge of optimism about the direction in which they are seeking to move.

The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons does not make its attainment feasible, let alone inevitable. Nuclear disarmament and resolution of political–security conflicts would have to proceed together in a reciprocating, co-evolutionary process. Early steps—nuclear arms reductions, implementation of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and universal adoption of the Additional Protocol—would improve political dynamics and confidence between nuclear-armed and non–nuclear-weapon states.

Perhaps most importantly, the United States, Russia, and China would have to reassure each other of their strategic intentions, constrain certain military capabilities, and reach a mutual understanding on the future of ballistic missile defenses. In South Asia, culmination of India's and Pakistan's positive back-channel diplomacy over Kashmir could expedite agreement to eliminate short-range ballistic missiles that both countries recognize are unnecessary and not conducive to crisis stability. Or, this logic could be reversed with an agreement on missiles that improves the political environment for creating and announcing a formula for ending conflict over Kashmir. Other such co-evolutionary developments can be easily imagined throughout the global nuclear order.

The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons does not make its attainment feasible, let alone inevitable. Nuclear disarmament and resolution of political–security conflicts would have to proceed together in a reciprocating, co-evolutionary process.

The elimination of all nuclear arsenals is not an end in itself. It is a means to global security. The verification and security conditions that would be required to enable the abolition of nuclear weapons are all conducive to a more secure world. Therefore, the goal of abolishing nuclear weapons can be a beneficial organizing principle of the national security policies of major states. The next U.S. administration should be one of its champions. ■

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RESOURCES

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