

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: THE STATE OF PLAY

Address by Professor Gareth Evans, Co-Chair of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group and former Australian Foreign Minister, to Global Strategy Forum, London, 18 October 2011

The Good News

The good news about nuclear weapons, and there is some, is that, after a decade of sleepwalking, there really has been a high-level political effort made over the last three to four years to jolt policymakers and publics into confronting the reality that unless we seriously commit to complete disarmament – to getting all the way to zero -- there is a very real risk that the planet as we know it will not survive, and that that effort has borne some fruit.

The first high-profile effort to shock the world out of its complacency was made by four of the hardest-nosed realists ever to hold public office -- former US Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and Senator Sam Nunn -- in their famous series of Wall Street Journal since 2007 arguing that whatever role nuclear weapons may have played in the Cold War, in the present international environment the risks of any state retaining them far outweigh any possible security reward. That was followed by a series of similar ‘group of four’ statements from eminent former officials in the UK and elsewhere. And then came the election of Barack Obama, a US president at last totally committed, intellectually and emotionally, to the ultimate achievement of a nuclear weapon free world, a vision which he articulated superbly in his 2009 Prague speech.

It’s a message that has since been reinforced by, among other initiatives, the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) which I co-chaired, and which built upon the work of earlier commissions and panels, including the Blix Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction going back to the Canberra Commission in 1996. In our 2009 report we systematically analysed and documented the nature and extent of the risk which exists from non-state terrorist actors getting their hands on nuclear weapons or material; of new states joining the ranks of the nuclear armed; of the proliferation risks that will be associated with any expansion of civil nuclear energy in the years ahead; and -- above all – the risks associated with the existing global stockpile of 23,000 nuclear weapons, with their combined destructive capability of 150,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs, 7,000 of them still operationally deployed, and (unbelievably, 20 years after the end of the Cold War) some 2,000 of those held by the US and Russian still on dangerously high alert, ready to be launched on warning in the

event of a perceived attack, within a decision window for each President of four to eight minutes.

The key point we made was that given what we now know about how many times the very sophisticated command and control systems of the Cold War years were strained by mistakes and false alarms, human error and human idiocy; given what we know about how much less sophisticated are the command and control systems of some of the newer nuclear-armed states; and given what we both know and can guess about how much more sophisticated and capable cyber offence will be of overcoming cyber defence in the years ahead, it is sheer dumb luck that we have survived as long as we have without catastrophe, and the worst kind of wishful thinking to assume that that luck can continue indefinitely.

The new momentum that has been generated by all this alarm-bell ringing, and associated articulation of action plans, has brought some results. Last year's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference did not collapse in disarray, like its predecessor, and some useful – albeit lowest common denominator – language was agreed, including on movement towards a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East. There has been movement in Vienna, at the IAEA, on setting up a fuel bank which will give an incentive to new nuclear energy entrants not to establish new uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing facilities of their own ('bomb starter kits' as they've rightly been called). France has dismantled its own such facilities, and set a ceiling of 300 on the number of warheads it will retain; the UK, similarly, has set a limit of 225 on its warhead numbers, and been transparent in declaring that no more than 160 of these will be operationally available.

In the U.S., President Obama has delivered, with the cooperation of President Medvedev, the US-Russia New START treaty, which will bring some significant reductions in deployed strategic weapons, if not their actual numbers; has hosted a successful global Summit (to be followed up next year in Seoul) on the crucial issue of securing nuclear weapons and material from misuse; and has overseen a Nuclear Posture Review, which – in the interests of reducing the role and salience of nuclear weapons -- at least holds out the possibility that the US will declare that the 'sole purpose' of its nuclear armoury is to deter the use of *nuclear* weapons by others (though it's all rather like St Augustine's "God give me chastity and continence – but not yet.")

The Bad News

But that's where the good news ends. The US Senate is no closer to ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty than it ever was, and China, India and Pakistan among others are sheltering behind that inaction ; a host of obstacles stand in the way of further bilateral arms reduction negotiation any time soon – both in the U.S. and Russia; although the Permanent Five Security Council members have started regular consultations on these issues, no progress at all has been made in terms of starting serious disarmament discussions with China, or on a wider multilateral basis; an ugly stalemate continues in Geneva on negotiation of the proposed treaty to ban further production of

weapons grade fissile material; among proliferators and would-be proliferators, North Korea is no closer to being put back in the box, and Iran is closer than ever to jumping out of it should it make the decision to do so; and, even after last week's announcement – after months of haggling – that a Finnish diplomat would facilitate the process, one would need to be a supreme optimist to think in the present environment in the Middle East anything useful will emerge any time soon from the effort to hold a WMD Free Zone – and if that is so, quite apart from anything else, it won't help the chances of any kind of consensus on the next NPT Review Conference.

So the air has quite seriously gone out of the nuclear disarmament balloon. I've just come from a meeting in Seoul of North East Asia security specialists, and it was a dispiriting experience: they were all concerned with proliferation but not remotely focused on disarmament. The assumption was that nuclear weapons were a given and would remain so, this was seen as posing technical rather than existential problems, and the talk among US allies was all about maintaining traditional extended nuclear deterrence: it was like being in a Cold War time warp.

Re-Energising the Agenda

So what can we do to reinflate that balloon – and ensure that it's not just full of hot air? How do we regenerate that momentum that seemed so promising just a couple of years ago? What should concerned parliamentarians and activists be arguing for?

(1) Remaking the Case for Zero. The first priority must be to make the case for global zero all over again, both top-down from leaders, and bottom-up from civil society activists, and this time in a way that the message really sticks in the mind of publics, and policymakers and those who most influence them. The story is there to be told, but it must be told over and over again, in a way that compels attention.

The absolutely crucial messages can be very simply stated:

- nuclear weapons are the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever invented. They can't be uninvented, but they can and must be outlawed, as chemical and biological weapons have been;
- so long as anyone has nuclear weapons others will want them; so long as any nuclear weapons remain anywhere, they are bound one day to be used – if not by design, then by mistake or miscalculation; and
- any such use will be catastrophic: nuclear weapons are the only ones capable of destroying life on this planet as we know it. The only comparable risk to planetary survivability is climate change, and bombs can kill us a lot faster than CO2.

(2) Mapping a Credible Path to Zero. A second priority, certainly intellectually (opinions will differ as to whether this is politically necessary) must be to map a credible path to zero -- showing how it is possible to get to where we need to go. Nuclear disarmament activists and advocates are absolutely united in our commitment to that end goal, but there are differences – which we need to acknowledge and accommodate – in

the way the road to zero has been mapped. The differences basically boil down to two different visions of what can be accomplished by when, which could be labelled the ‘super-optimistic’ and the ‘optimistic’ respectively:

The Super-Optimistic Roadmap: The Global Zero Action Plan. This proposes the phased, verified elimination of all nuclear weapons is a four-phased strategy to reach a global zero accord over the 14 years from 2010 to 2023, and to complete the dismantlement of all remaining nuclear warheads over the following seven years to 2030. In Phase 1 (2010-13) there would be a major new bilateral accord between the US and Russia, and preparation for multilateral negotiations; in Phase 2 (2014-18) there would be further bilateral US-Russia agreed reductions, an agreed freeze on increases by the other nuclear-armed states, and establishment of a new verification and enforcement system; in Phase 3 (2019-23) the negotiation of a global zero accord, signed by all nuclear capable countries, for the phased, verified, proportional reduction of all nuclear arsenals to zero total warheads during Phase 4 (2024-30).

The Optimistic Roadmap: The ICNND Action Plan. My own Commission in its 2009 Report, while wholly committed to the zero objective, took the view that even on the most optimistic assumptions about what might be achievable in practice (and some of those assumptions are now looking decidedly shaky in the light of the loss of momentum I have described), it was simply not possible now to map the road all the way to zero, and that a more realistic course -- and one that had a much better chance of getting buy-in from the relevant governments -- was to aim at a ‘minimization’ target to be achieved over the fifteen years to 2025.

This would have three elements – a phased but dramatic reduction in stockpile numbers, from 23,000 to less than 2,000 (the US and Russia 500 each, and all the other armed states 1,000 between them); universal embrace of “no first use” doctrine; and practical credibility being given to that doctrine by having only a very small number of weapons actually deployed, with the rest needing a long lead-time to make operational.

As much as we would have liked to continue the timeline, to zero by 2030 or 2035 or some other specific date, we assessed that it was simply not credible to try to do so now. Getting from low numbers, to states giving up their weapons completely won’t be, as much as we might hope otherwise, just a matter of continuing along a quantitative continuum, but jumping over four huge qualitative hurdles: geo-political uncertainty, psychological reluctance, and having in place verification and enforcement systems which every state is totally confident will stop any subsequent breakout. Maybe if the minimization phase goes well, we will be able to put a timeline on the elimination phase within the next decade, but we simply didn’t think it was possible now.

Opinions here will no doubt differ as to which of these roadmaps you find the most credible – or least incredible! – and the most attractive for campaign purposes and energising real commitment by policymakers. Of course there is an argument, which I well understand, that specific dates have more immediate appeal, and that it is better to set one’s sights too high rather than too low. The question we have to wrestle with is whether setting target dates which are seen by policymakers as impossibly ambitious will stop them listening altogether.

(3) Finding Mechanisms to Energise Policymakers and Publics. Others will have ideas about how best to do this both in the short and long term – including no doubt through the education system, where nuclear issues seem to have been long more or less completely neglected in every country of which I’m aware -- but let me mention three particular initiatives in which I’ve been involved one way or another.

Nuclear Weapons Convention. This is a way forward which has been mapped by a group of international NGOs, is supported by many governments (though so far none of the key nuclear players, and I am sure will have a good deal of support in the UK Parliament. It is to get started immediately on negotiating and seeking support for an all-embracing Nuclear Weapons Convention, which would provide for the phased achievement of global zero (though at the moment with the time-line left open to be negotiated) and embrace a complete legal array of supporting verification and enforcement machinery. The models that most proponents have in mind are the Ottawa treaty on land mines and Oslo treaty on cluster bombs, which were initially negotiated by groups of like-minded governments, have secured considerable (though still by no means universal) buy-in from other governments, and proved to be wonderful vehicles for energising grass roots campaigning.

There is not much to dislike about the idea of a NWC, though a number of governments clearly do - as I found when I tried to drum up support around Europe last year for a new global research centre which would have as one of its objectives the substantial further development of the draft now in circulation, so that it could be a credible foundation for multilateral disarmament negotiations whenever these could be started. I think work of this kind should now take place, and the only question that needs to be debated further is whether the NWC really is capable of being a “campaign treaty” on the Ottawa and Oslo models, or as I am inclined to think, the issues it addresses are so much more complex – with so many (like verification and enforcement) presently so unresolved – that this just couldn’t work in the same way.

State of Play Report Card. I have been involved in establishing recently a new Centre at the Australian National University, supported by the Australian Government – which will work with SIPRI in Stockholm and have some outreach activities in Geneva with the assistance of the Swiss Government – whose primary role will be to produce a series of major ‘state of play’ report cards, the first at the end of 2012, summarizing where we have got to on the whole vast interlocking nuclear agenda that the world needs need to pursue, and making clear – without pulling punches in the way that official intergovernmental reports invariably do -- who is pulling their weight and who is not, and what the action priorities need to be for the short, medium and longer term ahead. Hopefully this will prove to be a useful advocacy and energizing tool.

Leadership Networks. The third initiative is an important one which will be very familiar to this audience following the efforts of Lord Browne – and many of you here – to establish the European Leadership Network on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament: the idea of gathering together experienced and high-profile current and former figures from politics, diplomacy and the services to inform and energise public

opinion, and especially high-level policymakers to take seriously the very real threats posed by nuclear weapons, and do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and ultimately eliminated.

Inspired by the European example, and the excellent inputs that the ELN has been making, for example, into the ongoing debate on NATO's nuclear posture and specific issues like the future of tactical nuclear weapons, I have been engaged over the last year in establishing a similar group for the Asia Pacific region– with the help, as was the case with the ELN, of a seed grant from the Nuclear Threat Initiative, co-chaired by Sam Nunn and Ted Turner. APLN presently has some 30 very senior members from 13 countries from Japan to Pakistan – nearly all former Prime Ministers, Foreign or Defence Ministers, National Security Advisers or service chiefs – and we are meeting for the first time next month in Tokyo to see if we can thrash out a general position statement, and make progress on some specific issues where we have formed working groups, namely extended deterrence, transparency and the potential for multilateralising in the region the most sensitive stages of the nuclear fuel cycle.

If getting real movement on these issues is, in the Euro-Atlantic context, slow boring through very hard boards, let me tell you that in my part of the world it will be like tackling a rock with a pen-knife. But we will persist because we must.

Finding Common Ground

One of the many frustrations of working with these issues is that, as with just about every reform effort in human history, there is a tendency for activists to become more absorbed in the thrill of chasing down apostates and dissidents in the ranks on particular policy arguments than focusing on the goals that unite them.

But even if we can't all agree on the utility of setting a particular target date for achieving zero, we can surely agree on the initial series of steps we need to take to start that journey, and in fact to get a very long way down the road compared to where we are today. And if we can't all agree about how at this stage to best use a draft NWC, we can surely agree that putting intellectual and political energy into creating a really compelling legal framework document of the kind that can serve as the basis for serious intergovernmental negotiations is a hugely useful enterprise.

The crucial task is to get nuclear disarmament back to the centre of the global policy agenda, and to keep that agenda moving forward. This is not, after all, just another difficult policy issue. Nothing less than the fate of this planet of ours hangs on us getting this right. It's not a matter of our children and grandchildren not forgiving us if we get it wrong. It's a matter of whether they'll be around at all.

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