Possibilities for a Nuclear-Free World

Lawrence S. Wittner, Jayantha Dhanapala

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Introduction

In the following opinion piece, which appeared in the March 20, 2008 issue of the Asahi Shimbun, Jayantha Dhanapala—the distinguished former Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs at the United Nations—not only makes the case for a nuclear-free world, but argues that it is a viable possibility.

In Dhanapala's view, the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons has acquired significant momentum thanks to the initiative of four former senior U.S. government officials: George Shultz (Ronald Reagan's secretary of state), Henry Kissinger (Richard Nixon's secretary of state), William Perry (Bill Clinton's secretary of defense), and Sam Nunn (former chair of the senate armed services committee). In January 2007 and, again, in January 2008, they published powerful opinion pieces in the Wall Street Journal (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120036422673589947.html?mod=opinion_main_commentaries)that outlined the need for a nuclear-free world, as well as steps in that direction. Since that time, Dhanapala notes, there has been important follow-up to this initiative by other former national security officials and nuclear experts.

As none of these former U.S. government officials showed much interest in the idea of abolishing nuclear weapons in the past, how should we account for their newfound zeal? Part of the answer seems to lie in their fear that terrorists will acquire and use nuclear weapons. As they stated in the first paragraph of their 2008 article: "We face a very real possibility that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands." Of course, many people believe (and have believed for decades) that nuclear weapons are already in "dangerous hands." Nevertheless, it is hard not to agree that adding terrorist bands—or additional nations--to the list of the nuclear-armed will raise the level of nuclear danger.

A second factor that might explain why portions of the U.S. national security elite are keener on nuclear abolition than in the past is that U.S. conventional military power is far superior to that of any other nation. In reality, as U.S. scientists began warning in 1945, U.S. national security can be maintained better in a non-nuclear world than in a world bristling with nuclear weapons. Even so, people of good will might still welcome the Shultz-Kissinger-Perry-Nunn initiative for, although it appears to contain an element of self-interest and to return us to the pre-nuclear era debate over the broader issue of using military force to maintain national security, it does enhance the prospects for human survival.

A more telling objection to this focus on a group of former national security managers is that they might not be sufficient for the task at hand. For one thing, there are plenty of national security officials who are not at all interested in nuclear abolition—or at least nuclear abolition for their country! And these people are in power. As Dhanapala observes, at present "there are no ongoing negotiations for nuclear weapons reductions."

Conversely, there is plenty of pro-nuclear activity by government officials. Although the Bush administration has focused on nuclear projects in Iran and North Korea, it has consistently supported the building of new nuclear weapons by the United States. Moreover, it has winked at the development of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan. Indeed, it recently pushed through Congress a nuclear technology sharing agreement with the Indian government that will upgrade the ability of that government to churn out nuclear weapons.

The leaders of many non-nuclear nations, of course, are less enthusiastic about the ongoing nuclear arms race. Even so, there has been an erosion of their willingness to challenge the policies of nuclear-armed nations. The emergence of the nonaligned movement during the 1950s provided powerful international pressure upon the great powers for an end to the testing, development, and deployment of nuclear weapons. For decades, Third World nations played a key role in the nonaligned movement, and were particularly sharp in their condemnation of the Soviet-American nuclear confrontation. Today, however, relatively little antinuclear rhetoric seems to emanate from these nations.

Furthermore, although there was substantial nuclear disarmament in the past, that progress toward a nuclear-free world was based heavily on massive popular pressure from peace and disarmament organizations. In the United States, groups like the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), Women Strike for Peace, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, and Physicians for Social Responsibility helped create a national uproar over the nuclear arms race. They were joined in their protest ventures by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, the Congress Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikin) and the Council Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikyo) in Japan, Project Ploughshares in Canada, the Trust Groups in the Soviet Union, and hundreds of similar organizations around the world. This activist pressure, plus the antinuclear sentiments of the general public, led politicians in numerous nations to abandon many of their nuclear ambitions. But, although polls show that popular sentiment remains antinuclear, that previous massive campaign against nuclear weapons is largely absent today.

Thus, ironically, when portions of the national security elite have finally come around to championing a nuclear-free world, much of the popular antinuclear movement is dormant.

Can it be revived? Perhaps so. Groups like Peace Action (the successor to SANE and the Freeze), Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, and Faithful Security are among those striving to spark a resurrection of the nuclear disarmament campaign in the United States. And others are at work abroad. But popular protest against nuclear weapons remains far from its peak in the mid-1980s.

At present, then, Dhanapala—and all other people committed to human survival—should certainly welcome the recent antinuclear activities of a portion of the national security elite. But, as he implies, substantial progress toward a nuclear-free world remains dependent on a revival of pressure from non-nuclear nations and from the public. Lawrence S. Wittner

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From pie in the sky toward a nuke-free world

Jayantha Dhanapala

The vision of a nuclear weapon-free world was most famously dismissed by the former Prime Minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher, as a "pie in the sky." Such was the derision which greeted the disarmament scenario championed by governments, especially from the Non-aligned Movement, as well as nongovernmental organizations such as Pugwash.

It is therefore a revolutionary change to see senior officials in former U.S. Administrations combine to write--not one but two--pieces in the conservative Wall Street Journal, calling for such pie in the sky.

In the past, other senior members of U.S. Administrations, like Robert McNamara, and retired military top brass, like Gen. Lee Butler, have also experienced epiphanies and recanted their views on nuclear weapons.

What distinguishes this year-long initiative by George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn and William Perry is the fact that they have been able to gather a number of distinguished U.S. individuals like Madeleine Albright, James Baker III, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Warren Christopher and Colin Powell behind them with a group of scholars in Stanford University's Hoover Institution providing the scientific expertise.

The influence of this extraordinary initiative is beginning to percolate in the campaigns for the U.S. presidential elections and the policies of other countries like Britain. At the end of February, the Norwegian government hosted a meeting of global experts in Oslo to carry the initiative further.

A major aim of the initiative is to make the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world into "a joint enterprise."

The need for broader support is obvious. Not only do many of the nuclear weapon states (NWS) and NATO retain policies for the first use of nuclear weapons, but some also have plans for preemptive strikes and the building of new weapons with the specific intent of violating the taboo that has existed since the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that has long stood against proliferation and represented a hope for nuclear disarmament is now in grave jeopardy.

There are no ongoing negotiations for nuclear weapons reductions; negotiations about the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran are still inconclusive, and there is growing evidence of terrorist groups seeking access to nuclear weapons technology and materials.

Faced with this seemingly entrenched attitude in favor of nuclear weapons and their use, broader support for an initiative that will eventually lead to the elimination of the world's 26,000 nuclear weapons must come primarily from the governments and peoples of the NWS, two of which, the United States and Russia--who own 95 percent of the weapons--will soon have new presidents.

At the same time the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) and their citizens also have a right, and indeed an obligation, to take steps that will help usher in a nuclear weapons-free world.

The NNWS do not, however, form a monolithic group. There are the NNWS who are allied to NWS and who, like Japan, enjoy the benefits of a security umbrella by belonging to a security pact or, like Canada, to a security alliance (NATO) with "nuclear sharing" arrangements.

The NATO summits in April 2008 and again on the 60th anniversary of the alliance in 2009 will enable a review of the 1999 Strategic Concept.

The involvement of some NNWS in ballistic missile defense plans clearly linked to nuclear

weapons strategy is another factor compromising these NNWS.

But we do have a unique opportunity where the fulfillment of the reciprocal, albeit asymmetrical, obligations of the nuclear "haves" and "have-nots" can together help to usher in a nuclear weapons-free world. This is the "partnership" the Wall Street Journal articles call for.

A new U.S. president can take the lead. But for this United States leadership to be effective, the support for the Shultz/Kissinger/Nunn/Perry initiative must also come from other NWS and the NNWS.

Sweden sponsored the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (WMDC), chaired by the respected Hans Blix, which proposed a world summit on disarmament, nonproliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction.

The time is right to prepare for this summit in 2009. The alternative is too awful to contemplate.

As the Blix Report noted, "So long as any state has such weapons--especially nuclear weapons--others will want them.

So long as any such weapons remain in any state's arsenal, there is a high risk they will one day be used, by design or accident. Any such use would be catastrophic."

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