

Nuclear Deterrence

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Mr President, Ambassadors, delegates and friends of the NGOs,

In the NGO presentation on this issue at last year's PrepCom, it was stated that nuclear deterrence is the largest obstacle to a nuclear weapon-free world. We endorse this, but go further: we have concluded that nuclear deterrence doctrine is a potentially terminal delusion that needs to be challenged head-on because it is the final justification for never getting rid of nuclear arsenals. If we are right, then all that is preventing rapid progress in complying with Article VI of the NPT is a terrible, naïve misunderstanding associated with hitherto unquestioned acceptance about what nuclear weapons are supposed to do. This issue is one of the most urgent that we need to address now because, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon rightly observed on United Nations Day 2008, "the doctrine of nuclear deterrence has proven to be contagious." This needs an immunization programme which persuades security planners that nuclear deterrence is irrational and unacceptable.

Exploited by those with a vested interest in retaining nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence runs counter to military experience and behavioural analysis. Yet they insist that, because the technologies to make such weapons cannot be disinvented, nuclear deterrence must remain in security doctrines. Even in a nuclear weapon-free world, they argue, the ability to build nuclear weapons must be retained as a "virtual deterrent" against breakout.

Such justifications are rejected by the overwhelming majority of NGOs and security analysts, who believe that nuclear deterrence doctrines have a fundamental and insoluble problem of credibility and logic. The belief in nuclear deterrence is based upon the crazy premise that nuclear war can be made less probable by deploying weapons and doctrines that make it more probable. Specifically, it is impossible for a rational leader to make a credible nuclear threat when directed against a nuclear adversary capable of a retaliatory second strike. And a second strike is pointless, because it would be no more than posthumous revenge, in which millions of innocent people would die horribly. This is why enthusiasm for a nuclear weapon free world is incompatible with "we will keep nuclear weapons for deterrence as long as anyone else has them." We commend the recently published US Nuclear Posture Review for narrowing options for use of nuclear weapons by restoring assurances of non-use against non-nuclear weapon members of the NPT. However, this core contradiction remains, undermining President Obama's efforts to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons.

Once again, we see how nuclear armed states resist giving up their nuclear arsenals because of the prevailing belief that nuclear weapons provide an ultimate security guarantee and privileged status. This provokes proliferation. Nuclear deterrence, like all theories, is not foolproof. It entails a hostile stand-off, relying on rational actors with similar values and perfect communications, who in the case of the United States and Russia have less than half an hour to assess a possible attack and decide what to do. Furthermore, such hostile posturing can result in deterrence being misinterpreted as provocation.

The administration of George W. Bush was the first among the nuclear weapon states to recognise publicly that nuclear deterrence would not work against terrorists. What was not admitted is that nuclear weapons are not weapons at all. The uniquely indiscriminate, long-term effects of radioactivity, including genetic and environmental damage, on top of almost unimaginable explosive violence, make them the most unacceptable terror device yet invented – far worse than chemical or even biological weapons, with which they are deliberately linked by some policy-makers. Relying on threats to use them, therefore, amounts to state-sponsored nuclear terrorism. Yet every nuclear weapon state contemplates modernizing, if not increasing, its arsenal.

Extremists driven by religious or political ideologies would not only not be deterred by nuclear weapons. Their game plan could include provoking nuclear retaliation in order to turn moral outrage against the retaliator and recruit more people to their nightmarish causes. Also, some nuclear-armed states are threatening nuclear retaliation against even cyberwarfare. Where would the nuclear strikes be targeted? Hackers – individuals or governments – cannot necessarily be identified as to location or nationality.

Some allies of the nuclear weapon states are re-assessing the value of extended nuclear deterrence. In our view, extended nuclear deterrence is unnecessary and counterproductive for security. First, the nuclear states risk being pushed into first use of nuclear weapons when their own security is not directly threatened. Secondly, the misnamed “nuclear umbrella” could become a lightning rod for insecurity because of the high risk of rapid, uncontrollable escalation to full-scale nuclear war. Even limited use could also magnify catastrophic climate change, causing widespread famine for millions.

A significant parliamentarians’ group from the new Japanese government seeks real security by promoting a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone covering the Korean Peninsula and Japan, as an important step towards further confidence-building in the region. This would prevent a regional nuclear arms race between Japan, South Korea and North Korea, or between Japan and a reunified Korea. Such an arrangement would be in the interests of the US, Russia and China. It would be a powerful way to ease tension and enhance security by hastening the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas and promoting co-operative security in Northeast Asia.

Meanwhile, NATO is under pressure to review its nuclear doctrine as five member states call for US tactical nuclear weapons to be removed from Europe as a confidence-building measure with Russia. Further steps towards effective Negative Security Assurances would include a protocol to the NPT, signed by all the nuclear weapon states, undertaking not to attack non-nuclear signatory states, plus all the P-5 ratifying the NSA protocols in nuclear weapon free zone treaties.

The nub of the moral case against nuclear deterrence is that no state has the right to seek security by threatening, through collateral damage, to destroy potentially all civilization and the entire ecosystem of the planet. Nuclear deterrence doctrine has always entailed an intention to attack cities with nuclear terror devices, knowingly causing monstrous atrocities. The moral deception deepens when the nuclear weapon states, having admitted that extremists armed with weapons of mass destruction cannot be deterred, plan pre-emptive nuclear attacks in ‘anticipatory self-defence’ of their ‘vital interests’ – not last-ditch defence of their home territory. Thereby, their unprovable claim that nuclear deterrence averts war is cynically stood on its head.

In its 1996 Advisory Opinion, the International Court of Justice in effect outlawed nuclear deterrence when it unanimously confirmed that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be illegal. It

stated:

‘If the envisaged use of force is itself unlawful, the stated readiness to use it would be a threat prohibited under [UN Charter] Article 2, paragraph 4. Thus it would be illegal for a State to threaten force to secure territory from another State, or to cause it to follow or not follow certain political or economic paths. The notions of “threat” and “use” of force under Article 2, paragraph 4 of the Charter stand together in the sense that if the use of force itself in a given case is illegal – for whatever reason – the threat to use such force will likewise be illegal.’

The Court did not sanction any use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear deterrence mantras provide no more than a psychological security blanket, a grown-up version of the bit of ragged cloth that some children turn to alone at night or when times are stressful. Most children grow up enough to leave it behind. Another variant is that nuclear deterrence is described as ‘the ultimate insurance’. Insurance policies do not prevent disasters or make them go away; but they might (depending on the small print) help a policy-holder recover from some of the damage if disaster strikes. However, likening nuclear deterrence to insurance ignores the opportunity costs in terms of other defence and security resources, and that in order to be credible, nuclear weapons must be deployed ready for attack. Such deployment sustains an atmosphere of distrust and hostility, increasing potential threats and dangers – especially with associated risks of false warning, miscalculation and accident. It also assumes a reasonable ratio between the costs and benefits of the chosen insurance, and glosses over the terrible, uninsurable costs if the relied-upon but oxymoronic ‘nuclear deterrent’ fails and nuclear weapons are launched. What is more, at least some of the long-term environmental costs would be incurred not by just the nuclear adversaries, but over time by the entire international community and all life on the planet.

Sixty-five years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and over twenty years after the Cold War ended, we need to have the courage and wisdom to discard that security blanket, and strip away the deceits of nuclear deterrence. If the political and military leaders of the nuclear weapon states and their allies cannot think their way beyond the circular logic, myths and misleading promises of nuclear deterrence, then it is up to responsible, conscientious citizens to call their bluff and demand more humane, lawful and safer non-nuclear – and preferably non-violent – security strategies. As with the abolition of slavery, we need to generate unstoppable political will in support of the UN Secretary-General’s courageous plan to remove and dismantle the scourge of nuclear weapons under a Nuclear Weapons Convention, so that the world is not destroyed if – when – deterrence fails.