

Alternative Civil Society View: Nuclear Deterrence

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Mr. President, Ambassadors, delegates, and friends of the NGOs, you have heard much about disarmament from NGOs here today. I am glad to be able to speak to the subject too, however, lest you get the false impression that what you have heard so far represents the views of all civil society. Fortunately, it does not.

To hear some tell it, nuclear deterrence is a terrible travesty – at best a naïve mistake, and really more akin to criminal insanity. Anyone who insists upon a such starting assumption, however, is not interested in a meaningful or constructive dialogue with nuclear weapons possessors and indeed many *other* countries in the present international system – and will thus continue to pass up opportunities to make progress in reducing reliance upon nuclear weapons, the numbers of them in existence, and the risks they present.

Simply put, the problem is that nuclear deterrence *isn't* stupid or insane, and it is an important part of the security planning of numerous governments. Nuclear weapons possessors think nuclear deterrence is viable and necessary; many of their allies rely upon such deterrence in “extended” form; other countries clearly *seek* nuclear weapons on the basis of what they claim, at least, is some need to deter others. Remarkably few, if any, appear to think it *irrelevant*, much less insane.

Still more removed are we from a world in which “deterrence” *per se* is no longer a factor in security planning. *That* world, indeed, is scarcely imaginable at all. One might as well plan for the abolition of locks, car alarms, and police constables. Deterrence *as a phenomenon* cannot be declared away, and it is simply a fact of life that one can indeed often prevent someone from taking some action by making clear that its cost will be unacceptable and outweigh any benefit.

The challenge for the disarmament community, therefore, is not to reject the possibility of deterrence in its *nuclear* form but rather to understand and work to lessen reliance upon it. If my colleagues were right that nuclear deterrence is simply lunacy, disarmament wouldn't be so hard: most governments aren't led by lunatics. But it takes clear thinking and sustained effort replace sane and well-established traditions of relying upon nuclear weapons with intelligible and credible *alternatives*. How tragic it would be for ideological blinkers to preclude the kind of engagement needed to replace nuclear deterrence by such alternatives.

Deterrence in its most basic form is as old as one human's capability of harming another, and will not disappear even with the abolition of nuclear weaponry. Moreover, because knowledge of the possibility of nuclear arms – and basic information about how to fabricate them – cannot be erased from human memory, and because nuclear materials and the technologies for producing them remain dangerously widespread, at least *some* form even of *nuclear* deterrence is likely to remain viable even were we to achieve abolition. As long as anyone has the “option” of weapons development afforded by the possession of fissile material and dual-use technology, “nuclear deterrence” will not wholly have disappeared.

What we are talking about, therefore – or what we *should* be talking about if disarmament politics and ideology permit us such honesty – is the challenge of shaping the future security environment in ways that make it progressively more unnecessary and unwise to rely upon nuclear weapons for deterrence.

We will never be able to escape deterrence *as a phenomenon*, nor probably even that oblique form of *nuclear* deterrence inherent in the continued existence of nuclear technology and material – that is, the technical availability of some weapons “option.”

But there is no law of nature that requires the actual existence of nuclear weapons; that is a policy choice. It is our challenge to make *un-choosing* that choice more of a viable option for national leaders in the real world. To do this, however, we must remember that we *are* talking about the real world, and not some fantasy kingdom in which knowledge can be decreed away and human nature reshaped at our caprice. Our task is not entirely hopeless, but we do ourselves no favor by pretending it is different than it is.