

The Nuclear Bomb: A weapon in search of a target

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In 1993 the US and Russia removed each other from their nuclear targets list. The retargeting of their strategic nuclear weapons into open water in the Atlantic, was a simple task technically, but signified a momentous change politically. No longer were the two superpowers poised to annihilate each other. No longer was each power faced with a nuclear armed enemy, against which they felt the need to continue building nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

But did the nuclear weapons themselves disappear along with the cold war threat that generated their build-up? On the contrary, the nuclear weapons have survived, buttressed by new rationalisations for their existence including some from academics Dr John Battersby and Ron Smith writing in New Zealand International Review. Ron Smith for example writes that "*It should not be assumed the need for nuclear deterrence has disappeared with the ending of the Cold War. The possession of nuclear weapons would have the same implications for a future nationalist Russian leader (such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky) as it had for his communist predecessors.*" ("Peace and Disarmament", New Zealand International Review, May/June 1995, p14)

The prospect of a nationalistic leader like Zhirinovsky coming to power in Russia, has led others to conclude that, before Russia possibly slips into a leadership that would oppose nuclear disarmament and could consider using nuclear weapons as threats in an expansionist drive to reclaim neighbouring states, the West should take the opportunity to reach agreements with Russia to prohibit the use of nuclear weapons and to eliminate them.

During the Cold War, the nuclear states recognised the risks of nuclear deterrence and the need to eliminate nuclear weapons, even if they did not move towards reaching such a goal. They agreed, for example that, "*The most acute and urgent task of the present day is to remove the threat of a world war - a nuclear war*", and that "*... the ultimate goal is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.*" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/41/59F, 1986. Adopted unanimously.)

Robert McNamara, former US Secretary of Defense, recently revealed that the USSR and USA came much closer to actually engaging in nuclear war than had previously been thought (In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, Times Books, 1995, pp 337-346). The prospect of another Cold War with a less stable nuclear power is frightening.

In Europe the main rationale for nuclear weapons was to prevent an invasion by a Soviet army which was superior in conventional (non-nuclear) forces. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gabriel de Bellesize, French Ambassador to New Zealand, was asked by a UK arms control expert what role there now was for the nuclear arsenals of France and the UK, and in particular the proposed new Euro-missiles. He replied, "*Well you must give your foreign minister and mine time to think.*" (International Peace Research Association Conference, Christchurch, 1992. Reported in Power and Sex: A Book About Women, Scilla Elworthy, Element

Books, London, 1996.)

In October 1995 the French and British governments announced a new role for their nuclear weapons, that of targeting unspecified countries which threaten their *"vital interests"*. They stated that the use of *"low yield"* nuclear weapons may be necessary as a *"warning shot against an advancing aggressor, along with a threat warning of a massive nuclear strike unless the attack halts."* Such a warning shot could be fired *"as soon as a country's vital interests were threatened"* (Joint communiqué between France and the UK on nuclear cooperation, October 30, 1995. Reported in Financial Times, October 31, 1995).

In 1993, the Center for Defense Information, a US organisation founded by retired military officers and headed at the time by Admiral Gene La Roque, reported that nuclear weapons, which were produced to counter Hitler's Germany, Hirohito's Japan, Mao's China and the USSR, were no longer needed. The Pentagon however, struggled to find new targets for their nuclear weapons - and found them - *"...third world nations that threaten the interests of the United States and its allies"*. In particular the new strategic doctrine singled out *"any potentially hostile country that has or is seeking weapons of mass destruction."* (General Lee Butler, as quoted in "Head of Nuclear Forces plans for a New World", New York Times, 25 January, 1993, p B7.)

Policy for disaster

The main rationale for the US policy change is "counter proliferation", the theory that such threats will prevent the acquisition or use of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. On paper this appears a reasonable justification for the US to hold onto its arsenal. Preventing the acquisition and possible use of nuclear weapons by other states is a desirable goal. However, the reality is that this policy produces the opposite. The possession of nuclear weapons by the nuclear states stimulates proliferation rather than preventing it. As 1995 Nobel Peace Laureate Joseph Rotblat points out, *"If the militarily most powerful - and least threatened - states need nuclear weapons for their security, how can one deny such security to countries that are truly insecure? The present nuclear policy is a recipe for proliferation. It is a policy for disaster."* (Joseph Rotblat, 1995 Nobel acceptance speech, reprinted in Disarmament Times, January 1996.)

The new Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said recently that the Bahartiya Janata Party would *"...openly declare India a nuclear weapons state and deploy nuclear armed missiles unless the world's nuclear powers including the United States agreed to eliminate their own nuclear stockpiles."* (New York Times May 16, 1996, pA8.)

The nuclear states have tried to contain the spread of nuclear weapons by a range of technical, political and legal means, mostly under the framework of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, the failure of the nuclear states to implement their obligations under Article VI of the NPT to eliminate nuclear weapons threatens this. Mexico, for example, told the International Court of Justice in November 1995 that if the nuclear states did not meet their commitments to disarm within a reasonable timeframe *" we would need to revise our continuation as party to the Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons."* (Sergio Gonzalez Galvez, Undersecretary of Foreign Relations for Mexico. Presentation to the International Court of Justice, November 3, 1995.)

The acquisition of nuclear weapons in order to deter the possible use by existing nuclear states is an attractive option to some states threatened by the nuclear states. North Korea, which for decades had expressed that it felt threatened by US nuclear forces, found that by simply hinting that it might develop nuclear weapons, it could achieve security assurances from the US. In August 1994, in order to secure agreement from North Korea to forgo any further reprocessing of plutonium, which could be diverted into

nuclear weapons, the US provided security guarantees not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Korea. (See for example, North Korea's Nuclear program: The Clinton Administration's Response, William E Berry Jr., Institute for National Security Studies, US Air Force Academy, Colorado, March 1995, p30).

Nuclear use possible

Ron Smith argues that "*Nuclear capable states cannot come into conflict with each other*". ("Nuclear Weapons: the good and the bad", New Zealand International Review, Vol XXI, No 1 Jan/Feb 1996.)

Perhaps the world would therefore be safer if every country had nuclear weapons to deter each other from war? This is the logical conclusion of deterrence theory. Most non-nuclear states have however rejected the myth of deterrence and have no aspirations to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. Adding fuel to the fire is no way to put it out. Thus most states are likely to remain in the NPT and keep their obligations not to acquire nuclear weapons even if the nuclear states are slow to implement their obligations to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Nor do the nuclear states believe that other states should have nuclear weapons to prevent them from coming into conflict with each other or with the current nuclear states. The rationalisation for the discriminatory policy of nuclear weapons for certain states but not others is that "*new proliferators might not be susceptible to basic deterrence as practiced during the Cold War.*" (US Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. Annual Report to the President and Congress, January 1994, pp 61.) The reality however is that the nuclear states are at least as likely not to be deterred from using nuclear weapons as new proliferators.

The five declared nuclear states refuse to renounce their option to use nuclear weapons, and four of the five even maintain options to use nuclear weapons first. Russia, France, the UK and the USA all argued recently before the International Court of Justice that they had a right to use nuclear weapons in certain unspecified circumstances.

The nuclear states have made some pledges not to use nuclear weapons in certain arenas or circumstances, but these are not necessarily watertight. The Chinese pledge not to use nuclear weapons first, for example, does not ease the concerns of Japan, Taiwan or other countries in the Asian region, particularly following recent Chinese missile testing in the Northern Taiwan Strait. Nor is the US pledge not to use nuclear weapons against members of the Non Proliferation Treaty guaranteed, as evidenced by recent US hints that nuclear weapons might be used against Iraq (during the Gulf War) or against Libya, both members of the NPT.

Ron Smith's prognosis that "*if we keep our heads they [nuclear weapons] will not be used again*", is overly optimistic and ignores the warning signs. There have been at least sixteen times when the US has seriously considered using nuclear weapons (To Win a Nuclear War: The Pentagon's Secret War Plans, Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod, South End Press, Boston, 1987.), and a number of other times when nuclear weapons were almost used by miscalculation or accident. It has been more good luck than good management that has prevented a nuclear war so far. Robert McNamara says that we must "*put the genie back in the bottle. If we do not there is a substantial risk that the twenty-first century will witness a nuclear tragedy.*" (In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, Robert McNamara, Time Books, NY, 1995, p346.)

Of increasing concern is the prospect of nuclear terrorism. Theodore Taylor, US nuclear weapons designer, notes that "*terroristic use of nuclear weapons is almost inevitable because of the worldwide spread of*

nuclear technology." (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March/April 1996, p22). Taylor notes that Cold War era doctrines of nuclear deterrence provide no protection against clandestine nuclear programs. If a terrorist group launches a nuclear terror attack, "Who do you bomb in retaliation?"

Thus, as long as the five declared nuclear powers hold onto their nuclear weapons, other countries will be tempted to develop their own nuclear programs, and nuclear weapons could be used.

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has since 1947 estimated the danger of nuclear war with a "doomsday clock". On December 8, 1995, in recognition of the growing danger of proliferation and the possible use of nuclear weapons, the Bulletin moved the hands of their doomsday clock 3 minutes closer to midnight.

Nuclear weapons obsolete

Ever since nuclear weapons were first invented, their use or possible use has been widely condemned. Any use would indiscriminately affect civilians and spread radioactive poisons, thus violating well established laws of warfare. Former International Court of Justice judge Jens Evensen has thus remarked that "*The use of nuclear weapons is the ultimate crime....the behaviour of the other party doesn't make them legal... Retrials are themselves violations...*" (Press conference, The Hague April 1989.)

The nuclear states have yet to accept this interpretation of the laws of war, but even so there is a growing understanding of the lack of military and political utility of nuclear weapons. The current nuclear states have adequate conventional forces to meet any military threat, as well as the power in the United Nations Security Council to organise collective response to aggression. Even if this were not true, there is a growing realisation in the governments and militaries that Lord Louis Mountbatten was correct when he said that "*Wars cannot be fought with nuclear weapons*" (Speech in Strasbourg, 1979)

Any use of nuclear weapons would invite universal condemnation and retaliation either militarily or politically, the negative effects of which would far outweigh any possible military advantage that could be gained from such use.

An indication of the growing acceptance of this rationale is that a number of former high-level advocates of deterrence have recently joined commissions such as the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and the Henry L Stimson Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction, in order to promote the elimination of nuclear weapons. General Charles Horner, one of these converts, recently stated that "*The nuclear weapon is obsolete; I want to get rid of them all...*" (Boston Globe, July 16, 1994)

Nuclear genie back in the bottle

John Battersby argues that "*Nuclear technology is here to stay. There is no more chance of ridding the world of it now than there was of abolishing gun powder, or the machine gun, in previous centuries. Nuclear disarmament is not really an option.*" (Nuclear Weapons: Living with Reality", New Zealand International Review, Vol. XXI, No.3, May/June 1996)

There are many minds, military, scientific and political, including those formerly in the corridors of nuclear power, who disagree with Dr Battersby. Already there is an international consensus that eliminating weapons of mass destruction is not only possible, it is imperative. The negotiation of treaties prohibiting chemical

weapons and biological weapons have been supported unanimously at the United Nations, and have now been concluded. The United Nations has repeatedly adopted resolutions calling also for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Joseph Rotblat, himself a former bomb designer, says that the argument that nuclear disarmament is impossible because "*nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented*" is an "*absurdity...If accepted it would mean that there should be no disarmament of any kind of weapon.*" Such an argument "*...ignores ways of preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by making it a crime, an illegal act which is punishable by international law. This is the usual way for society to deal with harmful or dangerous products. It is a hallmark of a civilised society that it can control the undesirable creations of its ingenuity by national laws or international treaties.*" (Joseph Rotblat, "Objections to a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World", in Beyond the NPT: A Nuclear-Weapon-Free World, International Network of Engineers and Scientists Against Proliferation, April 1995.)

The elimination of nuclear weapons is technically much easier than either biological or chemical weapons. While these can conceivably be manufactured in home laboratories, nuclear weapons require fissile material which can only be produced in sophisticated nuclear reactors and re-processors. These can be easily monitored and their use in producing nuclear weapons prevented. The fact that adequate monitoring does not occur at present is not because of technical difficulties, but because current monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency is voluntary and does not cover the five declared nuclear states or non-members of the Non Proliferation Treaty.

Such monitoring of nuclear reactors and prevention of proliferation will, however, only be possible if the nuclear states agree to the global abolition of nuclear weapons.

Political will

Australian Ambassador Richard Butler, Chair of the Canberra Commission for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, notes that the Committee agrees that the achievement of zero nuclear weapons is possible, but that "*...the engendering of the political will to do so...is the crucial issue.*" (Richard Butler, presentation at the United Nations, February 26, 1996.)

While threshold states such as India, Pakistan and North Korea have said that they would welcome an international convention prohibiting nuclear weapons and providing for verification, the US, UK, France and Russia are dragging their feet. At stake is more than just a cherished military weapon, but the wielding of power in a post-colonial world. Mexican Ambassador Miguel Marin Bosch remarked that "*The whole debate is driving the French crazy. The French government thinks that their legitimacy comes from having nuclear weapons. Take away their nukes and their Security Council veto, and what are they? A little more than Italy and less than Germany.*" (Mutiny on the Nuclear Bounty", The Nation, December 27, 1993.)

The five declared nuclear states are the only states with permanent membership on the Security Council, and the only states with veto power. Challenges to the legitimacy of their nuclear weapons, such as the recent World Court case on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, are threatening this imbalance of power. John Pilger noted that "*The project's (World Court case) achievement can best be measured by the panic among the principal nuclear powers, which justify their Security Council seats by their membership of the nuclear club.*" (A Principled Audacity", New Statesman and Society, 17 November, 1995.)

The government of Aotearoa-New Zealand is to be commended for supporting many international

disarmament initiatives, including the recent World Court case. But it failed to support the United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1995 calling for the beginning of negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons within a reasonable timeframe. Aotearoa-New Zealand was further eclipsed by the initiative across the Tasman establishing the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

Aotearoa-New Zealand has gained widespread recognition and respect for making itself a nuclear weapon-free zone. However, it is not enough for us to rest on our anti-nuclear laurels. No country is safe from nuclear weapons until the whole world is safe. Before proliferation gets out of hand, or a new cold war begins, we must take every opportunity we can to move the nuclear states towards implementing their obligations to bring about a nuclear weapon-free world.