

The Elimination of Nuclear Weapons: History and Disarmament

By Ann Hallan Lakhdhir

Changes since the LWV adopted its arms control position in 1983. Is it still relevant and of even greater importance now?

This article will focus entirely on one sentence in the League's Position on Arms Control: "As a long-term goal, the League supports the worldwide elimination of nuclear weapons." When that position was adopted in 1983, the United States and the Soviet Union were actively building more and more nuclear weapons, which made its realization seem remote. Now, in different circumstances with the dangers of proliferation and threats of terrorists facing us, disarmament has moved to the front and center of the arms control agenda – and it does not seem so remote.

The practical utility of nuclear weapons was, however, debated from the beginning. Some of the nuclear scientists knew nuclear weapons could have far-reaching and terrible consequences. The issue of what to do about nuclear weapons became a matter of concern and discussion even before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On July 3, 1944, the physicist Niels Bohr shared his views in a letter to President Roosevelt:

*...A weapon of unparalleled power is being created which will completely change all future conditions of warfare. Quite apart from the question of how soon the weapon will be ready for use and what role it may play in the present war, this situation raises a number of problems which call for most urgent attention. Unless, indeed, some agreement about the control of the new active materials can be obtained in due time, any temporary advantage, however great, may be outweighed by a perpetual menace to human security...the terrifying prospect of a future competition between nations about a weapon of such formidable character can only be avoided through a universal agreement in true confidence. (Bruce Larkin, *Designing Denuclearization*, Transaction Publishers: 2008, quoted on p.157-8.)¹*

That is the road not taken. We developed and used the new weapon, enjoyed an advantage, and are now wondering if it is feasible to eliminate this menace to human security. In what follows we will look at the rationale for having nuclear weapons, past proposals for eliminating them, and a scenario for disarmament.

The rationale for U.S. nuclear weapons changed over the years.

Initially many U.S. political leaders saw the possession of nuclear weapons by the United States as an asset that could be used against the U.S.S.R. Nuclear weapons were perceived initially by some as only a bigger and more effective bomb. Some saw their possession as a way of intimidating the Soviet Union or China. The Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in the time period when the United States was the only possessor of nuclear weapons indicates that hope

¹ Larkin, Bruce: *Designing Denuclearization*, Transaction Publishers: 2008, quoted on p.157-8.

was not realized. Some considered the use of nuclear weapons in the wars in Korea and Viet Nam, but wiser heads prevailed.

By 1983, the rationale for the possession of nuclear weapons had become deterrence, sometimes called MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). Some have always questioned whether U.S. security should be based on the capability of responding to a first attack with a massive nuclear attack that would kill millions. There is some plausibility in the belief that when the U.S.S.R. developed nuclear weapons, that did deter some possible U.S. actions, and likewise Soviet actions were probably also deterred by U.S. possession of nuclear weapons. Eisenhower believed the West could not easily counter a possible conventional invasion of Europe by the Soviet Union and so relied on U.S. nuclear weapons as a cheaper option. The 1983 LWV position asserts the United States should never initiate use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the United States has so far never supported a no-first-use pledge and has implied that nuclear deterrence included the deterrence not just of a nuclear attack but also one using conventional, chemical or biological weapons.

The United States has decided against the use of nuclear weapons in all the conflicts it has been engaged in since World War II. Since 1983, there has been more questioning of theories of deterrence. How can the United States assert it has the right to have nuclear weapons for deterrence and others, such as Iran, do not? Some now see the possession of nuclear weapons primarily as an advantage for weak states – as a way of deterring their stronger adversaries. Pakistanis argue they need to have nuclear weapons to confront a stronger India. That is certainly a motive for North Korea and perhaps Iran to possess nuclear weapons.

Some also have concluded that deterrence theory has little relevance for terrorists. The threat of retaliation will not deter terrorists. It may also be impossible to determine their location or to target only terrorists, without killing many others.

Since 1983, the elimination of nuclear weapons has been increasingly put forth as a serious option by many international commissions and by bipartisan leaders and experts in the United States.

In January 1986, U.S.S.R. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev released a proposal *For a Nuclear-Free World* that led to a summit meeting in Reykavik, Iceland. At that October 1986 meeting, President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev agreed on the elimination of all nuclear weapons over a ten-year period. That agreement foundered over Reagan's conception of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), but it is evident that Reagan and Gorbachev rejected deterrence as a posture, preferring to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons. Many others were skeptical that elimination was possible.

The World Court issued an Advisory Opinion on nuclear weapons in 1996. It unanimously concluded: "There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control." (<http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/95/7495.pdf>)

Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defense for seven years, published an article, “Apocalypse Soon,” in the May/June 2005 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine. He said: “It is time – well past time, in my view – for the United States to cease its Cold War-style reliance on nuclear weapons as a foreign-policy tool. At the risk of appearing simplistic and provocative, I would characterize current U.S. nuclear weapons policy as immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous. The risk of an accidental or inadvertent nuclear launch is unacceptably high. ...I have worked on issues relating to U.S. and NATO nuclear strategy and war plans for more than 40 years. During that time, I have never seen a piece of paper that outlined a plan for the United States or NATO to initiate the use of nuclear weapons with any benefit for the United States or NATO.”

(http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2829&print=1)

Proposals for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

UNGA Resolution 1 (I) (<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/1/ares1.htm>), the first resolution of the UN General Assembly on January 24, 1946 called for the Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy. It called for the elimination of all nuclear weapons and other such weapons “adaptable to mass destruction,” including biological and chemical arms.

The Acheson-Lilienthal Report (March 16, 1946) was the first effort to control nuclear weapons. It is worth looking at the Acheson-Lilienthal Report in 2009 because many of its provisions are referred to in efforts since 1946 to construct a framework for eliminating nuclear weapons. The Report referred to the Declaration of November 15, 1945, by the governments of the United States, United Kingdom and Canada that the development of atomic energy and the application of it in weapons of war, have placed at the disposal of mankind “means of destruction hitherto unknown.” The Report asserts: “There can be no adequate military defense against atomic weapons.” It further quotes from the Declaration that these are weapons “in the employment of which no single nation can in effect have a monopoly.”

The Report called for:

- International legal ownership and control of all uranium and thorium ores wherever they exist in the world, including control over the prospecting, mining and refining of uranium, and, to a lesser extent, thorium.
- International control over the enrichment of the isotope 235 by any methods now known to us.
- International control over the operation of the various types of reactors for making plutonium, and of separation plants for extracting the plutonium.
- International control over any research and development in atomic explosives.

The Report said “We have therefore reached these two conclusions: (a) that only if the dangerous aspects of atomic energy are taken out of national hands and placed in international hands is there any reasonable prospect of devising safeguards against the use of atomic energy for bombs, and (b) only if the international agency was engaged in development and operation could it possibly discharge adequately its functions as a safeguarder of the world’s future.” It believed in

the great future benefits of nuclear energy for medical treatments and for the provision of electricity.

The international agency would construct and operate useful types of atomic reactors and separation plants. Operations, like those at Hanford and Oak Ridge, would be owned and conducted by the International Authority. The Authority would also inspect all nuclear reactors operated by governments or civil authorities, but it asserted control by inspection alone would be insufficient. An international authority must control all fissile materials and the production of fissile materials. (<http://www.learnworld.com/ZNW/LWText.Acheson-Lilienthal.html>)

This advice was not taken, and there is no international control of fissile materials and nuclear power plants. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has overview of nuclear power plants in the non-nuclear weapon states. In addressing how to eliminate nuclear weapons, it is evident that the capabilities and powers of the IAEA or some other body would have to be increased greatly over all nuclear facilities, including peaceful ones.

The Canberra Commission Report of August 1996. The Canberra Commission was convened by the Australian government in 1995. Its members, many of whom had held senior political and military posts in all the nuclear weapons countries, issued a clear, unequivocal call for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Elimination “should be conducted as a series of phased verified reductions that allow states to satisfy themselves, at each stage of the process, that further movement toward elimination can be made safely and securely.” The Commission put key subjects on the table: elimination, and transparency and verification. (Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, Report: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/cc/index.html>)

The Model Nuclear Weapons Convention of November, 1997. The Convention offers a considered framework for a treaty that is explicitly analogous to the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The full text can be found at <http://www.lcnp.org>.

The New Agenda Coalition, June 1998. The Foreign Ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden issued a Joint Declaration on nuclear weapons abolition titled “A Nuclear-Weapons-Free World: The Need for a New Agenda.” It asserted: “We can no longer remain complacent at the reluctance of the nuclear-weapon States and the three nuclear-weapons-capable States to take that fundamental and requisite step, namely a clear commitment to the speedy, final and total elimination of their nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons capability and we urge them to take that step now.” They acknowledge that “the actual elimination of nuclear arsenals, and the development of requisite verification regimes, will of necessity require time.” They urge adherence to the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), signing and ratifying the CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), effecting a fissile material cutoff, non-proliferation precautions, no-first-use undertakings, and nuclear-weapon-free zones. (<http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd27/27state.htm>)

Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, June 2006. Anna Lindh, the Foreign Minister of Sweden, called upon Hans Blix to implement an idea first advanced by Jayantha Dhanapala, then UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament: the creation of an independent international

commission to examine how the world could tackle the problem of weapons of mass destruction. The Commission asserts: “So long as any state has (weapons of mass destruction) – especially nuclear arms – others will want them. So long as any such weapons remain in any state’s arsenal, there is a risk that they will one day be used, by design or accident. Any such use would be catastrophic.”

One of its sixty recommendations was that all states possessing nuclear weapons should commence planning for security without nuclear weapons and that they should start preparing to outlaw nuclear weapons through joint practical and incremental measures that include definitions, benchmarks and transparency requirements for nuclear disarmament.”

(<http://www.wmdcommission.org>)

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon referred to the “contagious” doctrine of deterrence and put forth a five point proposal to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. He talked of the role of the NPT, the Security Council, the rule of law, accountability and transparency.

(<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11881.doc.htm>)

There have been many other proposals advanced in recent years for how we could eliminate nuclear weapons.

John Holdren, Science Advisor to the Obama administration, in April 1998 authored “Getting to Zero: Is Pursuing a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World Too Difficult? Too Dangerous? Too Distracting?” In this article, he argues that “the potential benefits of comprehensive nuclear disarmament are so attractive relevant to the attendant risks – and the opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War and a range of other international trends are so compelling – that increased attention is now warranted to studying and fostering the conditions that would have to be met to make prohibition desirable and feasible.”

(http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/2919/getting_to_zero.html)

Ambassador Thomas Graham, a chief U.S. negotiator on virtually all of the 20th century arms control agreements, in speaking in November 2007 before the greater Seattle League of Women Voters, put forth a blueprint for how nuclear weapons could be eliminated.

(<http://www.seattlelwv.org/sites/default/files/Grahamspeech07.pdf>)

President Barack Obama in a speech in Prague, the Czech Republic, in April 2009 said: “So today, I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons....To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same...We will negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians this year...To achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, my administration will immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty...And to cut off the building blocks needed for a bomb, the United States will seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in state nuclear weapons.” (<http://prague.usembassy.gov/obama.html>)

In conclusion, there are many in the United States in high political and military positions who remain convinced that U.S. possession of nuclear weapons remains essential to U.S. security and

who do not believe it feasible to construct a regime to achieve the elimination of all nuclear weapons and to ensure their continued elimination. A considerable discussion of the goal of elimination and how it might be achieved has begun with contributions from many countries. Also critical to the discussion is the consideration of security in the world after nuclear weapons have been eliminated – addressing large conventional imbalances and providing for international assurances to countries who might be threatened by those with conventional arms superiority.

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