



ARMS CONTROL: GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS PERTINENT TO THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS (LWV) POSITION

By Ellen Z. Berg

The Present: A Time of Peril, a Time of Promise

Four geopolitical developments since the League of Women Voters' (LWVUS) Position on Arms Control went into effect are particularly germane to this review. Each of these developments poses arms control challenges, which will be noted in more or less detail here; some will be explored more fully in subsequent papers.

1. The end of the Cold War and the challenge of existing weapons.
2. A new international balance of power and the challenge of proliferation to additional states.
3. September 11, 2001 attack on the United States (9/11), terrorism and the challenge of proliferation to non-state actors.
4. Some peace, some war and the challenge of controlling conventional arms.

The End of the Cold War and the Challenge of Existing Weapons: When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, one of the reasons cited was the drain on the economy posed by the arms race, which was suddenly over. Both sides were left with weapons whose purpose – mutually assured destruction – was no more.

But there were new arms control challenges associated with existing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Soviet weapons systems and production sites were scattered around their former territory, in several newly independent states. All this had to be made secure during a time of political upheaval and economic duress. Indeed, the possibility that weapons and related materials would be stolen and sold to other states or terrorists was widely assumed. This posed a peril, from which promise arose.

Recognizing this peril to U.S. and global security, the United States created the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program – informally called the Nunn-Lugar program – in 1991. This program has provided funds and expertise to help the former Soviet Union safeguard and dismantle its stockpiles of WMD, reemploy scientists and facilities in non-military research, and convert Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus to nuclear weapons free states.¹ Senator Lugar posts a Scorecard for the program. Targets were set for 2012 in a number of categories of which a few have been met, most are 70-93 percent complete and only two are less than 55 percent complete. This is remarkable progress, and, for old adversaries, a remarkable example of international cooperation.²

At the end of the Cold War, both sides of the conflict had what has been called “a vast oversupply of nuclear weapons and nuclear explosive materials.”³ Since 1991, the United States and the former Soviet Union have been reducing their nuclear stockpiles, under treaty arrangements. Welcome progress has been made, but the raw numbers can be deceptive as the reductions have, to some extent, “been a removal of redundancies.”⁴ Much remains to be done. As of January 2009, there were still 23,300 nuclear weapons in existence. More than 90 percent of these are in the stockpiles held by the United States and Russia.⁵ Obviously, perils remain – but promise is in the air.

In April 2009, U.S. President Obama and Russian President Medvedev announced that as the goals for strategic nuclear arms reductions in the 1991 START Treaty were reached long ago, they have decided to begin new bilateral negotiations on further reductions, with the expectation of having a new treaty in place before the current one expires in December 2009. At a second meeting, in July, they announced a framework for negotiations and numerical targets.⁶

A New International Balance of Power and the Challenge of Proliferation to Additional States: During the Cold War there was a bi-polar balance of power; the United States and Soviet Union each had a sphere of influence, and an East-West tension dominated geopolitics. But something else was going on as well. Between 1945 and 1965, many former colonies gained independence. The United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence in these countries, and some did become ‘client states.’ But, many of these countries came to assert independent, countervailing power – especially in the UN – as a bloc of non-aligned nations. Studying this in 1976, the League noted a new emphasis on a “rich-nation/poor-nation” geopolitical dynamic.⁷

With the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the single remaining superpower – making the global balance of power uni-polar. It is becoming clear that this hegemonic position will be short-lived, due not so much to actions by the United States as to what analyst Fareed Zakaria calls “the rise of the rest.”⁸ Development and globalization have transformed the economies of many nations, and they are emerging as part of a new multi-polar balance of power. The European Union, China, India and, to a lesser extent, Brazil stand out as power centers.

In a July 2009 address blocking out foreign policy principles and priorities, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton took note of the on-going changes in the global balance of power. Moving sharply away from the adversarial connotation attached to a polarized balance of power, she said foreign policy will be directed not towards a multi-polar world but a multi-partner world.⁹ Continuing, she identified arms control as a key priority for the Administration, saying: “President Obama is committed to the vision of a world without nuclear weapons, and a series of concrete steps to reduce the threat and spread of these weapons....” Among these steps will be “convening the world’s leaders here in Washington next year for a nuclear summit.”¹⁰ Such a summit will offer an opportunity for the United States to walk the talk on a multi-partnered world.

In the context of these changes in the global balance of power, the arms control challenge of WMD proliferation to more and more states, again, comes into high relief. In the early 1960s, President Kennedy thought that within a decade at least two dozen states would have nuclear weapons. That did not happen due to several factors, chief among them being the success of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This Treaty opened for signature in 1968, entered into force in 1970 and was indefinitely extended in 1995. While not fully universal, it is the most nearly universal arms control agreement.

The central bargain in the NPT is that the non-nuclear weapons states (a) will not acquire nuclear weapons and (b) will submit to international verification of their compliance to this pledge. In exchange, the nuclear weapons states (a) will give the non-nuclear weapons states access to peaceful nuclear technologies and (b) will pursue disarmament agreements leading eventually to the elimination of their nuclear weapons. Non-compliance is occurring on both sides of the bargain, and this is predictably weakening the non-proliferation regime.

There are five nuclear weapons states in the NPT regime: the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China. They have not lived up to the disarmament part of the bargain. Bans on nuclear weapons tests and on the production of fissile materials are unfulfilled promises. The United States and Russia are now negotiating new arms reductions that have been stalled for years. These states have pledged not to use nuclear weapons against their NPT non-nuclear weapons partners. However the policies of the United States, Britain, France and Russia keep that option open.¹¹

The international verification regime for the non-weapons states is imposed by an international agency and is mandatory. The disarmament regime for the weapons states is not externally designed or imposed and so, in practice, it is voluntary. This is a basic inequity in the NPT regime.

Another inequity derives from the pledge of the non-weapons states not to develop nuclear weapons. Given the repugnance many states feel for these weapons and the expense of developing them, forswearing them does not seem a sacrifice. And yet, something is lost. Great power and prestige have marked the nuclear weapons states: the five NPT weapons states are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council; two have been superpowers; the others figure importantly in the emerging multi-polar balance of power. This begs the question: Must global power and prestige entail having nuclear weapons?

These three factors – slow progress on disarmament, inequitable requirements for accountability and the prestige of weapons – are cited as prime reasons for the current up-tick in proliferation. Past proliferation has largely occurred among states which have not been part of the NPT: India, Pakistan and Israel. But more recently, North Korea withdrew from the NPT and developed nuclear weapons, and Iran, a signatory, is suspected of being engaged in developing nuclear weapons. While all proliferation creates the peril that the weapons might be used or might start an arms race, when it occurs among NPT members it adds another peril: that the regime which has minimized proliferation is falling apart.

Fortunately, there are signs of promise in the emerging foreign policy of the new U.S. administration. Actually, promise was in the air before the 2008 election. Candidates Obama and McCain both pledged to give greater prominence to this issue. And that has happened in a series of steps this year:

- President Obama's Prague speech on April 5th, outlining his aims: reducing the role of nuclear weapons in our national security, ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, seeking a treaty on fissile materials and strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a basis for cooperation;
- The early September decision to revise the policy for missile defenses against a possible Iranian threat from land-based defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic, to one of sea-based defenses – with the result of facilitating agreement with Russia on START, among other things;
- And, on September 24th, President Obama's chairmanship of a session of the UN Security Council for heads of state which “unanimously cosponsored and adopted a resolution committing to work toward a world without nuclear weapons and endorsing a broad framework of actions to reduce global nuclear dangers.”¹²

These steps lay the foundation for international talks with Iran and possible sanctions as well as for action to strengthen the NPT at the 2010 Review Conference, with regards to disarmament, nonproliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

This evolving Obama policy on nuclear arms control is one aspect of the geopolitical context in which our review of the LWVUS Position on Arms Control is taking place. The indication that there is an arms control agenda in the works gives urgency to our task.

September 11, 2001 (9/11), Terrorism and the Challenge of Proliferation to Non-State Actors: 9/11 had a great impact on America's role in the world. It was an attack from abroad. However, it was not an event in the sphere of inter-national relations because the aggressor was a non-state actor. The attack was an act of terror; it was designed to instill fear and incite a response reaching beyond its random victims and its immediate time frame. Such acts are effective in situations in which power is asymmetrical. Well planned and executed, terrorism can succeed against more powerful foes – even without traditional weapons.

But think of the greater effect terrorists would have with WMD. That nightmare, added to the peril of proliferation to states such as North Korea and Iran, prompted a bipartisan group of elder statesmen to write an editorial endorsing disarmament. The four statesmen are George Schultz (Secretary of State, 1982-89), William Perry (Secretary of Defense, 1994-97), Henry Kissinger (Secretary of State, 1973-77) and Sam Nunn (Former Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee).¹³

Their editorial was published in *The Wall Street Journal* in January 2007. A year later, they published a second editorial, amplifying their position. This collaboration began a new discourse. First, in July 2007, Mikhail Gorbachev endorsed their position in an editorial in the same paper,¹⁴ then other world leaders began to chime in, and an international conference on their vision was held in Oslo, Norway in February 2008.¹⁵ In May 2009, President Obama met with the four statesmen at the White House. In remarks afterwards, the President acknowledged that the views of these men “helped inspire” the policies he laid out in Prague, “which set forward a long-term vision of a world without nuclear weapons.”¹⁶

The statesmen's editorial opens by saying “Nuclear weapons today present tremendous dangers, but also an historic opportunity.” The writers believe that probable proliferation to states and non-state actors threatens us with “a nuclear era that will be more precarious, psychologically disorienting, and economically even more costly than was Cold War deterrence.” They note that a number of American presidents have supported disarmament, focusing particularly on the vision of a world without nuclear weapons endorsed by President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev at Reykjavik. This is the vision these writers want to reinvigorate. The editorial concludes with a series of concrete steps which would initiate the process of eliminating nuclear weapons.¹⁷

During the Cold War, deterrence was adopted as an alternative to disarmament as a means of achieving security. With deterrence, states arm themselves as heavily as possible so fear of retaliation restrains their adversaries from attacking them. These statesmen do not think this strategy will work in the current context of a multi-polar balance of power among states. They see miscalculations and accidents as almost unavoidable. Moreover, there is no indication deterrence will work with non-state actors.

While these statesmen have put disarmament on the public agenda, a debate about whether this is a realistic path to security is just getting underway.

Some Peace, Some War and the Challenge of Controlling Conventional Arms: To use an iconic phrase, the years following World War II have been “the best of times and the worst of times.”

On the positive side of the ledger, World War III has not occurred, nuclear bombs have not been used again, and Western Europe has experienced peace and comity after centuries of strife. On the negative side of the ledger, there have been many wars, hot spots have persisted for decades with occasional flare-ups, martial law and/or rule by warlords has become customary in some places, the numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons has steadily risen, a military-industrial complex has become an important element in many economies, international sales of conventional armaments flourishes – with the United States leading sales, and illicit sales of conventional arms and WMD (or related materials) to terrorist states and non-state actors has been uncovered.

This geopolitical pattern, including some peace and some war, but not resorting in any case to nuclear weapons, is much clearer now than when the 1991 LWVUS Position on Arms Control was written – leading the Task Force to include conventional arms in our review.

Endnotes:

¹ Nunn-Lugar Program

² Nunn-Lugar Scorecard

³ Graham book, p. 125

⁴ Blix, et al. p. 27

⁵ SIPRI Yearbook-2009, p.16

⁶ Obama-Medvedev April and July 2009

⁷ LWV, p. 31

⁸ Zakaria, pp. 2-5

⁹ Clinton, p. 4ff

¹⁰ Clinton, p.10

¹¹ Graham speech, p. 8

¹² Obama-Security Council

¹³ Schultz 2007 and Schultz 2008

¹⁴ Gorbachev

¹⁵ Oslo Conf.

¹⁶ Obama, p.1

¹⁷ Schultz 2007

References:

Blix, et al., Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, *Weapons of Terror; Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Arms*. Stockholm, Sweden: 2006.

Clinton: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/19840/>

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