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The Reality: A Goal of a World without Nuclear Weapons Is Essential

Should the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons serve as a serious guide for U.S. policy? This goal has been the declared purpose of several U.S. administrations. It has been included in treaties to which the United States is party and in official U.S. documents. In truth, however, with the possible exception of a brief period shortly following World War II after the Acheson-Lilienthal Report was adopted by the Truman administration,[1] the goal of a nuclear weapons–free world has not provided a compass for policy, nor has it had any real operational impact on U.S. government policies.

It is widely accepted today that nuclear weapons must be maintained because they are still an effective and necessary deterrent against attack. Some also accept this as the best possible policy because they believe that a world without nuclear weapons is a practical impossibility. Among those in this camp, some believe that the United States would be more secure in a world without nuclear weapons but that a serious effort to reach that goal would have a negative impact on fundamental U.S. national security interests. Former secretary of defense Harold Brown is in this camp. In his recent article "New Nuclear Realities," Brown expressed the view that "the assertion that we intend to abolish nuclear weapons is likely to gain less in goodwill and cooperation in nonproliferation programs from others than it will lose when it becomes clear that there is no believable program or prospect of doing so."[2]

We share a different view that is captured in a January 4, 2007, *Wall Street Journal* article signed by former secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry

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Kissinger, former secretary of defense William Perry, and former chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn (D-Ga.):

> Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and practical measures toward achieving that goal would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America's moral heritage. The effort could have a profoundly positive impact on the security of future generations. Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible.[3]

This conclusion, which is central to the case for revisiting the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons as an operationally meaningful goal, emerged from two recent conferences at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, in cooperation with the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI). It was strongly supported by the participants at a February 2008 international conference organized in cooperation with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry in Oslo.

Practical Steps toward Nuclear Reduction

The initial *Wall Street Journal* article generated concerns, expressed most clearly by Brown, that eliminating nuclear weapons would serve as a harmful distraction from making progress toward achieving more modest, practical goals of arms control. Our judgment, along with that of many others who have associated themselves with this project, is that a series of practical steps can be initiated leading to a world without nuclear weapons. Moreover, as the world proceeds down that path, political conditions will be created that will improve the prospects for getting to zero.

Our difference with Brown derives from the assumption, counter to his, that the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons is achievable. Before probing deeper into reasons for our two very different judgments on this issue that have led us to such different conclusions, it is important to recognize that Brown's article notably presents no arguments against initiating the steps that we propose. These steps will contribute to important progress in reducing the nuclear dangers that the world faces today and should be taken whether one accepts the goal of a nuclear weapons–free world or thinks it is unrealistic. In that regard, our ideas and those of Brown are very similar.

We agree with Brown's judgments on most of his points and specific recommendations, including the need for a more sustained and powerful U.S. diplomatic effort to resolve the regional instabilities that drive nuclear arms races. Shultz entitled his keynote address in Oslo "The Age of Diplomacy," meaning that the next few years will require a massive and skillful U.S. diplomatic effort to reverse current trends in the nuclear arena.[4]

We also agree with Brown that the likelihood of nuclear proliferation has increased in recent years and concur with his statement that "nuclear weapons proliferation is just as dangerous as most people have always believed."[5] He attributes that to the declining influence of the major nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, and increasing regional instabilities. Another important reason why this risk has increased is that, with the spread of nuclear know-how and material, we are facing an increasing danger that the deadliest weapons ever invented will be acquired by ruthless national leaders or by suicidal terrorists. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness that the steps the international community is taking to address these threats do not adequately respond to the danger. The world is approaching a time when nuclear weapons will be more widely available while deterrence becomes less effective and increasingly hazardous as a policy choice.

A series of practical steps can be initiated leading to a world without nuclear weapons.

This concern was addressed at the first Hoover Institution conference in 2006, on the twentieth anniversary of the remarkable summit at Reykjavik in October 1986 when President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev endorsed the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. They failed to achieve an agreement to abolish all of their respective nations' nuclear weapons, but they initiated steps leading to significant reductions in nuclear forces, including the elimination of an entire class of threatening missiles. Two major treaties eventually resulted from that summit, pushing policies in the direction of deep reductions in nuclear forces and launching a trend that has continued to this day.

An Action-Oriented Agenda

The initial Hoover conference participants considered two questions: What will it take to rekindle the vision shared by Reagan and Gorbachev? Can a worldwide consensus be forged on a series of practical steps leading to major reductions in the nuclear danger? The participants, including veterans of the past six U.S. administrations along with a number of other experts on nuclear issues, concluded that there was an urgent need to confront the challenges posed by these two questions and to develop an action-oriented agenda. Furthermore, it was recognized that the United States and Russia, which possess about 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads, have a special responsibility, as well as the experience, to demonstrate leadership. Yet, other nations must join the effort, and the sooner the better.

At a second conference at the Hoover Institution one year later, this time in cooperation with the NTI, the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons was reaffirmed, and specific steps toward that end were elaborated in considerable detail. The conference considered near-term steps that should be taken starting in 2008 and are listed in a second article by Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, and Nunn in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 15, 2008.[6] The article declares that the international community should extend key provisions of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 1991; take steps to increase the warning and decision times for the launch of all nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, thereby reducing risks of accidental or unauthorized attacks; discard any existing operational plans for massive attacks that still remain from the Cold War days; and undertake negotiations toward developing cooperative, multilateral ballistic missile defense and early-warning systems, as proposed by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin at their 2002 Moscow summit.

Deterrence is becoming less effective and increasingly hazardous as a policy choice.

The international community should also accelerate work dramatically to provide the highest possible standards of security for nuclear weapons, as well as for nuclear materials everywhere in the world, to prevent terrorists from acquiring a nuclear bomb; start a dialogue, including within NATO and with Russia, on consolidating the nuclear weapons designed for forward deployment to enhance their security and as a first step toward careful accounting for them and their eventual elimination; strengthen the means of monitoring compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to counter the global spread of advanced technologies; and adopt a process for bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into effect, which would strengthen the NPT and aid international monitoring of nuclear activities.

The article also emphasized that it is necessary to address four additional issues on a broad international scale. First, the United States and Russia must undertake further substantial reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear forces beyond those recorded in the 2002 U.S.-Russian Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. As the reductions proceed, other nuclear nations will become involved.

Second, an international system of controls should be developed to manage the risks of the nuclear fuel cycle. The growing worldwide demand for energy to meet civilian needs and aspirations has led to a resurgence of interest in building nuclear reactors to provide energy for increased civilian demand. This will inevitably lead to an increase in the potential for sensitive nuclear

fuel cycle technologies to spread through enrichment of uranium at the front end of the fuel cycle and reprocessing spent fuel at the back end. Multilateral facilities will have to be devised and operated with the support of a strengthened International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), guaranteeing that the low-enriched uranium required for power reactors will be available, that the fuel will remain under appropriate multilateral controls, and that the spent fuel will be removed to internationally operated facilities.

Third, a verifiable treaty should be completed to prevent all nations, both nuclear and non-nuclear, from producing nuclear materials for weapons, and a more rigorous system of accounting and security for nuclear materials should be developed.

Fourth, states must turn the goal of a world without nuclear weapons into a practical enterprise among nations by applying the necessary political will to build an international consensus on priorities. A key conclusion of the 2008 *Wall Street Journal* article states:

> Progress must be facilitated by a clear statement of our ultimate goal. Indeed, this is the only way to build the kind of international trust and broad cooperation that will be required to effectively address today's threats. Without the vision of moving toward zero, we will not find the essential cooperation required to stop our downward spiral.... In some respects, the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is like the top of a very tall mountain. From the vantage point of our troubled world today, we can't even see the top of the mountain, and it is tempting and easy to say we can't get there from here. But the risks from continuing to go down the mountain or standing pat are too real to ignore. We must chart a course to higher ground where the mountaintop becomes more visible.[7]

The two *Wall Street Journal* articles drew enthusiastic responses from around the world and gave great encouragement to those involved. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of Russia referred to them in a February 2008 speech before the Plenary Session of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, where he commented that they "argued in a convincing manner in favor of the need to continue nuclear disarmament."[8] He noted that these ideas are "in line with Russia's initiatives, though there are, of course, aspects that call for further discussion in seeking agreement on specific ways of resolving these not that simple tasks."

How Far and How Fast?

Given these areas of concordance, the argument between the partial reducers, such as Brown, and the ultimate eliminators would therefore appear to be only

about how far and how fast the United States should shrink its nuclear stockpile. Yet, the debate has opened up the question of whether the United States, and similarly Russia, would be led to make bad decisions and run into more obstacles to progress in confronting the new nuclear threats if their policymakers proceeded with the expectation that some day the number of nuclear weapons might shrink all the way to zero.

Inevitably, any judgment about what constitutes a bad decision or an obstacle to progress depends very much on the goal toward which one is striving. It matters whether one believes or rejects the conclusion that the world cannot escape the nuclear deterrence trap and that proliferation can be held back by a legal structure in which the world remains divided into two tiers of nations, those with and those without nuclear weapons. The United States and all but four nations in the world—the exceptions being India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan—adhere to the 1968 NPT, which in Article VI commits its signatories to negotiate nuclear disarmament.

The NPT, as Secretary of State Colin Powell said in his 2002 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "is the centerpiece of the global nonproliferation regime."[9] Given the spread of technology, it is widely recognized that the future of this regime requires bolstering the effectiveness of the NPT by negotiating provisions, such as the Additional Protocols, to strengthen the IAEA's ability to verify that the NPT's barriers against proliferation are maintained. Dismissing the Article VI commitment by saying that it is no more than a hope, not to be taken seriously, will not help prospects for making progress.

The U.S.-Soviet experience of the Cold War does not provide any grounds for complacency on the theory that nuclear deterrence can keep the peace through mutual assured destruction. The history of the Cold War establishes quite clearly that the U.S.-Soviet competition was unique. Nations that for the first time are building nuclear weapons, or planning to, may succeed in using their newfound power to avoid war, but this cannot be counted on. Very special circumstances made nuclear deterrence between the Soviet Union and the United States a successful instrument of peace, although one that carried with it the vast risk of annihilation on a global scale. Each of the two nations believed it would ultimately prevail, largely through peaceful means, and thought preventive war was unnecessary. Moreover, the United States and the Soviet Union had no territorial claims against the other. They were insulated by thousands of miles from the daily frictions that arise when adversaries live side by side.

Given these circumstances, the Soviet Union and the United States had the luxury of time to develop rules, tacit and otherwise, to tilt the scales against the use of nuclear weapons. These circumstances do not exist in the Middle East, Northeast Asia, or South Asia, and they may not exist in other parts of the world where nuclear weapons competition could suddenly erupt. To assume

that nuclear deterrence will always work successfully, even in very different conditions, is an exercise in wishful thinking. Brown's views regarding the limits of nuclear deterrence are similar to our own. He points out that "the stability of even the one-on-one case depends on the internal stability, rationality, and command-and-control arrangements of the respective regimes."[10] He correctly points out that "what works on one does not necessarily work on many."

Progress must be facilitated by a clear statement of our ultimate goal.

He also points to the key question in any program aimed at banning deployed nuclear weapons and reducing nondeployed weapons: how to detect and prevent rapid breakout and reconstitution of an operationally deployed nuclear strike force. He correctly underlines the necessity of safeguarding or denaturing hundreds of tons of fissionable material but is pessimistic about the prospects that all nondeployed nuclear weapons can be found. Because of this, Brown thinks that the United States should continue to maintain a nuclear deterrent. He accepts, however, that "success in antiproliferation efforts and in deemphasizing the role of nuclear weapons" would contribute to progress toward "a more peaceful and orderly world."[11] Further, he thinks that a peaceful and orderly world is necessary for the abolition of nuclear weapons. This would seem to support our view that a good-faith effort to end the threat caused by nuclear weapons will induce political changes that will in turn make it easier to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

With all of this said, is a world without nuclear weapons a practical impossibility? It is not if denuclearization is taken a step at a time, if something other than deterrence based on nuclear weapons is devised to promote security, and if nations develop a cooperative monitoring system that focuses on the nuclear fuel cycle, on detection of any deployed nuclear weapons systems, and on any efforts to reconstitute a deployed nuclear strike force. Naturally, finding all the nondeployed nuclear warheads in the world is going to be the last stage in a long process.

For a long time, the world will probably have to get along with perhaps a few nations having just a few nondeployed nuclear weapons. Recessed deterrence (an arsenal stored in such a way as to require lengthy preparation to assemble and launch warheads), latency (a technical capability that has not been constructed), and virtual arsenals (arsenals that have been deconstructed but can be rebuilt) are the kinds of options that need to be addressed by serious analysts. These conditions should not be the end of the road, but they are steps in the right direction, and positive political developments will have to occur to make a world without nuclear weapons a reality. Brown is correct

to suggest that deemphasizing nuclear weapons and building a peaceful and orderly world are mutually supportive.

Being caught in the nuclear deterrence trap at present levels of nuclear weapons is not a safe place in a world when 20 to 30 nations acquire nuclear arsenals. It was bad enough when just a few nations had them. Think of the Cuban missile crisis with the added uncertainty of many more decision centers and with terrorists ready to exploit the crisis. The February 2008 confrontation in the Persian Gulf between U.S. warships and Iranian speedboats may have been a case of false signals being injected into a crisis situation. In any event, false signals in a deep crisis could trigger a nuclear exchange.

Rallying the people in support of great causes requires projecting a big idea.

It is imperative that responsible governments form a coalition of the willing to block the spread of nuclear weapons capabilities and, as Brown says, to roll back existing capabilities. The February 2008 Oslo conference showed very clearly that the idea of a global partnership enjoys strong support as a means of dealing with today's nuclear threats.[12] The conference also demonstrated that the efforts of governments will succeed or fail to the extent that their people are wholeheartedly behind the idea and to the extent that their goal is not to perpetuate indefinitely a regime based on discrimination but to remove discrimination between the nuclear haves and have-nots. A world without nuclear weapons is the only goal that will meet these conditions.

This assertion is counter to a frequently stated claim that expectations about the role of nuclear weapons in future international relations have no part in national decisionmaking and will not affect the decisions of other countries that currently are weighing the importance of nuclear weapons for their security. If decisionmakers think that some nations will still possess nuclear weapons or that more nations will acquire them and that possessing nuclear arsenals is going to be seen as normal and legitimate, they will logically lean toward keeping open the option to build a nuclear arsenal themselves and will exercise that option when conditions seem to require it. Expectations about the actions of others have always played a large part in policymaking, and it is no different in the nuclear arena.

Expectations are particularly important in this area of national defense because decisions are usually incremental and frequently the subject of some debate. Decisions about major issues, such as building a nuclear arsenal, and the daily decisions about carrying out a national policy are not the prerogative of a single leader. That was true even in Iraq. Debates about costs and benefits present opportunities for diverse opinions to have their effect. When those debates

occur, it is imperative that at least some people expect that nuclear weapons will not always be the indispensable trump card. Of course, the exercise of U.S. power and influence by itself cannot stop a cascade of decisions to build a nuclear bomb, but it can help to create a climate of international opinion in which rolling back nuclear weapons programs seems as reasonable an option as developing new ones. Thus, we envision a global bargain that must be nearly universal and not dominated by nuclear-armed superpowers, as it was during the Cold War.

An Essential Vision

The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons is a necessary condition to make progress in implementing the steps proposed in the *Wall Street Journal* articles. As Nunn argued at the Oslo conference, "I have concluded that we cannot defend America without taking these steps; we cannot take these steps without the cooperation of other nations; we cannot get the cooperation of other nations without the vision and hope of a world that will someday end these weapons of mass destruction as a threat to the world."[13] Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Støre of Norway observed at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that "only by advancing non-proliferation and disarmament together will our vision of a world free from nuclear weapons be achievable. To make that vision a reality, all states—nuclear weapons states and non–nuclear weapons states alike—should work together on developing the verification tools and collective security arrangements that are needed."[14]

The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons was also strongly expressed earlier this year in separate speeches by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Secretary of State for Defence Desmond Browne of the United Kingdom.[15] Together with the Norwegian government, they have initiated a joint technical effort to develop powerful means of verification that will be required to approach the goal of zero nuclear weapons.

Great political leaders, such as Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, understood that rallying the people in support of great causes requires inspiration more than managerial skills. Inspiration is supplied by projecting a big idea. The threats that the United States and the world face today require that kind of inspiration, and that is where the goal of a world without nuclear weapons comes in.

Notes

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