

Nuclear Weapons and the International Security Context

At the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference, states parties reaffirmed their commitment to a “diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination.”¹ Nearly five years have passed; another Review Conference is in the offing. Nuclear stockpiles of civilization-destroying size persist, and progress on disarmament has stalled.²

The commitment to diminish the role of nuclear weapons in security policies assumed that de-coupling nuclear weapons from conventional military forces would help facilitate elimination of nuclear arsenals. Yet there has been little progress in reducing the role of nuclear weapons. All nuclear-armed states are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Modernization efforts include development by the leading nuclear weapons states of new nuclear-capable missiles, aircraft, and submarines that will incorporate advances in stealth and accuracy.³ Publicly available information shows that nuclear weapons continue to have a central role in security policies, and in the case of the United States, the integration of conventional and nuclear forces in current war planning.⁴ Potential adversaries of the United States see its advantage in long-range conventional forces as a rationale for retaining and modernizing their nuclear arsenals.

The decoupling of nuclear from conventional military forces is further impeded by arms-racing in non-nuclear weapons of strategic significance. These include missile defenses, more accurate and powerful stand-off weapons, and concepts such as “prompt global strike” that aim to hit targets anywhere on earth with a non-nuclear payload in an hour or less. The United States has taken the lead, but many others are participating in this accelerating new arms race which is not constrained to a bi-polar confrontation.

Nuclear war will not come as a bolt from the blue. It will come when national elites misjudge one another’s interests in a conflict on the borderlands of some nuclear-armed country, and “conventional” warfare escalates out of control. This is all the more likely in the 21st century strategic context where stealthy, precision stand-off weapons and delivery platforms face sophisticated and increasingly capable air and missile defenses, while electronic warfare measures target sensors and data-dependent systems. These elements can interact at levels of speed and complexity that defy human comprehension, much less rational decision-making.

For more than two decades, the political and military elites of the leading nuclear-armed states have engaged in perilous double-think about their arsenals. They have assured their publics that the continued existence of nuclear weapons in civilization-destroying numbers no longer presented a real danger because the risk of war among nuclear-armed states was a feature of the Cold War, now safely past. At the same time, they have done everything necessary to keep catastrophe-capable nuclear arsenals long into the future, as a hedge against the day when the most powerful states again might make war with one another.

Today we see a new round of confrontations among nuclear-armed states, in economic and political circumstances that bear worrisome resemblances to those that brought about the devastating wars of the 20th century. Amidst one crisis after another from Ukraine to the Western

Pacific, the world's most powerful militaries brandish their nuclear arms, while claiming that "routine" exercises with weapons of mass destruction pose no danger, could never be misconstrued or get out of hand.

To those who view the world from the heights of power and privilege in nuclear-armed states, all this only gives further reason to hold on to the weapons they have, and to develop more. For the vast majority of humanity, struggling just to get by in a world of immensely stratified wealth and power, it means a return to madness, to a world where at any moment the people can be annihilated to preserve the state. The lack of urgency on disarmament in the ruling circles of the most powerful states should shock the conscience of every person who still has one.

The growing risks of great power war and use of nuclear weapons make the abolition of nuclear weapons all the more imperative. It is far more likely to succeed if linked to economic equity, democracy, climate and environmental protection, and dismantlement of highly militarized security postures. For our part, Abolition 2000 members and partner groups are organizing a large-scale civil society conference, march and rally on these themes on the eve of the 2015 NPT Review Conference.⁵

¹ 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document, Volume I, NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), p.15; reaffirmed by 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document, Volume I, p.19.

² See Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Worldwide deployments of nuclear weapons, 2014," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* online, 2014.

³ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Slowing Nuclear Weapon Reductions and Endless Nuclear Weapon Modernizations: A Challenge to the NPT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2014 No.70 p.94.

⁴ Nuclear weapons continue to be a core element of NATO's strategic concept, with the nuclear arsenals of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom considered to be the "supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies." *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: "Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation,"* Adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, 19th November 2010. The 2014 Master Plan of the U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command, responsible for the missile and bomber elements of U.S. nuclear forces, states that "AFGSC [Air Force Global Strike Command] will maintain and improve its ability to employ nuclear weapons in a range of scenarios, to include integration with conventional operations...." U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command, *Strategic Master Plan 2014*, p.9. Russia's most recent publicly available military doctrine document states that "[t]he Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to the utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat." http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf

⁵ *Call to Action: Spring 2015 Mobilization for a nuclear free, fair, democratic, ecologically sustainable and peaceful future* was released on 26 September, 2014, the first International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. <http://www.abolition2000.org/?p=3546>

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Global Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons

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