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# **Eliminating Nuclear Arsenals: The NPT Pledge and What It Means**

By

Jayantha Dhanapala

Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs

United Nations  
New York, New York 10017



All-Party Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation  
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Not long ago, the UN's Messenger for Peace Michael Douglas had the privilege of addressing you in an effort to raise the profile of this year's NPT Review Conference and to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament. I am informed that one of your colleagues, the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, remarked shortly thereafter, "If a visit to Parliament by Michael Douglas cannot raise the profile on a lasting basis, I wonder what can."

She raised a valid concern, for eliminating stockpiles requires more than just raising profiles. It requires the ability to sustain a high profile, preferably in a manner that does not require shocking events like new nuclear detonations. This requires an educated public and enlightened leaders, guided by both resolution and thought, and reinforced by strong institutions. I have described this elsewhere as the challenge of “sustainable disarmament,” an enterprise of great pith and moment well deserving -- as Hamlet would say -- “the name of action.”

Progress in achieving such a goal seldom appears overnight. It evolves through an incremental process -- one that involves deliberate acts, measurable effects, and the advancement of both ideals and self-interests. As you know, the NPT provides the legal foundation for multilateral actions to prohibit the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to advance nuclear disarmament. Concerning the latter, the International Court of Justice concluded in a 1996 Advisory Opinion that “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.”

The process of global nuclear disarmament thus rests on a solid foundation in international law and is implemented by concrete actions of individual nation states. The periodic five-year NPT Review Conferences -- and the three annual preparatory committee sessions that precede them -- provide a forum for the States parties to review the treaty and shape expectations on its future. When successful, these conferences serve as a crucible for forging diverse national views into a solid international consensus.

By reaching such a consensus on some concrete benchmarks for evaluating progress on nuclear disarmament, the 2000 NPT Review Conference marked a significant step ahead in this historic process. It was all the more welcome an outcome in light of several ominous developments at the dawn of this new millennium.

We are all familiar with the U.S. Senate’s vote last year against ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the precarious future of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in light of the enactment of a U.S. policy to deploy a national missile defence as soon as it is “technologically possible.” We see elsewhere not just the perpetuation or re-affirmation of military doctrines relying upon nuclear terror, but even the spread of such doctrines to a new region, South Asia. We recall well the shrill headlines announcing several nuclear tests in that region, followed by official words trumpeting the great security benefits from possessing nuclear weapons. We see new missile developments -- including flight tests -- in various regions. We read about the dangers from an emerging global black market in nuclear materials. And fully three decades after the NPT entered into force and obliged its parties to pursue good faith negotiations on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament, we recall that over 30,000 nuclear weapons reportedly continue to exist.

Viewed in isolation, such developments might lead a neutral observer to conclude that disarmament had been honoured more in its breach than in its observance -- and that it had only truly deserved the “name of inaction.”

This of course does not tell the whole story. Global nuclear disarmament surely is no empty slogan or “pie in the sky,” as a former British Prime Minister once said. Quite to the contrary, it is a goal of literally every government on Earth. Even the three nuclear-capable states outside the NPT -- India, Pakistan, and Israel -- have endorsed this goal. Critics of disarmament point out that agreement on a goal is one thing, while reaching consensus on actions needed to achieve that goal is quite another. This is of course true.

Yet this is what makes the 2000 NPT Review Conference so remarkable. At the opening of the Conference on 19 April, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan challenged its participants to -- in his words -- “embark on a results-based treaty review process focusing on specific benchmarks.” This is precisely what happened. After four weeks of intense deliberations, the participants agreed on some significant new standards for evaluating progress along the road to global nuclear disarmament.

In contrast to their customary practice of referring only to an “ultimate goal,” the nuclear-weapon States made an “unequivocal undertaking ... to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament.” This pledge, moreover, was not expressly conditioned upon the prior achievement of “general and complete disarmament,” another goal found in the NPT. Here is a summary of the new benchmarks:

- Early entry into force of START II and conclusion of START III as soon as possible
- Further unilateral reductions in nuclear arsenals
- Increased transparency by nuclear-weapon states of their nuclear weapons capabilities
- Further reductions in stocks of non-strategic nuclear weapons
- Agreed measures to reduce the “operational status of nuclear weapons systems” (de-alerting)
- “Diminishing the role for nuclear weapons in security policies” (doctrines)
- Expanding nuclear arms reductions to other states
- Multilateral controls over fissile material to be removed from warheads

- Creating a subsidiary body with a mandate to deal with nuclear disarmament in the Conference on Disarmament (CD)
- A moratorium on nuclear testing pending the early entry into force of the CTBT
- Application of the principle of “irreversibility” to nuclear disarmament

The Final Document also records a consensus of the States parties that the elimination of nuclear weapons is “the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of” such weapons. *The only absolute guarantee* -- in these limpid terms, the world community has stated unambiguously its lack of confidence in the ability of either deterrence or defence to prevent another Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

With these words, the world community has recognized that it has arrived at a crossroads in dealing with the nuclear threat. Yet the choice is no longer simply between two familiar but treacherous routes. In terms of responsible national security strategy, there is now a Third Way -- so to speak -- the only one offering an absolute guarantee, the only one not depending either upon eternal mutual terror or the fanciful quest to achieve perpetual military supremacy. The alternative to which I refer is the much-maligned, poorly-understood, and seldom-travelled road of disarmament. It is the Way ahead.

Much of the progress at this conference was due to the constructive work of the British Government and the enlightened and cross-party support it has received from the Parliament on all matters relating to the NPT. Britain’s leadership in the fields of disarmament and non-proliferation has been impressive indeed, as illustrated in the progress made since the publication of the report of the Strategic Defence Review two years ago.

The United Kingdom has substantially cut the size of its nuclear stockpile, both in terms of numbers and explosive potential. It now has only one nuclear-weapons delivery system. It has dismantled all of its air-delivered nuclear weapons. Leading by its example, Britain has encouraged other nuclear-weapon states to increase the transparency of their nuclear arsenals, both in terms of weapons and fissile materials. It has stopped altogether the production of fissile material for weapons and is at the forefront of international efforts to achieve a global treaty to this effect. It has both de-targeted and de-alerted its remaining nuclear forces. At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, it also circulated a thoughtful set of technical proposals on how to verify the final and complete elimination of nuclear weapons -- to the few remaining true believers in nuclear weapons, this is truly “thinking the unthinkable.”

I salute these achievements of the government and civil society of this great nation who are

responsible for them. With this deep wellspring of support, Britain will undoubtedly continue to demonstrate its independence, its leadership, and its determination to ensure that the noble words of the NPT and the Final Document of its last Review Conference are translated into concrete deeds.

There is of course much work ahead -- improvements in transparency, verification, de-alerting, irreversibility, confidence-building, and enforcement are needed most urgently. There is also an immense diversity of global nuclear threats to address. Some involve strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. Others relate to proliferation, physical security, environmental hazards of nuclear materials, and growing capabilities of delivery vehicles. It will be vital to address these threats in a variety of arenas -- national, regional, and international.

All NPT States parties -- particularly the nuclear-weapon states -- have the enormous challenge ahead of devising policies and mobilizing national institutions to pursue progress in all these areas. On an international dimension, however, progress has been slowed by a long-standing stalemate in the world's principal disarmament negotiating forum -- the Conference on Disarmament -- over issues relating to nuclear disarmament, the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, the prevention of an arms race in outer space, and nuclear security assurances. Bilateral undertakings, particularly in the START process, are also vital to the global nuclear disarmament effort, but they alone do not constitute the totality of this global effort.

I remain convinced that it would be desirable to convene a fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament, an SSOD IV. Even though the nuclear disarmament priority remains unchanged since the first SSOD in 1978, the world has indeed changed and it is time for the members of the United Nations to take a good close look at its institutions to ensure that they are best organized and equipped to advance disarmament goals. Yet it is apparent that there is not a sufficient consensus on its objectives and agenda to organize such a gathering at this time.

In his Millennium Report to the General Assembly, Secretary-General Kofi Annan offered another idea: the convening of a major international conference to focus on eliminating nuclear dangers. In addition to disarmament, such a conference could also address non-proliferation, safeguards, export controls, confidence-building, the international transportation and disposition of fissile material, and even relevant environmental problems. It would also be open to all countries, including those that now remain outside the NPT. Such a gathering would complement disarmament efforts in other international arenas. The proposal offers no panaceas, only new grounds for hope and action.

The world should not have to wait until the 2005 NPT Review Conference -- or for the stalemates over SSOD-IV and in the Conference on Disarmament to be resolved -- before exploring new ideas in other arenas to eliminate these nuclear threats. Ultimately, nuclear disarmament is a

responsibility of all countries, not just the States that now possess such weapons. I hope therefore that when the heads of state and government meet at the UN in early September for the Millennium Summit, they will give all the Secretary-General's proposals careful consideration, especially his call for the new international conference on eliminating nuclear dangers.

No review of nuclear disarmament -- or the meaning of the NPT pledge -- would be complete without mention of the special roles played by the legislatures in this process. The parliaments of the world are the bridges between government and civil society. They provide the funds to pay for national initiatives. Through their deliberations, they help to shape policy, and through their investigative and oversight powers they build public accountability. They provide a bulwark to ensure that governments comply with their international commitments and pledges -- a role that at times requires the enactment of domestic legislation. These functions are absolutely vital to the future of nuclear disarmament. They help to give disarmament not only vision, but also some backbone, muscle, and teeth.

One of the most compelling roles for parliaments derives from their powers of public inquiry. The American historian, Barbara Tuchman, once wrote in her book, *The March of Folly* that "What government needs is great askers." This applies especially to activities undertaken in the field of disarmament. As nations have agreed long ago on the goal of total nuclear disarmament, parliaments have every reason to explore responsible ways and means to achieve this goal most effectively and efficiently. A powerful instrument in pursuit of this goal is found in the simple parliamentary process of asking the right questions and asking them persistently.

Several such questions come to mind in five areas.

1. **On nuclear weapons** -- If some countries continue to maintain that nuclear weapons are "vital" or "essential" to their security, how can they deny other nations the same right? Yet if every country adopted that logic, what would be the result for all? And with respect to "sub-strategic" nuclear weapons, is it conceivable that such weapons could ever be used without having strategic consequences?
2. **On nuclear doctrines** -- If countries join nuclear-weapon-free zones to be free from nuclear threats, how does a military doctrine providing for the first-use of nuclear weapons -- or for their use against non-nuclear-weapon states -- affect the incentives of states to create or maintain such zones? Do doctrines proliferate just as weapons?
3. **On delivery vehicles** -- The preamble to the NPT identifies the elimination of nuclear-weapon delivery vehicles as a key goal -- why is public debate mired today in a duel between deterrence and missile defence, with scant attention to missile disarmament? In April 1999, the UN Secretary-General stressed "the need for multilaterally negotiated

norms” for missiles and missile defences, who is taking up this challenge in earnest?

**4. On fissile materials** -- Why must countries continue to produce new fissile nuclear materials, given the lack of a compelling economic need for such materials and the widely-recognized limitations of safeguards over them? Is it either realistic or prudent to assume that this production can forever be reserved to just a few nations? What is being done to ensure that efforts to ban the production of fissile materials for weapons will also extend to controls over existing stockpiles of such materials?

**5. On the infrastructure of disarmament** -- What resources are now being devoted both nationally and internationally to the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament and are they adequate to the job?

Such inquiries, in short, should not focus simply on the costs or risks from nuclear disarmament. They should also consider the costs and risks of its alternatives -- especially efforts to perpetuate nuclear deterrence or to develop an infallible missile defence. Nuclear disarmament will grow in attractiveness as civil societies and their governments examine the relevant facts and figures. With persistent parliamentary inquiry, we will soon find ourselves not simply trying to promote disarmament, but to practise it. We will have reached, in short, the point where we can take disarmament beyond its boost phase. Only then will we know for sure what the NPT pledge really means.