

The Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament

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Jennifer Allen Simons, C.M., Ph.D., LL.D
President,
The Simons Foundation
Canada

Thank you very much! It is a pleasure to be in Canberra again. I am a fifth generation Australian, and born in Canberra; and I lived here until my late teens. I am delighted to be here with my colleagues, Professor Gareth Evans - eminent Australian with a long history as a Nuclear Disarmament Crusader; and Professor Ramesh Thakur, who I invited to become Director of the Simons Centre for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation which I established at the University of British Columbia some years ago.

My offer came too late because Professor Thakur had just agreed to return for a second term as President of the UN University in Japan. The Crawford School and ANU are indeed fortunate to have secured him as Director of this new Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.

I am pleased that I can talk positively about the prospects for nuclear disarmament. Almost the entire world breathed a sigh of relief when President Obama was re-elected. If he had not been, the prospects for nuclear disarmament would have –indeed - been gloomy. And for at least for the next four years I believe we will make some headway.

On April 5th, 2009, President Obama, in Prague, made his historic speech acknowledging the moral responsibility of the United States to act because it is the only country to have used a nuclear weapon. And he committed “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”. The prospects for Nuclear Disarmament had never looked brighter. This was the first President who had actually committed to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

In his first term he began the process joining with Russia in The New START Treaty and, as well, his Administration has been laying the groundwork in preparation for further action. Now, in his second term, I believe that the prospects are good for moving forward on the extremely daunting task of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide.

Despite their lack of utility as a war-fighting weapon, nuclear weapons are generally an accepted weapon – and in fact considered by many – the military, politicians and many members of the public– an essential weapon – in military arsenals. There are many in civil society who do not understand the nature of these weapons and their catastrophic consequences. Distressingly, it is not a crime to develop, manufacture, stockpile or target nuclear weapons.

To use one, however, would be illegal under International Humanitarian Law and a crime against humanity. But there may be no-one to prosecute the perpetrators!

Since the end of the Cold War, the number of states with nuclear weapons has grown from five to nine; states capable of developing nuclear weapons have grown to some 40 in number; nuclear technology is proliferating and is also trafficked illegally, thus enhancing the likelihood that terrorists will acquire nuclear materials and nuclear weapons.

Even though the Cold War ended 23 years ago, the United States and Russia, still maintain their Cold War nuclear war plan and have thousands of nuclear weapons, on continuous high-alert status, targeted on each other – with launch protocols unchanged since the Cold War.

Despite the NPT commitments to eliminate their arsenals, all nuclear weapons states have been upgrading these arsenals. The numbers have come down but the projected power of upgrades, perhaps, makes the actual numbers of weapons less relevant.

In the political realm there is more focus on the dangers of non-proliferation than on disarmament. And yes, we are at risk from proliferation of nuclear weapons. However, the problem of proliferation can be resolved only through the complete elimination of these weapons. As long as nuclear weapons exist there will be states and people determined to have them too.

As Iran's President Ahmadinejad said to the US: "if you have them, we want them. If they are so good, we want them too." And according to Geoffrey Robertson, Saudi Arabia is currently negotiating with Pakistan to purchase nuclear weapons.

The danger of proliferation, though, is only one half of the equation. Possession of nuclear weapons itself carries with it a great risk! The continued existence of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert and targeted for immediate launch carries with it the risk of accidental, malicious or mistaken launch. As well, we are at risk from nuclear accidents and from inadequate command/control and warning systems.

There is also the danger of cyber failure and the danger of cyber attacks. Hackers – on a regular basis - attempt to penetrate the Pentagon and the nuclear weapons command and control systems – a very frightening prospect - because the command and control system is highly automated. Moreover, we are at risk of acquisition of nuclear weapons, and their use by non-state terrorists because of the inadequate security for fissile materials and warheads.

It is past time to call a halt to living with these dangers and now with President Obama returned to the White House, I feel confident that - if Russia will state without hesitation that it will engage in further cuts to the nuclear arsenals - President Obama will make it an early priority in his agenda. The United States and Russia then will proceed, in tandem, with further cuts to their arsenals – reducing them to the level at which the other nuclear weapons states are willing to engage in multilateral negotiations to continue the downward process to elimination.

Domestic issues such as the financial situation and job creation will be President's Obama's immediate priority. However, he will focus on foreign affairs – specifically Iran and the reduction of nuclear arsenals - for two reasons: first, it is an opportunity, not just merely to continue with what he started, but also to create a legacy for himself – as the person who was responsible for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Secondly, the Republican-dominated Congress will again make it difficult for him to fulfill his agenda; but he has significant freedom to act in the realm of foreign policy so he may focus more on issues in which he can have some success.

The immediate task is to continue – in partnership with Russia - to reduce the nuclear arsenals to the point where the other nuclear states, including Israel, India and Pakistan will join the process. Russia is especially keen for the United Kingdom and France to join in multilateral negotiations; and both Russia and the United States want China to join.

My view is that both countries will cooperate in continuing to cut their arsenals to the point in which the other states will enter in multi-lateral negotiations. Global Zero estimates the point to be 900 total weapons on both sides – an 80% reduction from current levels.

Civil society is an important dimension if real headway is to be made in reducing the nuclear arsenals to zero.

Leadership in democratic states comes not from the top, but rather in response to the citizens, the voters, the grassroots. So while President Obama can make this commitment to a nuclear weapon-free world, he needs the voting public behind him – in the United States, in all countries with nuclear weapons, in NATO member countries and in the European Union. He needs the support of all the de facto nuclear weapons states - those protected under the US nuclear umbrella – Canada, Japan, Australia, South Korea to name some - in order to carry it through.

With politically difficult issues - like nuclear disarmament - which hinge - in say, Canada, Australia and Japan - on international defence alliances; and - in the United States – on the technology-driven, so-called “military-industrial complex” which underpins the U.S. economy - the only possible hope for resolution of the issue - for change - is an aroused public - the building of public support to increase the leverage of politicians who - with eyes on the next election – will support the agenda of his or her constituents.

The major achievements in the past were the results of mass protests. Mass civil society protests – predominantly in the form of marches which took place in many parts of the world - have been very effective in moving the nuclear disarmament agenda forward. In 1961, Women Strike for Peace, the largest national women’s peace march of the century influenced President Kennedy to call for a ban on atmospheric testing. He said he watched the mass of protesting women from his window.

In the 1980s one million marched in New York. And five million Europeans demonstrated against the planned deployment of United States intermediate range nuclear missiles on their territories.¹

Though the Europeans were unsuccessful - according to former US Secretary of State, George Schultz, President Reagan was stunned, and decided he had to propose nuclear disarmament. Soviet President Andropov, Gorbachev's predecessor, was not ready. But Gorbachev, possibly for economic reasons, and influenced by both the Western peace movements and the Chernobyl disaster, willingly joined with Reagan and the process began of reducing their nuclear arsenals.

Concern died away at the end of the Cold War but briefly re-emerged when - in 1998 - India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons.

¹*Laurence Wittner*

Since 2001, the issue of nuclear disarmament has stagnated. The grassroots movements have essentially disappeared. Most non-governmental organizations and their networks have lost touch with the people. Yet the dangers remain, and are in fact, heightened.

Following 9/11 and the 2004 revelation of the A.Q. Khan nuclear technology proliferation network which added traction to the threat of nuclear terrorism, the failure of the 2005 NPT Review Conference, the stalled Conference on Disarmament, it seemed that the nuclear weapons states should and would become serious about eliminating their weapons. Yet, the United Nations, The First Committee on Disarmament and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty process were suffering from inertia; and failing to deal in any concrete way, with the issue of nuclear disarmament.

At the United Nations there was - and is - much laudable rhetoric. The language, however, is so cleverly crafted that it makes it possible for the nuclear weapons states to make commitments and do nothing – even the reverse! A current example is the Resolution, co-sponsored by the United Kingdom and endorsed by the recent UN First Committee on Disarmament, calling for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Yet, at home in the United Kingdom, the British are making plans to upgrade their Trident submarines to last for another 80 years. And as well, because of the fear that Scotland may secede, the British are actively seeking a temporary base for 20 years in the US, or France, for their nuclear submarines, so that they will not be forced to unilaterally disarm.

There are many non-governmental organizations and think-tanks working on this issue of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, but since the end of the Cold War most of them operate in isolation from the general public. One that I find particularly interesting and have funded from its beginning is Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament - because its members - which include Prime Minister Julia Gillard - are the lawmakers, the decision makers for their countries.

As well, there are the government-initiated and funded high-level Commissions - the 1996 Canberra Commission, Tokyo Forum, Swedish-initiated Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, and the most recent, the Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. The Reports of these government-initiated Commissions essentially feed into venues already cognizant with the issues, for example, NGOs, the think tanks, academia, government departments and the United Nations.

There is no doubt that all of this activity has some influence in furthering the issues. But for the most part, the general public pays no attention.

In my view – and, perhaps, in the view of Gareth Evans and others - it was time for a bold approach outside of the United Nations and one that could move fast, yet be supportive of UN attempts to grapple with nuclear weapons states unwilling to eliminate their arsenals; to grapple with the proliferation of nuclear weapons; and the inability of the Conference on Disarmament to negotiate a programme of work, and currently held in stranglehold by Pakistan.

Gareth Evans encouraged the government of Australia to initiate a new Commission, and as well, worked with Lord Des Browne, former UK Defence Minister to set up a global network of eminent persons: Browne's, the European Leadership Network and Evans, the Asia Pacific Leadership Network and I believe YOU are also working on an Americas network.

I joined with Dr. Bruce Blair, a former nuclear launch officer and pre-eminent expert on de-alerting nuclear weapons; and former Secretary of State, for Rhode Island, Matthew Brown, in the embryonic stage of what became Global Zero and am Founding Partner and Principal Sponsor.

These new disarmament movements – European Leadership Network, the Asia Pacific Leadership Network and Global Zero are not grass roots movements though Global Zero is developing in this area. They are organizations of high level persons – of people who make the decisions, and in the past, have made the decisions - former prime ministers, former presidents, members of parliament, diplomats, former nuclear arms negotiators, and members of the military who were in positions of responsibility for weapons and their possible use.

Movements from the top – unlike those at the grass roots level - are more difficult to transform into action at the political level. Global Zero's aim is to cover the full spectrum and its activities combine policy development and direct dialogue with governments - with public outreach, including media, online and grassroots initiatives.

Global Zero, is an international organization which has a step-by-step plan for the phased, verifiable, multilateral elimination of all nuclear weapons by 2030.

The process involves preparation, negotiation, ratification, and implementation of a legally binding international agreement for eliminating all nuclear weapons. And the establishment of necessary measures for strict enforcement, and permanently prohibit any country from developing, possessing or using nuclear weapons. This plan is similar to the CNND's with the exception that CNND does not have a date for zero.

We are building an international student movement, and to date, have more than 150 campus chapters in fifteen countries, and we have produced the documentary film, Countdown to Zero. Global Zero has been extremely successful to date. Its name has become shorthand for the elimination of nuclear weapons. It has received extraordinary media coverage and the government of Russia used the recent Global Zero Moscow conference as the forum to presents its several messages to the United States.

However, none of us can rest on our laurels. It is essential to continue to seek ways to accomplish the goal. It is a slow process. There is not the spontaneous outrage of the late 1950's when high levels of strontium 90 were manifest in children's baby teeth – levels that rose and fell in correlation with above ground atomic testing. Or when US nuclear weapons were deployed in bases in European countries and across the water from Vancouver. Or when arms build-ups were so absurd, horrifying and outrageous because there were enough to destroy the world multiple times over.

We now have to engage in an educational process – seeking new ways to educate and engage a generation now reaching adulthood with little knowledge and therefore no fear of nuclear destruction.

And twenty-first century civil society communes, meets, be-friends on the internet, the new social medium. How effective this medium will be in generating the necessary mass support and media attention to become the “wind at Obama’s back” is still a question.

A question too is can nuclear disarmament be achieved through only working at the top? Do we need grass roots action? And what is the role for Universities in this?

Even though President Obama is in the White House, and the prospects for significant movement in disarmament are good, we cannot sit back. I feel some urgency because we have a window of four years in which we must make significant progress to ensure that the process of nuclear weapon elimination reaches the point at which it will be difficult- and hopefully impossible to halt the reduction to zero.

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Jennifer Allen Simons, C.M., Ph.D., LL.D.

President

The Simons Foundation

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