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The New Disarmament Discussion

SHARON SQUASSONI

Nuclear disarmament appears to be on track for a political makeover. Serious commentators have begun to discuss what it might take to actually get to zero nuclear weapons, a question that is no longer the exclusive purview of grassroots activists. No one believes the goal will be achieved any time soon. But a consensus has emerged that the project of disarmament must be taken seriously if the world is to avoid further proliferation of nuclear weapons, perhaps into the hands of terrorists.

SECURITY

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Until about two years ago, few but the most ardent antinuclear groups advocated outright elimination of nuclear weapons. Arms control advocates lobbied for fewer strategic nuclear weapons, less threatening alert postures, a continued ban on nuclear testing, and limited or no modernization of existing stockpiles, among other things. When cornered, US government officials would note that Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) calls for *negotiations in good faith* on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament. In short, there was a safety valve on just how far the project of nuclear disarmament could proceed and certainly no timetable for reaching any particular goals.

Visualizing a world free of nuclear weapons belonged in the same category as eradicating hunger or cancer or poverty—a nice idea with overwhelming practical limitations. There has always been a host of reasons not to eliminate nuclear weapons. For example, the technology cannot be disinvented. Or, the elimination of nuclear arms could introduce strategic instabilities and possibly make conventional war more likely. It might

even induce states that now do not have nuclear weapons to develop them.

More important, the security order of the past half-century has been based on the logic of nuclear deterrence. Talking realistically about eliminating nuclear weapons has bordered therefore on doctrinal heresy. (In contrast, no one argues that hunger, cancer, or poverty have their uses.) Trading a “nuclear peace” for uncertain outcomes seemed far too risky. Yet, as Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Store remarked at an international conference in Oslo last February, the Achilles heel of thinking about nuclear weapons has been the false assumption that the status quo is less risky than change.

TERRORISM FOCUSES THE MIND

What has shifted? First, the language of disarmament has been adopted by senior American statesmen and, abroad, by senior government officials. It is not clear yet that this language will be adopted within the US government, which, if it happened, could be the first step toward setting the machinery of disarmament in motion. But the careful logic set out in the past two years cannot be dismissed as a pipe dream of the political left.

Second, the impetus for substantially reducing nuclear forces has been linked directly to concerns about proliferation and terrorism. The 9/11 terrorist attacks; nuclear tests by Pakistan, India, and North Korea; and Iran’s refusal to abide by the resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and United Nations Security Council have raised the stakes in efforts to tamp down proliferation.

In its simplest form, the idea gaining momentum is that more weapons—regardless of whether they are amassed in existing nuclear weapon states or new nuclear weapon states—provide more potential access points for terrorists. A more sophisticated version of the argument suggests

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that proliferation of nuclear weapons to new states renders an already complex deterrence calculation unmanageable, thereby degrading the deterrent value of existing nuclear weapons.

This connection between disarmament and nonproliferation and terrorism is significant for several reasons. In the past, foreign policy realists have argued that disarmament steps were irrelevant to other countries' calculations concerning their aspirations for nuclear weapons, while nonproliferation advocates argued that such steps were still relevant for the balance and sustainability of the nonproliferation regime as a whole. In other words, in order to get agreement to strengthen nonproliferation (such as enhanced inspections), it was necessary politically to show progress on disarmament. Realists appear now to be agreeing that disarmament steps may be vital to shoring up nonproliferation efforts.

Tying disarmament to reducing the threat of terrorist access to nuclear material or weapons is a new twist. Although this link formed the basis for the cooperative threat-reduction programs begun in 1991 in the then-Soviet Union, it has not been applied to other nuclear weapon states. In general, observers have assumed that nuclear material is protected most securely when it is in nuclear weapons, in contrast to material stored at universities, hospitals, and commercial power plants.

A highly publicized incident in August 2007—when six cruise missiles armed with nuclear warheads were mistakenly loaded onto a US Air Force plane and flown across the country without authorities being aware that they were missing—underscores the foolhardiness of that assumption. The looming threats of proliferation and terrorism have lent new urgency to the project of disarmament.

THE FOUR STATESMEN STEP IN

In January 2007, four senior American statesmen—the former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and Senator Sam Nunn—published an op-ed essay in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.” The choice of venue—the conservative *Wall Street Journal*—and the inclusion particularly of Kissinger sent a compelling message that nuclear disarmament might actually be politically feasible.

The four statesmen essentially argued that the threats posed by nuclear arsenals in the form of proliferation into the hands of dangerous states or terrorists may ultimately be greater than the risks

posed by their abolition. They did not reject nuclear deterrence, but suggested that “reliance on nuclear weapons for this purpose is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective.” In response to the op-ed, the former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: “It is becoming clearer that nuclear weapons are no longer a means of achieving security; in fact, with every passing year they make our security more precarious.”

Part of the appeal of the four statesmen's approach was its grounding in the vision of eliminating nuclear weapons that was shared at Reykjavik 20 years ago by Gorbachev and then-President Ronald Reagan—two cold warriors at the epicenter of nuclear competition. The essay recalled the shock and hope of the Reagan-Gorbachev vision—shock from experts in the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and hope from people all around the world. Another part of its appeal was its remarkable lack of ideology. Like a reluctant suitor, this disarmament campaign, which might more comfortably be described as a nuclear security campaign, has attempted to steer a course between shock and hope, particularly by refusing to disavow deterrence.

Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn called for making the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world a joint enterprise among nuclear weapon states. The steps they advocated are well-known, including reducing alert levels, substantially cutting nuclear force levels, working toward a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), halting the production of fissile material for weapons globally, and improving the security of nuclear weapons and weapons-usable material worldwide. If the four authors had simply called for taking those steps, rather than placing them in the framework of a world free of nuclear weapons, their article might have elicited curiosity about the breadth or depth of their agreement, but not the level of excitement it has generated thus far.

A year later, in a follow-on article in *The Wall Street Journal*, the four statesmen called for making disarmament a practical enterprise among non-nuclear nations as well. This time, their recommendations primarily focused on US and Russian actions but also fleshed out steps toward a test ban and efforts to manage the risks of the nuclear fuel cycle.

This post-ideological campaign—some might say it is a perfect fit for the Obama administration—has not argued that the vision of a world without nuclear weapons is right or moral. Instead, it has argued that the vision is necessary to energize ac-

tions and to build the international trust and cooperation necessary for those actions. Coming from what some call the “realist” security elite, it has the very real potential to effect change.

A wider, international campaign has also begun, officially unveiled in Paris in December 2008. Drawing from military, political, religious, and business communities, the Global Zero campaign seeks to generate support among world leaders for disarmament steps. Members of Global Zero thus far include former foreign ministers and retired generals from the United States, United Kingdom, Pakistan, and India. The group hopes to hold a world summit of 500 leaders in January 2010. A key question is whether the campaign will catch on in the relevant governments.

WILL OTHER STATES GO FOR IT?

Gauging support for a world free of nuclear weapons is difficult. The five nuclear weapon state parties to the NPT all have expressed support for the general commitment under the treaty’s Article VI to pursue nuclear disarmament. But as the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme remarked 30 years ago, “Everybody pays lip service to disarmament, but the issues are clouded by technical details and secrecy, left to the experts.” Has much changed?

The United Kingdom has certainly gone furthest in rhetoric. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called for accelerating disarmament among nuclear weapon states, preventing proliferation to new states, and ultimately achieving a world that is free of nuclear weapons. In June 2008, the “UK Four”—former Foreign and Defense Secretaries Douglas Hurd, Malcolm Rifkind, David Owen, and George Robertson—published an article in *The Times* of London entitled “Start Worrying and Learn To Ditch the Bomb.” Their starting point was simple and stark: The more nuclear material in circulation, the greater the risk it could fall into the wrong hands. They suggested nuclear disarmament is possible (but stopped short of saying it is necessary), and chose to describe a world free of nuclear weapons as an “ultimate aspiration.”

Actions may speak louder than words, however. The United Kingdom recently has embarked on a path that, according to British officials, is making their country a “disarmament laboratory.” The government has tasked the Atomic Weapons

Establishment with detailing key stages in verifying disarmament, including the authentication of warheads, chain of custody problems in sensitive nuclear weapons facilities, and monitored storage of dismantled nuclear weapons. In addition, experts have been working on provisions to manage access to sensitive nuclear facilities.

The British government commissioned a study in 2008 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies on the requirements for disarmament. “Abolishing Nuclear Weapons,” a paper by George Perkovich and James Acton, explores how to create the necessary security conditions for disarmament as well as measures to verify and enforce it. The UK has also set in motion an effort among the five nuclear weapon states’ laboratories to explore technical verification issues.

French officials have steered clear of supporting abolition of nuclear weapons. President Nicolas Sarkozy, with the United States, refused in 2005 to reaffirm the goal of total elimination of nuclear arsenals that nuclear weapon states had made at the NPT 2000 review conference. On the

other hand, Sarkozy announced in March 2008 that France would reduce its nuclear arsenal, and he urged support for the entry into force of the

CTBT (which France has signed and ratified), as well as a global ban on fissile material production for weapons. Ultimately, however, France presently views its nuclear deterrent as vital protection against a wide range of threats.

Official Russian rhetoric has been slightly more supportive. In a speech to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament in February 2008, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that many of the steps recommended by Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn were “in line with Russia’s initiatives.” But then he proceeded to warn that US efforts to deploy its global anti-ballistic missile system would affect Russian decisions about strategic offensive weapons, footnoting the fact that limitations on strategic arms may expire soon. Sergei Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the United States, told *Arms Control Today* in November 2008 that Russia supports the ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, but he stressed the complexity of the process. Clearly, a follow-up to the 1991 strategic arms reduction

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treaty, which will expire at the end of 2009, is a critical first step in the entire process.

It is not clear how the Russians' actions will compare to their rhetoric. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov introduced a draft treaty at the February Conference on Disarmament to eliminate all short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, essentially an extension of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement. Yet the proposed deployment of 10 US missile interceptors to Poland in late 2008 prompted Russia to declare that it would station Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. Critics have noted that the Iskander's range can be extended to the point that it would violate the INF treaty.

Another issue is Russia's modernization of its strategic systems, made possible by strong economic gains of the past few years. Some analysts note that this modernization does not necessarily preclude steps toward disarmament, since Russia might feel more comfortable negotiating from a stronger position.

China also is modernizing its nuclear forces. But its policies and practices have shown restraint in the deployment of nuclear weapons. And Beijing has long stated its support for the "complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons," including the conclusion of a treaty for that purpose. Any attempt to bring China into multilateral negotiations will likely depend on significant US-Russian advances first. According to Chinese official policy: "The two countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals bear special and primary responsibilities for nuclear disarmament. They should . . . create conditions for achieving the ultimate goal of complete and thorough nuclear disarmament."

China has committed to "no first use" of nuclear weapons, and has urged other nuclear weapon states to do the same—including abandoning deterrence based on a first use of nuclear weapons. In addition, China supports early negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, as do most of the other nuclear weapon states.

Any disarmament project would have to reel in the three states outside the NPT that have nuclear weapons: India, Pakistan, and Israel. India's commitment to a world without nuclear weapons is longstanding, but like China, its efforts to modernize and expand its arsenal create doubts about matching actions with words. At the 2008 UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suggested a number of practical measures

toward disarmament. These include: reaffirming the unequivocal commitment of all nuclear weapon states to the goal of completely eliminating nuclear arms; reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines; and adopting measures to reduce the risks of accidental war, for example, by taking nuclear systems off alert status.

The Indian prime minister also called for efforts to negotiate new agreements, including a global pact among nuclear weapon states on a policy of no-first-use of nuclear arms, and a universal and legally binding ban on the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. In addition, Singh proposed a convention on prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons and creating a plan to destroy nuclear weapons. Such a convention, he urged, should lead to the global, nondiscriminatory, and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons within a specified time frame.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari recently created a stir when he suggested that Pakistan would not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a war with India. But it is not clear that the Pakistani military also supports this significant change in nuclear doctrine. Pakistan has continued to expand its nuclear arsenal, including building new reactors to make more weapons-grade plutonium. Although Pakistani officials rhetorically support disarmament, they are likely to throw up roadblocks to progress on the CTBT and fissile materials ban.

Meanwhile, Israel's nuclear weapons remain under wraps, making it difficult for Israeli officials to say much about their own nuclear arms or their views on disarmament. They have, however, been very clear about one thing: Efforts to rid the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction can only be successful in the context of durable peace and transparency.

INTO THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The vision of a world without nuclear weapons has taken shape outside of governments, but is increasingly creeping inside governments. The election of Barack Obama holds particular promise in this regard. During the presidential campaign, Obama stated his intention to make the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide a central element of US nuclear policy. He declared that "a world without nuclear weapons is profoundly in America's interest and the world's interest. It is our responsibility to make the commitment, and to do the hard work to make this vision a reality."

In particular, Obama promised to “initiate a high-level dialogue among all the declared nuclear weapon states on how to make their nuclear capabilities more transparent, create greater confidence, and move toward meaningful reductions and the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons.” In the interim, Obama and his national security team are committed to maintaining a strong deterrent while stopping the development of new nuclear weapons.

As part of a plan to control and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons around the world, President-elect Obama has called for securing, within four years, all nuclear materials in the 50 countries that have them, and phasing out highly enriched uranium in the civil fuel cycle. He wants to negotiate radical reductions in US and Russian nuclear stockpiles, and to lower current alert levels of deployed nuclear forces. He has called for negotiating a verifiable global ban on the production of fissile materials for weapons, and a global ban on all intermediate-range missiles. Obama has proposed the creation of a new global nuclear energy architecture that includes an international nuclear fuel bank, international fuel cycle centers, and reliable fuel supply assurances. And he wants to increase funding for IAEA inspections and safeguards.

President-elect Obama has also stated that he will ask the US Senate to ratify the CTBT as soon as it is practical to do so, and will launch a diplomatic effort to get other states, such as India and Pakistan, to support the treaty. It is too soon to tell how nonproliferation and disarmament priorities will compete against other more urgent economic, foreign, and security policy priorities in the Obama administration. But even creating a favorable impression in 2009 could buy time to win support further down the road.

THORNY CHALLENGES

Nuclear issues have a way of sticking around a long time. Fifty years after the dawn of nuclear energy, no country has been able to decide where to permanently store nuclear waste. Nuclear fusion is, and has been for a while, about 50 years off into the future. And the disarmament project was born in 1945 and is still in its infancy.

Will the campaign for nuclear disarmament become a movement? Is that necessary? Will it

be embraced by the states most important for its success? Several critics of the four statesmen’s approach have suggested that convincing Americans will be the easiest part. The challenges facing this project are daunting and will need to be whittled away over time. Political will to work on disarmament must be sustained for long periods, which will be difficult. Technical issues too will require sustained attention.

Politically, the top priority will be to renew cooperation between the United States and Russia, at a time when US-Russian relations have reached a new low. President Dmitri Medvedev has continued to urge the United States to drop its plans to deploy missile defenses in the Czech Republic and Poland, but he also has interpreted President-elect Obama’s muted response so far as favorable, according to press reports. Medvedev specifically has expressed hope that the Obama administration will help restore US-Russian relations.

Technical challenges depend on a host of decisions about the scope of disarmament and how it would be carried out. Would the scope cover warheads, nuclear material, and/or delivery vehicles?

What level of confidence would be necessary in verifying declarations of stockpiles and the destruction of warheads? How can sensitive information be protected so that nuclear secrets are not divulged? Many of these technical problems

will require years of study before any decisions are reached; the studying should begin now.

Other technical challenges that need to be sorted out concern how to deter and detect any proliferation after nuclear weapons have been eliminated—in other words, the risk of a country “breaking out” from zero nuclear weapons. For those that favor countries’ maintaining a hedging capability, this is less of an issue. For others, the continued use of nuclear energy in a world that has far fewer or zero nuclear weapons may present significant technical challenges.

All types of nuclear fuel—whether reactors use natural uranium, low-enriched uranium, or plutonium—require some sensitive fuel cycle facilities. Both uranium enrichment and spent-fuel reprocessing plants, which separate out plutonium from waste products, can be used to make reactor fuel or fuel for bombs. In a world that has fewer nuclear weapons, the incentives to use civilian

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nuclear facilities for clandestine purposes may be greater since the advantages to be gained would be greater. This is why all disarmament proposals stress the importance of enhancing controls on nuclear material worldwide.

This would be a challenge even if the status of nuclear energy remained exactly as it is today. However, industry experts predict a major expansion. In the past few years, dozens of countries have stated that they plan to develop nuclear energy as an antidote to dependence on oil and natural gas and as a greener energy solution in the context of global climate change. If all the states that now have plans actually followed through on them, current nuclear reactor capacity could double by 2030. If states were serious about using nuclear energy to help significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions, nuclear capacity might triple or quadruple.

Nuclear power, moreover, would no longer be concentrated in the relatively advanced 31 nations that now operate reactors in North America, Europe, and Asia, but would spread among possibly 80 countries with widely divergent economic, social, and political development. The real problem would be if the sensitive fuel-making capabilities of enrichment and reprocessing also spread to significantly more countries. Technical and political solutions to these technologies' proliferation risks

have so far been relatively unappealing to most countries, although work on this undoubtedly will continue.

THE ULTIMATE ASPIRATION

It would be wrong to suggest that a consensus has emerged on abolishing nuclear weapons. Yet recognition is growing among experts and some government officials that the risks of nuclear arsenals may outweigh their benefits, given the security challenges posed by proliferation and terrorism. This is an enormously different environment from the one that existed in 1946, when the US government proposed to eliminate nuclear weapons under the Baruch Plan. It is also enormously different from the 1980s environment that spawned the nuclear freeze movement.

Moving toward the goal of zero nuclear weapons will require sustained engagement by experts inside and outside governments. It might also require, as Palme suggested decades ago, a groundswell of support from people across the world. Most important, it will require committed political leadership and vision to create the security structures that will enable states confidently to reduce and eventually to eliminate their dependence on nuclear weapons for security. ■