

Fear, Loathing, and Nuclear Disarmament

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The past year was one of extremes for nuclear disarmament.

At the United Nations, more than 120 countries negotiated a nuclear weapons ban in record time. The chief negotiator, Costa Rican Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gómez, hailed the new legal norm that will in principle prohibit the use and threat of use, testing, development, production, possession, transfer, and stationing of nuclear weapons. On the heels of this milestone, in October, the Nobel committee awarded the Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons for its efforts to draw attention to the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use” of nuclear arms, which helped build momentum for the ban treaty.

In the same year, however, North Korea tested a hydrogen bomb and steadily advanced its program to develop missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads. US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un indulged in alarming rhetoric about their ability and willingness to destroy each other’s country, presumably with nuclear weapons.

Even “safe” agendas like nuclear arms control and nonproliferation seem off-limits for the moment for the United States and Russia, which previously cooperated in those areas. Stockpile reductions beyond the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), if they are contemplated, must await completion of the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review and resolution of noncompliance allegations under the landmark 1987 US-Soviet treaty that eliminated an entire class of intermediate-range nuclear-tipped missiles (the INF Treaty). Even if the Trump administration wanted to pursue nuclear arms control, the current anti-Russian sentiment within Congress on so many issues could make ratification of any new treaties difficult if not impossible.

From all public accounts, however, it is clear that Trump views nuclear weapons as an essential—and usable—component of US military power. He told reporters in October that he wanted “modernization and total rehabilitation” of the arsenal. Reports that the Trump administration also favors more usable nuclear weapons with lower yields align with several public statements suggesting his willingness to resort to the nuclear option under a variety of circumstances. Whatever ultimately happens with stockpile modernization, Trump’s threats to rain down “fire and fury like the world has never seen” and “totally destroy” North Korea have many people worried.

These concerns over a potential lack of presidential restraint prompted the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to begin a series of hearings in November on the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. Senator Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, said, “We are concerned that the president is so unstable, is so volatile, has a decision-making process that is so quixotic, that he might order a nuclear weapons strike that is wildly out of step with US national security interests.” According to the committee chairman, Tennessee Republican Bob Corker, Congress had not held a hearing on this topic since 1976.

Others are worried about attacks on the United States. One recent poll (for *Investor’s Business Daily*) found that 73 percent of Americans were “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned” about the possibility of a nuclear strike by North Korea against the United States or its allies. At least three North Korean missile tests in 2017 demonstrated enough range to hit the US mainland, though there is still some uncertainty about their payloads and reliability. Within Washington policy circles, concerns about nuclear attacks are not limited to North Korea. They also extend to Russia’s nuclear modernization program, its violations of the INF treaty, and the perception that Moscow may now be more inclined to use tactical nuclear weapons to offset its inferiority in conventional forces, stealing a page from NATO’s Cold War playbook.

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step would be for China and the United States to work together with North Korea toward all three of them ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Other steps should include extending New START and addressing ballistic missile defense issues in US-Russian strategic stability talks. All nuclear-armed nations ought to demonstrate that they are taking steps to reduce their reliance on these weapons.

Could greater anxiety about nuclear weapons actually boost the cause of nuclear disarmament? After all, nuclear freeze movements in Europe and the United States in the 1980s helped bring about the “zero option”—the removal of intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe—under the 1987 INF Treaty. Over time, Ronald Reagan’s cavalier attitude

toward nuclear weapons shifted, leading him to declare in 1984 that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” At a summit meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, in the fall of 1986, Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev discussed practical proposals for eliminating nuclear weapons on a timetable.

Here is where the “ban the bomb” movement could have an impact. Buoyed by the treaty and the Nobel Peace Prize, civil society advocates could amplify their voices and their demands, using the same social media so deftly employed by Trump and his administration. Whether they can create a Reykjavik moment for the leaders of nuclear-armed nations is uncertain, but they need to try. ■