Creating a World Without Nuclear Weapons

We are in the seventh decade of the Nuclear Age. With the capacity to destroy civilization and end life on the planet, more than 20,000 nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of nine nuclear weapon states.

The United States and Russia head the list of countries with nuclear weapons, and together have more than 95 percent of the total on the planet. These two countries still maintain over 2,000 nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, ready to be fired within moments, raising concerns for accidental launches. The UK, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea hold the remaining 5 percent of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons endanger the future of our species along with all other forms of life. The only safe and stable number of nuclear weapons on the planet is zero. Achieving zero will require political will, which in turn will require strong public support. It will also require an effective means to verify honesty. As Ronald Reagan, a nuclear abolitionist, said, “Trust, but verify.”

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The Limits of Deterrence

Weapons of mass annihilation have been used throughout the Nuclear Age to threaten retaliation. But the threat of retaliation, known as deterrence, is not defense. Nuclear deterrence is meaningless when it comes to terrorist groups, which, without territory, cannot be subject to retaliation. No matter how powerful a country’s nuclear arsenal, it cannot deter a determined extremist group in possession of a nuclear weapon.

For deterrence to work, the country’s leaders must believe in the intent, as well as the opponent’s capacity, to retaliate. Without that belief, such a threat may be doubted or dismissed, rendering the deterrence effort useless. Deterrence also relies upon rationality, and history proves that all political leaders do not act rationally at all times.

Weapons of the Weak

Nuclear weapons may provide perceived security for a weaker country in relation to a stronger one. Iraq, Iran and North Korea were branded as an “axis of evil” in the early days of the Bush administration. The US then proceeded to attack Iraq on the false charge that it had a nuclear weapons program, overthrow its leadership and occupy the country. With North Korea, a country suspected of having a small arsenal of nuclear weapons, the US was much more cautious and engaged in negotiations. This sent the message to Iran that they would be more secure with a nuclear arsenal, which is surely not the message that the US wishes to send to the world.

Thought of as “military equalizers,” nuclear weapons may make a country think twice about attacking. But this is a dangerous game of Russian roulette. And the more countries that have nuclear weapons, the greater the danger that these weapons will be used by accident, miscalculation or design.

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Although it’s not a pledge to zero, it is a small step in the right direction. However, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty refers to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy as an “inalienable right.” This moves the world in the wrong direction in terms of nuclear proliferation and nuclear waste. Nuclear energy provides a pretext for the creation of fissile materials for nuclear weapons through uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technologies. Once commerce is established in such bomb materials, the prospects of nuclear proliferation, even to terrorists, increase dramatically. In addition, there is still no good answer to the problem of nuclear waste, which will remain dangerous to human health and the environment for many times longer than human civilization has existed.

Changing Our Thinking

We need to shift our thinking if we are to confront the serious dangers to the human future posed by nuclear weapons. As Albert Einstein warned early in the Nuclear Age, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.” The needed changes in thinking will require a major shift in our orientation toward nuclear weapons, in our willingness to imagine possible alternative futures and in our empathy for others.

Nuclear weapons are immoral weapons; they are not just another, albeit more powerful, weapon of war. They are the enemy of humanity and the future, and we must rise up and make our voices heard for the total elimination of these weapons. Countries with nuclear weapons must stop basing their security on the threat to annihilate vast numbers of innocent people.

The Need for Greater US Leadership

The United States, as the world’s most powerful country, must lead in achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. In his speech in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Obama said, “...as a nuclear power—as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon—the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it.”

To get to zero nuclear weapons in this lifetime, the leaders of the world’s nations, particularly the leaders of nuclear weapon states, need to agree upon the phased elimination of all nuclear weapons, with provisions for effective verification and enforcement.

Each generation has a responsibility to pass the world on intact to the next generation. Those of us alive today are challenged as never before to accomplish this. Technological achievement does not necessarily make us stronger; it may simply make us more vulnerable, and our old ways of thinking may seal our fate. The alternative to waiting for another nuclear catastrophe to occur is to join with others who are committed to assuring a human future, and act to rid the world of this most menacing of all human inventions. It is the power of ordinary people working in concert that has the potential to move political leaders to effective action. It is this power that must be mobilized on behalf of ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

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David Krieger is a founder of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (www.wagingpeace.org) and has served as its president since 1982. He is a leader in the global effort to abolish nuclear weapons. Among the books he has written or edited are Nuclear Weapons and the World Court (with Ved Nanda), At the Nuclear Precipice: Catastrophe or Transformation? (with Richard Falk) and The Challenge of Abolishing Nuclear Weapons.