

## **If You Want the Peace of the Dead, Prepare for Nuclear War**

By Ramesh Thakur

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The world faces two existential threats: climate change, and nuclear Armageddon. Action on both is required urgently. Tackling the first will impose significant economic costs and lifestyle adjustments, while tackling the second will bring economic benefits without any lifestyle implications. Those who reject the first are derided as denialists; those dismissive of the second are praised as realists. Although action is needed now in order to keep the world on this side of the tipping point, a climate change-induced apocalypse will not occur until decades into the future. A nuclear catastrophe could destroy us at any time, although, if our luck holds out, it could be delayed for another six decades. The uncomfortable reality is that nuclear peace has been upheld, owing as much to good luck as to sound stewardship. Because we have learned to live with nuclear weapons for 66 years, we have become desensitized to the gravity and immediacy of the threat. The tyranny of complacency could yet exact a fearful price if we sleepwalk our way into a nuclear Armageddon. The time to lift the spectre of a mushroom cloud from the international body politic is long overdue.

Nuclear weapons are strategic equalizers for weaker sides in conflict relationships, but they do not buy defence on the cheap. They can lead to the creation of a national security state with a premium on governmental secretiveness, reduced public accountability, and increased distance between citizens and Governments. There is the added risk of proliferation to extremist elements through leakage, theft, state collapse, and state capture. In terms of opportunity costs, heavy military expenditure amounts to stealing from the poor. Nuclear weapons do not help to combat today's real threats of insurgency, terrorism, poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and corruption. As they said in the streets of Delhi in 1998: "No food, no clothing, no shelter? No worry, we have the bomb."

Since the end of the Cold War, the risk of a Russia-United States nuclear war has diminished, but the prospect of nuclear weapons being used by other nuclear-armed states or non-state actors has become more plausible. As a result, we find ourselves at a familiar crossroads, confronting the same old choice between security in or from nuclear weapons.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has kept the nuclear nightmare at bay for over four decades. The number of countries with nuclear weapons is still in single figures. There has been substantial progress in reducing the number of nuclear warheads. However, the threat is still acute with a combined stockpile of more than 20,000 nuclear weapons; of these, 5,000 warheads are launch-ready and 2,000 are in a state of high operational alert.

The NPT enshrined multiple bargains. The non-nuclear countries agreed among themselves never to acquire nuclear weapons. They entered into a deal with the nuclear weapon states (NWS) whereby, in return for intrusive end-use control over nuclear and nuclear-related technology and material, they were granted favoured access to nuclear technology, components, and material. The non-nuclear countries struck a second deal with the NWS by which, in return for forever forswearing the bomb, the NWS would pursue good faith negotiations for complete nuclear disarmament. Article 6 of the NPT is the only explicit multilateral disarmament commitment undertaken by all NWS.

Those agreements are now under strain due to a five-fold challenge:

1. The five NPT-licit nuclear powers (Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States) have disregarded NPT obligations to disarm.
2. Three nuclear-armed states lie outside the NPT: India, Israel, and Pakistan.
3. As an intergovernmental agreement, the NPT does not cover non-state groups, including terrorists.
4. Some NPT members may be trying to elude their non-proliferation obligations, while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has withdrawn from the NPT and tested nuclear weapons.
5. Many countries are interested in nuclear energy owing to rising environmental anxieties and fossil fuel price, raising issues of safety, security, and weaponization.

The disquieting trend of a widening circle of NPT-licit and extra-NPT nuclear weapons powers has a self-generating effect in drawing other countries into the game of nuclear brinkmanship. Adding to the five sets of concerns is the sorry state of global governance mechanisms for nuclear arms control. The Conference on Disarmament cannot even agree on an agenda. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty has not yet entered into force and a fissile material cut-off treaty is no nearer conclusion.

After more than a decade in the doldrums, the nuclear agenda was re-energized by a coalition of four United States national security policy heavy weights—William Cohen, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, and William Perry—and given fresh momentum with President Barack Obama's Prague Promise in April 2009 to aim for the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. The Washington Nuclear Summit looked closely at the safety and security requirements of nuclear programmes and materials. The 2010 NPT Review Conference was a modest success. Commissions such as the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and campaigns like Global Zero have helped to mobilize key constituencies. Russia and the United States have negotiated, signed, ratified, and brought into force a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (know as START II) to cut back nuclear arsenals by one third, limiting each to 1,550 deployable warheads.

Yet, there is a palpable and growing sense that START II could mark the end of nuclear disarmament progress, instead of being the first step on the road to abolition. There is little evidence of significant demand for disarmament by domestic political constituencies in the nuclear-armed states. Tellingly, not one country that had an atomic bomb in 1968 when the NPT was signed has given it up. Judging by their actions rather than the rhetoric, all are determined to remain nuclear-armed. They are either modernizing nuclear forces and refining nuclear doctrines, or preparing to do so. For example, even after implementing START II, the United States will retain a cache of reserve warheads as a strategic hedge available for rapid uploading, should the need arise, and also build three new factories for increased nuclear warhead production capacity. To would-be proliferators, the lesson is clear: nuclear weapons are indispensable in today's world and for dealing with tomorrow's threats.

Reflecting the technical state of 1968 when the NPT was signed, Iran insists on its right to pursue

the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes—to the point where it would be a screwdriver away from developing the bomb. The world is at a loss on how to stop Iran from crossing the weapons threshold and how to persuade, coax, or coerce the DPRK from stepping back into the NPT as a denuclearized member in good standing.

Japan is the emotional touchstone in the discourse as the world's only victim of the bomb. The United States has a special responsibility to lead the way to nuclear abolition as the only country to have used atomic bombs, and as the world's biggest military power. The A-bomb was developed during the Second World War by a group of scientists brought together for the Manhattan Project under the directorship of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Witnessing the first successful atomic test on 16 July 1945, Oppenheimer recalled the sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One." Birth and death are symbiotically linked in the cycle of life. Oppenheimer also recalled the matching verse from the Gita: "Now I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds."

The same duality is omnipresent in every aspect of modern day Hiroshima. The citizens of Hiroshima, in rebuilding their city, have consecrated it as a testimonial to social resilience, human solidarity, and nuclear abolition. Once again a beautiful, scenic, and thriving city, Hiroshima lives by three codes: transformation from a military city to a city of peace; to forgive and atone, but never to forget; and, never again.

The case for abolition is simple, elegant, and eloquent. Without strengthening national security, nuclear weapons diminish our common humanity and impoverish our soul. Their very destructiveness robs them of military utility against other nuclear powers and of political utility against non-nuclear countries. As long as any country has any, others will want some. As long as they exist, they will be used one day again by design, accident, or miscalculation. Our goal, therefore, should be to make the transition from a world in which the role of nuclear weapons is seen as central to maintaining security, to one where they become progressively marginal and eventually entirely unnecessary. Like chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented, but like them, nuclear weapons can also be controlled, regulated, restricted and outlawed under an international regime that ensures strict compliance through effective and credible inspection, verification, and enforcement.

The common task is to delegitimize the possession, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons; to require no first use and sole purpose commitments; to reduce their numbers to 10 per cent of present stockpiles (500 warheads each for Russia and the United States, and 1,000 among the rest) by 2025; to reduce the high-risk reliance on them by introducing further degrees of separation between possession, deployment and use, by physically separating warheads from delivery systems and lengthening the decision-making fuse for the launch of nuclear weapons; to strengthen the authority and capacity of the International Atomic Energy Agency; to establish a multilateral fuel cycle; and to toughen up supply-side restrictions.

Because the NPT has been subverted from a prohibition into a purely non-proliferation regime, the time has come to look beyond it to a better alternative that gathers all the meritorious elements into one workable package in a nuclear weapons convention. This will not self-materialize merely because we wish it so. Nor will it ever eventuate if we always push it into the distant future. There are many technical, legal, and political challenges to overcome, but serious preparatory work needs to be started now, with conviction and commitment.

Those who worship most devoutly at the altar of nuclear weapons issue the fiercest fat- was against others rushing to join them. The most powerful stimulus to nuclear proliferation by others is the continuing possession of the bomb by some. Nuclear weapons could not proliferate if they did not exist, but because they do, they will. The threat to use nuclear weapons, both to deter their use by others and to prevent proliferation, legitimizes their possession, deployment, and use. That which is legitimate cannot be stopped from proliferating.

Critics of the zero option want to keep their atomic bombs, but deny them to others. They lack the intellectual honesty and the courage to show how non- proliferation can be enforced without disarmament, to acknowledge that the price of keeping nuclear arsenals is uncontrolled proliferation, and to argue why a world of uncontrolled proliferation is better than abolition for national and international security.

The focus on non-proliferation to the neglect of disarmament ensures that we get neither. The best and only guarantee of non-proliferation is disarmament. If we want non- proliferation, therefore, we must prepare for disarmament. Within our lifetime, we will either achieve nuclear abolition or have to live with nuclear proliferation and die with the use of nuclear weapons. It is better to have the soft glow of satisfaction from the noble goal of achieving the banishment of nuclear weapons, than the harsh glare on the morning after these weapons have been used.

#### *About the author*

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