

Achieving the Vision of a World Free of Nuclear Weapons
International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament, Oslo February 26 – 27 2008

De-emphasizing the Nuclear Weapons

Dingli Shen
Executive Dean, Institute of International Studies
Director, Centre for American Studies
Fudan University, Shanghai, China

1. The irrelevance of nuclear weapons to nuclear weapons states

For nuclear weapons states, nuclear weapons used to be the core of their national arsenal, and nuclear weapons policy the core of their respective national security policy. This was due to the role of deterrence of such weapons. No countries could stand with the destructiveness of nuclear strikes, no matter a first attack or a retaliatory one. Modern nuclear weapons would be typically tens if not hundreds of times of more powerful than the two dropped against Japan. Therefore, the formidable amount of power unleashed has served to deter inter-state aggression among nuclear weapons states.

Nuclear weapons, as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), have therefore assisted to avoid a third world war from happening during the Cold War time. The weapons themselves have evolved to be far more advanced and sophisticated than half a century ago, in addition to their quantity in respective national arsenals of the nuclear weapons states. Clearly, such weapons have been excessively developed to bring tremendous amount of threat to human-being. Subsequently, there has always been strong opposition to the existence of such weaponry ever since they came into being.

Morally, many even believe that the sheer existence of such weapons is against humanities, let alone their use. There have been efforts to work out a Nuclear Weapons

Convention (NWC), similar to CWC (Chemical Weapons Convention) or BWC (Biological Weapons Convention), to ban the possession, development, test, manufacturing, stockpiling, transportation and use of them. In terms of use of nuclear weapons, its first-strike or pre-emptive use is simply deemed illegal and immoral, for its indiscriminatory nature. Meantime, it is hard to argue that a second strike would be anymore moral than a first attack, for the same indiscriminatory mass destructiveness, though the International Court of Justice has not concluded that a nuclear retaliation in kind is illegal.

Today, nuclear weapons for nuclear weapons states have become increasingly irrelevant. Nuclear weapons states spent far more resources on advanced conventional weapons than nuclear weapons as the former is “useable”. It is advanced conventional weaponry that has been employed in inter-state conflict, and so far for the combat against non-state actors. For instance, the U.S. war on Iraq in 2003, without a U.N. Security Council mandate and solid facts establishing the accusation against Saddam regime’s WMD development, was neither deterred by any nuclear weapons of the world, nor by possible WMDs that Iraq might have had at that time.

The U.S. weapons sale to China’s Taiwan, which undercut China’s core national security interests, has also not been deterred by the fact that Beijing has acquired atomic bombs. On one hand, even though the U.S. would not believe in China’s no-first-use pledge, the U.S. still bets that Beijing’s overall interests would override its concerns over Taiwan. On the other hand, for Chinese perspectives, it will stick to a no-first-use policy even in the worst case situation. Therefore, when nuclear weapons states have in fact abandoned the employment of nuclear weapons in dealing with each other in the first place, what will be the relevance of such weapons in addition to deterrence?

The United States’ conditional first-use is virtually a conditional no-first-use. Despite the fact that American government has voiced nuclear threats during the entire post-WWII time, it has restrained itself by not implementing its threat. For instance, the U.S. government threatened Chinese side times and again in the 1950s – during the Korean

War, during the crisis of artillery shell exchange with Kinmen/Matsu, and during China's assistance to Vietcong's military offensive with French colonizers. The U.S. didn't honor its nuclear bluff but its nuclear threat had already forced Chinese to acquire nuclear weapons as a response.

2. Nuclear weapons proliferation as a security hedge

Though nuclear weapons are increasingly irrelevant to nuclear weapons states, this may not be true to non-nuclear weapons states yet. When China was coerced by America in 1950s, Beijing responded with its nuclear weapons in kind. The U.S. seems not to have drawn the lesson. It continued to be hostile to DPRK to lead Pyongyang to conduct a nuclear test. Though the DPRK has its own room to improve its internal and external statecraft on this issue, American hostility, at least to DPRK's perception, helps explain the latter's nuclear weapons development.

The recent U.S.-DPRK improvement of relations is, ironically, exactly the U.S. realistic response to Pyongyang's hardline position on nuclear program. Then the U.S. nuclear logic turns out rather pragmatic as well as contradictory. Washington indeed feels the threat of WMD proliferation, especially at a time of global anti-terror. But the approach to DPRK's nuclear weapons program, prior to the latter's nuclear test, was unreasonable and too much high-handed. After DPRK's nuclear test, nevertheless, the U.S. swiftly shifted its policy toward Pyongyang, employing a new strategy of dialogue. This proves the DPRK's thoughts that only nuclear weapons of its own can revert the hostility of America, so while negotiating with America to disable Pyongyang's nuclear wherewithal, the DPRK will clearly demand maximum payoff while likely retaining the core of its nuclear weapons program, for fearing of an uncertain unfavorable circumstance arising in the future.

The logic of non-nuclear weapons states to go nuclear is therefore out of fear. This could be fear toward certain nuclear weapons states, or toward certain non-nuclear weapons state. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed a series of serious proliferation episodes: nuclear tests of DPRK, India and Pakistan; Libya's secretive

nuclear weapons program; Iran's clandestine nuclear program prior to 2003 that is yet to be clarified; Iraq's persistent pursuit of WMDs in 1980's-1990s regardless the UNSCR 687, etc.

None of the aforementioned cases has aspired to acquire WMDs purely for bragging, but primarily for deterrence. India and Pakistan developed their nuclear weapons for deterrence, and India has proposed a no-first-use promise in order not to threaten the others in the first place. Pakistan has not reciprocated, so as to check India's conventional superiority. Saddam's chemic/biological agents were conceived to deter the alliance's attack in 1991, though he was deterred by the then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's threat of nuclear retaliation should Iraq's chemical or biological weapons be used first (technically, Cheney's threat has constituted a violation of an earlier U.S. commitment to conditional no-first-use of nuclear weapons issued in 1978). There is reason to believe that the leadership in Pyongyang would also conceive the utility of its nuclear weapons for deterrence solely.

These non-nuclear weapons states, at least per NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), would justify their acquisition of nuclear weapons, an act of nuclear proliferation, for national security reason, similar to the justification of the acknowledged nuclear weapons states.

Truly there is no better international institution to specifically control nuclear proliferation than NPT. But the NPT has stricken a balance between the nuclear haves and have-nots: all nuclear weapons state members of the NPT shall join to "undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament" (Article VI). The success of non-proliferation is clearly conditioned to nuclear disarmament.

Then, to promote the idea of WMD non-proliferation, virtually a discriminatory notion but realistically conducive to world stability, all nuclear weapons states, NPT acknowledged or *de jure* ones, shall make their own efforts of nuclear disarmament as

well as not to employ offensive military gesture in conducting foreign relations. The first will involve a visionary shift of nuclear weapons philosophy, while the second will demand a fundamental change of power politics in the contemporary world.

3. De-emphasizing the nuclear weapons

In this section, a program of nuclear threat reduction is proposed to enhance both nuclear non-proliferation and global security. The program shall have two key components: i) it applies to all nuclear weapons with a vision to go zero; ii) it de-emphasizes the role of nuclear weapons in national security and international politics, cutting the threatening nuclear gesture to promote non-proliferation.

First, to cut global nuclear arsenals, the major nuclear weapons states shall lead the movement by dismantling a significant part of their arsenals irreversibly, verifiably and firstly. Desirably the U.S. and Russia shall cut their respective nuclear arsenal to lower than 1,000 nuclear warheads, unilaterally or bilaterally, and verifiably and irreversibly, to lay the foundation of global multilateral nuclear disarmament.

Then, all other nuclear weapons states, NPT acknowledged or non-admitted, shall act either unilaterally or multilaterally, to offer a phased program of global reduction of nuclear arms, in parallel to the nuclear superpowers' deep reduction as aforementioned. At that stage, UK, France, China, as well Israel, India, Pakistan, and the DPRK, should its nuclear disarmament have not completed, shall join the U.S. and Russia, to negotiate a mutually agreed-upon arrangement of deeper global nuclear disarmament, to a global total to 1,000 or hundreds before reaching a revolutionary zero.

Realistically speaking, a nuclear-weapons-free world is rather visionary but still not impossible. Fundamentally, it is up to nuclear weapons states' calculation of security gain-and-cost. Only when the nuclear weapons states are convinced that their security will increase without nuclear weapons, a nuclear-free world is more likely. However, various factors – inertia of traditional security mentality, group interests of bureaucratic institutions, uncertainty of conventional deterrence, and, fear of breach of nuclear

weapons development in a nuclear-weapons-free world – all contribute to the unwillingness to rid nuclear weapons thoroughly. Therefore, a call for visionary leadership, the ability to shape consensus, the adequate role of the public participation, technical preparedness for security without nuclear weapons, ability to handle potential breaching of nuclear-free paradigm etc, are instrumental in attaining the vision.

Second, before such an ideal world could be reached, nuclear weapons states can do a lot more to push toward that direction. While working on a scheme of phased nuclear reduction, nuclear states need to align their nuclear doctrines as exclusively deterrence: the only mission of the weapons is to assure that they won't be first used. Though policy could shift pending upon circumstances, a global no-first-use pledge by all nuclear weapons capable states serves as negative security assurance inductive to nuclear non-proliferation.

More can be done to lower the nuclear threat due to the existence of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons shall not be ready on a hair-trigger alert status. The nuclear warheads and the launch vehicle shall be deployed separately, at least for a large portion of the nuclear arsenal, to both reduce the vulnerability of such weapons to a first attack and to lower the incentive to knock such targets out preemptively. In the meantime, while reducing the quantity of nuclear arsenals, further efforts to advance the quality of the weapons shall be barred. During the program toward nuclear-weapons-free world, only the efforts to assure the safety and security of nuclear arsenal can be accommodated, but not to allow R&D for new types of nuclear weapons, or to test current weapons, either through nuclear explosion or computer simulation.

The reduction of threatening nuclear doctrine shall extend to overall national security strategy. Just like the NPT has mandated, all NPT party shall “undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”. The DPRK's nuclear test is a response to the U.S. hostility, not only necessarily the nuclear hostility.

The DPRK's nuclear disablement and eventual disarmament is conditioned upon the reversal of such hostility, which the U.S. is attempting to present.

A nuclear-weapons-free world is visionary if not illusory. It is difficult but not impossible to attain. An instrument as NPT has been crucial to slow the pace of nuclear proliferation during the Cold War period. However, its discriminatory nature has made it to attain only limited success lately, especially it has suffered major setbacks in the past decade.

As proliferation *per se* is a response to threat perception, to render non-proliferation successful has to address national security without nuclear weaponry. Therefore, to cut the threatening posture, and to provide robust collective security guarantee to dispel insecure perception, and to dissolve the need to build national nuclear deterrence as a hedge, are fundamental to propel the cause of nuclear non-proliferation. The international community needs to work in concert, forging a credible collective international security institution in which inter-state relations are not hostile and needs for nuclear deterrence will diminish, and, the breach of a bar on nuclear weapons is unacceptable and guaranteed not to bring benefits to the violators.