



Photo: An Airman completes a missile assembly on an F-16 Fighting Falcon during a load crew competition at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., June 30, 2017. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Andrew D. Sarver

Kick Off To A Nuclear Race Threatening Doomsday

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By Sergio Duarte

The writer is President of the 1995 Nobel Peace Laureate [Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs](#) and a former Ambassador of Brazil who served in key posts. He was President of the 2005 Seventh Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs with [UNODA](#), the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2007-2012). – The Editor

NEW YORK (IDN) – As if by coincidence, almost simultaneously the world learned of [the Doomsday Clock](#) moving closer to midnight and of the release of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) by the government of the United States.

Although based on very different world views, both actions respond to security concerns: the former is a dramatic reminder of the imminent dangers posed by nuclear weapons and of the need for their elimination; the latter stresses the role of nuclear armament as capable of dealing with international tensions and of avoiding such

dangers through the expansion of the flexibility and diversity of existing nuclear capabilities.

The Doomsday Clock is a serious and timely warning demanding urgent national and international measures to control and finally ban nuclear weapons as the best guarantee against their actual use in conflict.

For many observers, the NPR would increase the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons and could serve as justification for other nuclear armed States to improve the destructive potential of their own arsenals as a way to counter what they might see as an aggressive posture, thus triggering a new round of the nuclear arms race.

The central argument of the Nuclear Posture Review is that nuclear weapons have and will continue to play a critical role in deterring nuclear and non-nuclear attack and are essential to prevent aggression now and for the foreseeable future. Complementary and interrelated roles of these weapons are listed as: assurance to allies and partners, achievement of national objectives in case of failure of deterrence and maintenance of the capacity to hedge against an uncertain future.

According to the NPR, the deterrent role of the American nuclear arsenals would be extended through the enhancement of the flexibility and range of nuclear options, including low yield weapons, which would prevent potential adversaries from seeking advantages in a limited nuclear escalation.

Critics of the new nuclear posture have warned that smaller, low-yield atomic devices would in fact blur the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons and lower the nuclear threshold. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the cycle of escalation would be limited once nuclear weapons of any size are introduced in the theater of war.

In addition, the NPR contemplates the use of nuclear weapons to respond to non-nuclear attacks on the United States and does not rule out first use. It is also possible to argue that some current non-nuclear nations might be tempted to acquire these weapons themselves if they become convinced that such a move would make them similarly able to achieve their national objectives and to prevent attack from possessors.

Since the advent of the United Nations, the international community has made painstaking progress in its effort to deal with the terrifying prospect of nuclear conflict. That was the objective of the very first General Assembly resolution in 1946, which unfortunately did not achieve concrete results.

During the following decades a few States developed nuclear capabilities while the wide majority accepted a number of legally binding commitments not to acquire atomic weapons and placed their trust instead in increased confidence building measures and cooperative security undertakings as a hedge against the inherent uncertainties and unpredictability of international relations.

In spite of mutual accusations of violations, bilateral measures negotiated between the United States and the Russian Federation resulted in significant reductions of the staggering amount of weapons of mass destruction amassed during the Cold War.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently congratulated both countries on the successful reduction of their strategic nuclear forces to the levels established by

the [New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty \(New START\)](#) and stressed that "efforts in nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control are more vital than ever".

[The Treaty was signed April 8, 2010 in Prague by Russia and the United States and entered into force on February 5, 2011. New START replaced the 1991 START I treaty, which expired December 2009, and superseded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which terminated when New START entered into force.]

The total nuclear warhead count in the United States and Russia now stands at the lowest levels ever. This is truly a commendable effort that should be taken forward to achieve the long-sought goal of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

Guterres went on to call on both States "to engage in the necessary dialogue that will lead to further arsenal reductions and to continue to display the historic leadership across the multilateral disarmament agenda." Strong leadership by the two most heavily armed nations on Earth is crucial to further disarmament efforts and to the collective security of the world as a whole.

Current instruments in the field of disarmament recognize the possession of nuclear weapons only until they are completely eliminated and call for action to achieve this objective. However, this basic premise has been increasingly misinterpreted by the pervading notion that those instruments somehow legitimize the exclusive and indefinite retention of such awesome means of destruction and condone the continued postponement of specific measures to abolish them.

In the absence of strong, legally binding commitments to nuclear disarmament with clear timelines, possessor States seem to feel entitled to keep their arsenals at least well into future decades at the same time that they deny any others the same means to ensure their own security.

There is no doubt that an increase in the number of nuclear weapon States would endanger international peace and security. The wide majority of the international community has repeatedly asserted, however, that the very existence of nuclear weapons is the real threat to peace and security, regardless of their possessors. Unequal standards cannot endure forever.

This became clear after the entry into force of the NPT, which limited the number of nuclear weapon States to the five that had acquired such weapons by an arbitrary date. Subsequently, four other countries managed to develop their own nuclear arsenals and a small number have been dissuaded by a variety of means from embarking on the same course.

In some others, sections of public opinion openly advocate the acquisition of independent nuclear forces in order to free themselves from the uncertainties of defensive arrangements. Indeed, the emphasis on nuclear deterrence provides encouragement for such sentiments. Most non-nuclear States, however, firmly believe that their security is better served by not acquiring nuclear weapons.

Over the decades since 1945 [the end of World War II] a number of multilateral agreements sought quite successfully to prevent the unbridled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical and bacteriological. Despite their importance, however, two of those treaties are not yet in force.

The 1996 Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) is one of them. Eight key States still hesitate either to sign and/or ratify it, a necessary condition for the entry into force of the instrument. Alone among those eight countries, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has carried out nuclear test explosions into the 21st century, in defiance of the UN Security Council and in spite of repeated and increased sanctions imposed by it. All others are observing voluntary moratoria on such tests.

According to the Nuclear Posture Review, the United States will not seek ratification of the CTBT but will continue to support its Preparatory Committee as well as the International Monitoring System and the International Data Center. Other outlying States are not as straightforward in the statement of their intentions. In any case, the leadership of the major nuclear powers is obviously needed to bring all recalcitrant countries into the fold.

The other important instrument not yet in force is [Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) leading to their complete elimination. It was adopted on July 17, 2017 by a large majority of States, but the pace of signatures and ratifications has been slower than expected, in part due to the active and fierce opposition of the possessors of nuclear weapons and their allies.

These countries have dismissed the treaty and attempt to portray it as a naïve and futile gesture that may even exacerbate tensions within the existing non-proliferation regime and ultimately undermine efforts to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons.

The supporters of the instrument, for their part, stress that it is not meant to contradict the NPT but rather to provide a path for the fulfilment of the commitment contained in its Article VI. Even if it does not reach the widest adherence possible, – as neither have several existing multilateral instruments in this field, including the NPT itself – the Prohibition Treaty remains a powerful expression of the support of a large number of members of the international community to concrete measures of nuclear disarmament.

Mainstream media in countries with the most powerful military forces, as well as in those that have predicated their security on weapons not under their own control continually publish stories and commentary about the need to counter external threats through the strengthening of their armed forces, but very rarely publicize peace initiatives. A culture of war seems to have taken precedence over a culture of peace. Nuclear-armed States are currently engaged in increasing and modernizing their arsenals, and insist that the current security conditions in the real world do not allow for nuclear disarmament, at least for the foreseeable future. Observers, for their part, point out that their very postures and deeds have the effect of increasing tensions and perpetuating the climate of mistrust and insecurity.

Nevertheless, the growing international awareness of the humanitarian, environmental and social consequences of any use of nuclear weapons may provide opportunities for progress on nuclear-risk-reduction measures in order to prevent disasters caused by nuclear detonations by design or accident.

Experts and prominent former high-level officials from nuclear armed States have revealed multiple near-misses that brought the world to the brink of full-scale nuclear war that were averted by single individuals in the chain of command who took on their own shoulders the responsibility not to press the fatal button.

Civil society organizations and a number of States have been trying to change the status quo by promoting actions aimed at reducing the danger of a nuclear confrontation that could have catastrophic consequences for humanity as a whole.

One opportunity is provided by the current review cycle of the NPT. Another is the forthcoming [United Nations High Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament](#), scheduled to take place in May in New York.

World leaders attending this conference are expected to take, or announce, a number of concrete actions, many of which suggested by those organizations, that would help facilitate further efforts toward nuclear disarmament, such as taking all nuclear weapons off launch-on-warning and high alert; adopting policies never to initiate nuclear war; agreeing not to develop new nuclear weapons systems; removing all forward-based nuclear weapons; commencing negotiations on the phased reduction and elimination of nuclear stockpiles; and reducing nuclear weapons budgets in order to release resources for climate protection and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

The president of Kazakhstan – a country that relinquished the nuclear weapons it once possessed – recently proposed at the UN Security Council the goal to achieve global elimination of nuclear weapons by 2045, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations.

On the same occasion UN Secretary-General Guterres warned that "global anxieties about nuclear weapons are the highest since the Cold War" and announced the intention to explore opportunities to generate a new direction and impetus for the global disarmament agenda. He is expected to launch a major initiative on disarmament encompassing several categories of weapons, including new technologies such as cyber warfare.

The translation of proposals made from several quarters into practical arrangements presupposes a considerable amount of political will. Enlightened world leaders know that the supreme interests of their countries involve also the interests of humankind as a whole. No nation, particularly those with large resources and wealth, can devote itself to the satisfaction of its national objectives without taking into account the legitimate needs and aspirations of humanity, of which their own populations are an indissoluble part.

The understanding of this simple, yet undeniable truth is essential for the success of efforts to achieve security for all through the complete elimination of the enormous risk posed by the existence of nuclear weapons. [IDN-InDepthNews – 11 February 2018]

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