The Impasse in Nuclear Disarmament

John P. Holdren, 5 August 2000

As we meet here in Cambridge, for the 50th Pugwash Conference, some ten years after the end of the Cold War, it's rather dismaying to have to talk about the impasse in nuclear arms control - an impasse that has been afflicting our core field of interest since about the middle of the 1990s. It's partly perhaps a result of the diversity of nuclear dangers that the world faces that it has proven possible for us to make some of them worse, even as we have been making some of them better.

There really is no doubt, of course, ten years after the end of the Cold War that the danger of an authorized deliberate massive use of US and Russian nuclear forces against each other, which was of course the nightmare that plagued everyone during the long 45 years of the Cold War, has now greatly diminished. That danger is certainly smaller.

But the dangers are many and diverse, and there is good reason to believe that some of them have not gotten smaller, and that others have even gotten bigger. For example, the dangers of unauthorized accidental or erroneous use of nuclear weapons, even between the USA and Russia, have probably actually gotten larger for a number of reasons that it is worthwhile reflecting upon. And certainly they are larger in relation to the supposed deterrent benefits of maintaining these very large nuclear forces. In addition, the dangers of regional nuclear war have unquestionably gone up; the dangers of proliferation appear to be going up; and even the dangers of nuclear arms competitions, the dynamic of offence/defense arms races for example, are still with us even though the rationale for such an arms race between East and West has long since disappeared.

The question becomes, how have we managed to do so badly? We were presented at the end of the Cold War with an extraordinary opportunity to diminish the nuclear danger irreversibly and comprehensively, and while we made some initial progress in that direction, which I will discuss, we have again found it possible to become blocked, to become paralyzed, to become stuck in an exceedingly unattractive situation. If you ask how we managed to do that, I would say, in short, that on the American side of the East/West relationship we have been plagued by deficits of generosity and imagination, focus, and foresight, and by surpluses of arrogance, inconsistency, and unilateralism. The Russian side, for its part, has been
crippled by economic distress, by a weakened and divided government, and, until recently, by a sick and politically impotent president.

Positive developments in the early 1990s

But let me go back and start with the early positive developments after the end of the Cold War in relation to nuclear arms control in order to work my way into where we went wrong in more detail and how we might get out of it. You are all familiar with this list. I'll run through it fairly quickly.

- The START I Agreement signed in July of 1991, which entered into force December 1994 and has since been implemented, reduced the deployed strategic nuclear forces on the US and Russian side. Deployed strategic warheads have been reduced from 11,000-13,000 on each side, which is what it stood at the end of the Cold War, to 7,000-8,000 warheads each.
- That was accompanied by a process of unilateral withdrawals undertaken and initiated both by President Bush and Secretary-General Gorbachev in 1991; unilateral withdrawals of thousands of tactical, that is non-strategic, nuclear warheads. At about the same time the US bombers and flying command posts were taken off of airborne alert and have remained off.
- The Lisbon Protocol, the great triumph of diplomacy in May of 1992, brought all four nuclear arms successor states to the Soviet Union under the umbrella of START I. Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine subsequently joined the non-proliferation treaty as non-nuclear-weapon states, a great step forward.
- Both sides, the USA and Russia, proceeded with voluntary dismantlement, not required by any formal agreement, of many of the warheads that they had withdrawn from deployment, at a rate of 1,500-2,000 nuclear warheads per year on each side.
- The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, better known as the Nunn-Lugar Initiative, starting in 1992 initiated an unprecedented cooperation between the two sides in dismantling delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons and also cooperation on protection of nuclear bomb material. The United States committed itself in 1993 to buy from Russia 500 tonnes of highly enriched uranium made excess by the end of the Cold War, and to use that uranium in blended down form as reactor fuel.
- The START II Agreement, signed in January of 1993, committed both sides to reduce their deployed strategic warheads by about another factor of two, to something in the range of 3,000-3,500 each, including the elimination of multiple independent re-entry vehicles on both sides.

All good news so far. But there then followed a period that I characterize as a combination of sins of commission and sins of omission in relation to nuclear arms control.
Sins of commission

I'll start with the sins of commission. The first of these, in my view, was the hasty expansion of NATO which perpetuated an adversarial stance of the West toward Russia that was aggravated not long thereafter by the non-defensive use of NATO forces outside NATO territory, which is something that NATO had pledged that it would not do. Russia then renounced its long-standing "no-first-use" pledge citing weak conventional forces and the need to rely on nuclear weapons to deter conventional attack. The highly enriched uranium deal was imperiled by the untimely privatization of the US Enrichment Corporation which allowed corporate profit motives to take priority over international security interests, and slow down, and ultimately entirely imperil, that transfer of highly enriched uranium.

India and Pakistan, as we all know, then in 1998 tested nuclear weapons, both of them raising the specter of regional nuclear war, fueling the argument by hawks everywhere that non-proliferation policies had failed and so we might as well forget about it.

Another sin of commission is that in the aftermath of what I call the 'Chinese nuclear espionage flap' in the USA, in the name of protecting nuclear secrets, the USA has cut back on the cooperation of US nuclear weapon scientists with their Russian and Chinese counterparts, cooperation on monitoring arms control agreements, improving the protection of nuclear materials, and so on. And meantime the USA appears to be careening toward unilateral renunciation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty - which of course imperils the foundation of nuclear arms control - in order to pursue an unworkable defense.

Sins of omission

Let me turn to the sins of omission. The Clinton administration Nuclear Posture Review at the beginning of the administration in 1993 and 1994 was initially intended by the late Secretary of Defense, Les Aspen, to be a so-called bottom-up review that would examine the fundamental premises about the uses of US nuclear weapons, the purposes of US nuclear weapons, in the aftermath of the Cold War, but it was greatly scaled back when Aspen left office, and failed utterly to address the fundamental questions of "no-first-use", the purposes of US nuclear weapons, in favor of minor adjustments in the US nuclear posture. And the USA then failed once more to consider the "no-first-use" question when a couple of years later both Germany and Canada suggested within NATO that NATO's "no-first-use" posture should be revisited.

Russia, of course, as we all know, failed for more than seven years until April of this year to ratify the START II Agreement. The USA and Russia failed in this period to reach a transparency agreement that would permit more far-reaching cooperation on weapons dismantlement and materials protection. The G7
meanwhile failed to agree, and has still failed to agree, on coming up with the funding for the disposition of excess Russian plutonium, which Russia cannot afford to pay for the disposition of on its own. The United States and Russia have both failed to remove all of their strategic nuclear forces from short reaction time alert, even though again there is no longer any political rationale for having those forces on short reaction time alert. Some 2,000 nuclear warheads on each side remain in this condition and are particularly vulnerable to accidental or erroneous launch.

The Clinton Administration of course failed to prepare adequately for the Senate vote on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that was ratified by Russia but which, as we all know, the US Senate failed to ratify, and I believe that blame is about equally shared between the Clinton Administration for failing adequately to prepare the ground and make the case, and the Senate for an entirely politically motivated and irresponsible vote. The five nuclear weapon states altogether failed to commit, both at the 1995 and at the year 2000 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, to any timetable for the elimination of nuclear weapons. They also have failed ever since the end of the Cold War, as well as before, to admit to permanent membership in the UN Security Council a single non-nuclear weapon state. They failed, in short, to seize the opportunity to devalue the currency of nuclear weapons in international relations. They had the chance to devalue that currency, but didn't do it.

The rest of the bad news

The entry into force of the START II Agreement, notwithstanding the Russian Duma now having ratified it, remains in doubt because of conditions attached to its entry into force that are unacceptable to the current US Senate; conditions on the succession of parties to the ABM Treaty, which a majority of the US Senate appears to want to scuttle; and conditions on the demarcation between permitted theatre missile defense activities and forbidden national missile defense activities under the ABM Treaty.

Reserve strategic nuclear warheads (as opposed to those already deployed on delivery vehicles), all tactical warheads and all stocks of bomb-usable nuclear materials, remain outside formal controls. There are no treaties governing any of those things and they would remain outside even if START II entered into force.

The US Joint Chiefs of Staff have recently refused to endorse START III levels below 2,000-2,500 deployed nuclear warheads, despite the expressed desire of Russian political and military leaders to go substantially lower to 1,000-1,500 nuclear weapons on each side. In the Conference on Disarmament a work program to ban fissile material production for weapons is blocked by the US refusal to accede to Chinese insistence on parallel negotiation to prevent an arms race in
outer space. That's being resisted by the USA in order to preserve options for using space for national missile defense.

**Underlying impediments to progress**

Let me talk for a moment about the underlying impediments to progress. What is behind this situation? I'm going to focus here on the USA, on the assumption that my colleagues on the panel from Russia and from the UK will give their own views on what's going on there, but for the United States I think a number of factors have been at work.

One is what in the trade is called 'realist theories' about international relations, which I would characterize here as: the proposition that powerful states can and should do as they please without regard for what other states may want; the proposition that nuclear weapons are effective instruments of power; the proposition that non-proliferation either can be achieved by assurances and intimidation and force, or else is unnecessary and doesn't have to be achieved at all, since small nuclear powers will just deter each other and superior US nuclear forces can deter everybody.

The second set of impediments I characterize as 'warmed over Cold War thinking'. Number one, the United States won so it can do whatever it wants. Two, Russia is so weak that she must threaten a nuclear response in order to deter conventional attack, which of course is exactly the proposition to which the USA clung throughout the Cold War. And finally, the proposition that a nuclear-weapon-free world is infeasible and undesirable.

The third set of underlying impediments have to do with lack of public pressure and political leadership. The public understands neither the nature of the danger, nor even the doctrines that apply to the use of nuclear weapons in today's world. Most of the US public does not know that the posture of the USA and NATO remains first nuclear use if necessary. They don't know how dangerous the current situation remains. On the political side, the current Democrats lack the nerve to challenge the old paradigm and the current Republicans lack the brains.

**Reasons to be optimistic**

There are however a variety of reasons to be optimistic anyway. In spite of all this bad news I was determined, especially after yesterday's Plenary, to make this an upbeat talk. Here's why I think we have reason to be optimistic anyway.

First, the public when it learns the truth becomes alarmed, and then outraged, and then energized. I know this because I've been giving lots of talks on this subject to the public. And when they find out in these talks what's going on they become alarmed, and outraged, and energized. Again the polls show that most Americans
don't now understand the situation. But they are going to understand the situation, and when they do things will have to change.

Secondly, the non-governmental organizations do know the truth already. The Union of Concerned Scientists, the Federation of American Scientists, the Arms Control Association, the Council for a Liveable World, and so on through the list, they know what's going on, and they are gearing up to tell the public, to channel the public's outrage, to harness the public's energy.

The third reason to be optimistic is that the private foundations, whose support for nuclear arms control analysis and activism waned in the latter part of the nineties, are now increasing their support again. They too have figured out what's going on and what is required, and they are going to fund the analysis and the NGO outreach that is going to change this landscape.

The media have already understood, in the USA, that national missile defense is a fraud, a waste, and a menace and they are battering it in cartoons and editorial pieces almost every day. To me that's a little bit like the plastic thermometer that pops up in the turkey when it's done. When the media are so overwhelmingly aware of what is wrong with the national missile defense proposition, it can only be a matter of time until the public becomes fully aware of it as well. And I would argue even further, that ridiculing US "first use" policy in which the nation with the most powerful conventional forces in the world insists that it must continue to rely on a nuclear threat to deter conventional or biological or chemical attack - ridiculing that, is going to prove to be quite easy also. Ridiculing refusal on the US side to match the Russians in deep cuts is going to be easy too. When the American public figures out that the Russians want to go much deeper than the Americans do, and the American authorities aren't willing, again things are going to change.

The military, even the military, is increasingly aware that nuclear weapons and national missile defense drain the limited resources of the armed forces, away from training, away from readiness, away from weapons that might actually be usable and might work. And as a result of that, the support in the military for NMD is thin and, in many cases, is grudging.

Next, the United States political landscape could change in November's election. If Gore wins, and if the Senate goes democratic, it could be a completely different landscape. Gore certainly has the brains to do the right thing, and he might have the courage. I urge the Americans in this room to help us try to find out.

There are more reasons to be optimistic. A nuclear-weapon-free world is not just a dream. It's a necessity. It's the ultimate pragmatism in my view. It's the one long-term goal that makes short-term arms control measures that lead toward it more than just temporizing. The analysis in support of this proposition becomes more persuasive every year.
Secondly, realities can change more quickly than most people expect. The Vietnam war ended when the efforts of the Peace Movement, the impact of insider defections from the Establishment consensus, and the public's first and second-hand familiarity with the war's consequences combined to make it's end inevitable. The combined weight of those factors became too much and the war was terminated. A different set of forces combined to end the Cold War more suddenly and more comprehensively than almost anybody thought possible. In a rapidly changing world, which we are certainly living in, the establishment consensus on the necessity of nuclear weapons could crumble quickly too.

Finally, optimism is the only alternative to despair. Despair is paralyzing; optimism is energizing. Pugwash was founded on optimism and on analysis. With your optimism, your analysis, and your energy, we are going to get out of the arms control impasse that afflicts us today, and we will get to a nuclear-weapon-free world. Thank you.