

Remarks of Ward Wilson*

at the Open Ended Working Group on Disarmament
14 May 2013, Geneva

Some advocates of nuclear weapons say it is a waste of time trying to achieve multilateral nuclear disarmament treaties. Nuclear weapons, after all, are what hold the international order in place. It is not possible, they say, to imagine a realistic world without nuclear weapons. Only altruists, dreamers, and credulous idealists believe that such a world is possible.

Mistakes

So let me begin by reminding you that the advocates of nuclear weapons were wildly wrong in their initial estimates of nuclear weapons' characteristics and capabilities. In 1945 advocates said nuclear weapons could do almost anything: deter nuclear attacks, prevent conventional invasion, assure victory in any war, confer great power status, and even assure success in diplomacy. Over the last seventy years we have watched these claims fall one by one. Today proponents of nuclear weapons admit that their initial estimate was flawed. It turns out nuclear weapons are not really useful for very much, except possibly deterring nuclear attack.

Advocates explain this order of magnitude mistake by quoting Thomas Schelling that there is a 30-year learning curve with nuclear weapons. But, don't worry, they say, now we understand their true value. Are they right? Is their judgment now accurate? Since the end of the Cold War scholars have been re-examining this question. And it turns out that despite their assurances advocates of nuclear weapons still have crucial facts and ideas wrong.

Bombing Hiroshima, for instance, did not force a stubborn Japan to surrender in just three days. Nuclear weapons are not miracle weapons. Japan's leaders surrendered, new research shows, because the Russians came into the war and fundamentally altered the strategic calculus. So the most important judgment by advocates of nuclear weapons--the only real test of the psychological impact of these weapons that so much of deterrence theory rests on--is wrong.

Advocates point to the crises during the Cold War and claim that the record of perfect success proves deterrence is safe and reliable. But a review of the facts shows that nuclear deterrence failed repeatedly in those crises. Leaders saw the danger of nuclear war but plunged ahead with risky and aggressive actions. Again and again we avoided nuclear war for the most part by luck. Far from being safe and reliable nuclear deterrence is very much like Russian roulette. Once again, the advocates for nuclear weapons are wrong.

Advocates have difficulty accepting these revised facts because they still cling to an outmoded Cold War mentality. Their faith in nuclear weapons is almost like a religion--a religion that increasingly people find difficult to share. So it is not surprising that serious people are talking seriously about banning nuclear weapons. Not because nuclear weapons are immoral, although they surely are. Not because nuclear weapons are dangerous, although that danger is certain beyond doubt. But because nuclear weapons are not just immoral and dangerous--they are immoral, dangerous, and clumsy weapons. They're bad weapons.

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Like a bull in china shop, they are so clumsy they create unacceptable humanitarian consequences even when they aren't intended to. In the real world, nuclear weapons have severe limitations. Advocates of nuclear weapons say that they are the realists. But this is not a debate between hard-headed realists on the one hand and idealistic dreamers on the other. That is an outmoded idea from a bygone era. This is a debate among serious pragmatists about how best to handle the undeniable dangers and very real drawbacks of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are messy. They leave a trail of poison downwind wherever you use them. Drop a nuclear weapon on your enemy's troops and the radiation can blow back on your own troops. Nuclear weapons are ridiculously large. If you want to destroy a building in a city you have to destroy three quarters of the city to do it.

It should not be surprising that nuclear weapons haven't been used for almost seventy years. The whole trend in warfare is away from big, blundering weapons. The trend is toward smaller, more intelligent, more precise weapons. This is what the future looks like. This is a four inch drone called the Black Hornet Nano. Equipped with a tiny camera, it hovers over the battlefield and peaks behind obstacles.

If nuclear weapons are awesome, powerful, magic weapons, then abolition is impossible and proliferation is inevitable. It is a waste of time talking about disarmament treaties. But if nuclear weapons are clumsy, blundering, expensive, seventy year old technological dinosaurs, then a world without nuclear weapons looks different.

Advocates of nuclear weapons were wrong in 1945, they were wrong during the Cold War, and they are wrong today.

This Open Ended Working Group on Disarmament and the work it has been charged with is not only important, it is entirely appropriate. It is no waste of time to seek progress on disarmament. It is essential. The time has come for serious discussions about the final resolution of the nuclear weapons question. And I believe this Working Group can begin that process.

So let us look to the future. Is a world without nuclear weapons realistic? Would such a world be stable? Safe? There are three typical objections to such a world. First, that a madman would break the treaty and use a handful of weapons to dominate the world. Second, that we cannot get rid of nuclear weapons until ongoing conflicts in certain hot spots are resolved. And finally that no small nation would be able to guarantee its survival without such weapons. Let me address each of these in turn.

Madman

There are two problems with the madman theory: size and time. Small nuclear arsenals are simply not enough. And domination takes time. Even though the thought of nuclear attacks against cities is appalling, the history of city bombing shows that nations can absorb extraordinary punishment. And bombing cities doesn't win wars. And the danger is that while you are wasting bombs on Chicago or St. Petersburg, B2 stealth bombers are searching out your remaining arsenal, or land forces are invading your territory. If nations are determined to resist, small arsenals aren't much use.

But would nations be determined to resist? George Perkovich and James Acton argued that you would need an iron-clad treaty that nations could not back out of in order to ensure resistance to a nuclear cheater. But the evidence of history shows that iron-clad treaties are not necessary. When conquerors have arisen in the past, ad hoc coalitions have naturally formed to oppose them. There was no existing alliance against Napoleon at the outset of the Napoleonic wars, but by the end almost all of Europe fought against him. No formal alliance united the Allies at the outbreak of WWII, yet by 1945 it was a

worldwide coalition. Even the ancient Greek states - notorious for fighting each other - united when they were faced with the invasion of the Persians in 480 BC.

So realistically, a small arsenal would not do. The difficulty is that most experts believe that with reasonably stringent inspections, a cheater would be able to build at most 100 nuclear weapons in secret before getting caught. Against a determined world a small arsenal of nuclear weapons is not sufficient. And there is no doubt the world would be determined to resist. The first thing everyone would conclude about a leader who breaks out of a treaty banning nuclear weapons is that he or she was “another Hitler.”

Which brings us to the problem of time. As soon as word of a cheater’s arsenal gets out a race would begin to rebuild nuclear arsenals in the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea and perhaps even countries that didn’t have the bomb before the treaty was signed like Brazil or Japan. And--depending on the terms of the treaty that banned nuclear weapons--those arsenals would be ready on average in about six months. In the case of the United States it could be as little as three months. Three months is not enough time to occupy and inspect all the places where nuclear weapons might be being made in the United States, much less in nine former nuclear states. Nuclear weapons are frightening but not really very useful. The madman scenario tells us more about what we’re afraid of than the real world of practical consequences.

Hot spots

It seems reasonable to assume that hot spots need to be resolved before moving forward with disarmament. But ask yourself: which perennial trouble spots had to be resolved before chemical weapons were banned by the Geneva Protocol in 1925? Were the “troubles” in Ireland resolved before the convention banning biological weapons was signed? Were all Middle East disputes settled before the passage of the Land Mine Ban? Did the conflict on the Korean peninsula have to be cooled down before the Cluster Munitions ban could take effect? Arguing that all the points of conflict must be resolved before banning nuclear weapons is to argue that nuclear weapons can never be banned.

Small nations

The question, “How can we guarantee the survival of small nations without nuclear weapons” presumes that there is a technology that can protect small nations. --A technology that can overcome the realities of size and power. There is no technology that can magically keep a small nation--or any nation--safe. That’s not the way the real world works. The real world is a world of risks and dangers. Small nations will survive in a world free of nuclear weapons in the same way that small nations have survived for millennia: they will make alliances with powerful nations, refrain from angering their neighbors, or carefully guard their neutrality.

Conclusion

Talking about a magic technology that could insure the safety of small nations or stop age old conflicts or keep us safe from madmen is like talking about some sort of genie in a bottle. There’s nothing realistic about that kind of talk. Even dreamy idealists know that there is no such thing as a genie in a bottle. A realist is someone who understands that nuclear weapons are enormously dangerous but that they are weapons with very few practical uses. A realist is someone who understands that when technology is very dangerous and not very useful, the best option is to ban it.

No doubt advocates for nuclear weapons will come before you and testify that nuclear weapons are essential. --That the world will not survive without them. And you should listen to those people. If only

because it is always interesting to hear quaint echoes out of a past that is gone now forever. Make no mistake: the day when people foolishly believed that nuclear weapons could do almost anything--that they were magic--is gone forever. The exaggerations of the Cold War mindset are nothing more than a dangerous anachronism.

We live in the 21st century. A century that is complex, interesting--even exciting. And it's a century that has challenges of its own. It is time--it is past time--to leave the problems of the 20th century behind us. It is time to step boldly into the future. My hope is that this Working Group is the beginning of that process.