Toward zero: The path to nuclear disarmament

by David Cortright in the June 28, 2011 issue

Fireball from the Tsar Bomba detonation in 1961.

Read the sidebar article, "A good START."

After the end of the cold war, a new global movement arose seeking nuclear disarmament. The movement was sparked in part by a remarkable initiative by four self-described former cold warriors—former secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former defense secretary William Perry and former U.S. senator Sam Nunn. In editorials published by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007 and 2008, these four called for abolishing nuclear weapons.

The statements by the "four horsemen of disarmament" emerged from an October 2006 conference at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Reykjavík summit meeting between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. It was at that 1986 meeting in Iceland that Reagan and Gorbachev agreed to the idea of eliminating all ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. Their verbal agreement foundered on differences over cuts in strategic missile defense, but the meeting nonetheless laid the groundwork for significant arms reduction and helped to end the cold war.

The initiative by Shultz and the other senior statesmen was followed by similar statements by other high-level former officials and leaders in Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and other countries.

For some of the leaders advocating disarmament, their stance represents a striking departure from previous beliefs. Perry, for example, spent much of his professional life in the Pentagon creating and maintaining the nuclear weapons that he now wishes to dismantle. At the end of the cold war, however, he realized that the vast remaining arsenals of the weapons were a security liability rather than an asset. He became increasingly concerned about the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation and the risk that terrorists might acquire or develop such weapons.

Although nuclear arsenals have declined, Perry emphasizes, the risk that nuclear weapons might be used is arguably greater now than it was during the cold war. Though there are fewer bombs in the world, they are in the hands of more people, and they are coveted by people who would not hesitate to use them to inflict maximum casualties and mayhem.

Perry told a National Academy of Sciences panel in 2004: "I have never been as worried as I am now that a nuclear bomb will be detonated in an American city. . . . I fear that we are racing towards an unprecedented catastrophe." The ultimate nightmare is the prospect of followers of Osama bin Laden and other terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons.

The deadly nexus of proliferation and terrorism is driving the renewed global concern for denuclearization and nuclear security. The 2006 Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, led by Hans Blix, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, described the possible terrorist use of nuclear weapons as an increasing threat that could occur "either within or across state borders." Senior U.S. intelligence officials have warned of al-Qaeda's intention to acquire and use such weapons.

In the late 1990s bin Laden declared it a "religious duty" to obtain such weapons for the supposed defense of Islam. In 2003 he obtained a fatwa from a prominent Saudi cleric justifying the use of a nuclear weapon against Americans. Police and intelligence officials around the world have interdicted several attempts by al-Qaeda to acquire nuclear or radiological weapons capabilities.

Compounding the fear of terrorists possessing nuclear bombs is the deepening concern about the status and fate of Pakistan's nuclear program. Islamabad's nuclear arsenal has grown rapidly over the past decade. Latest reports suggest that the country has assembled more than 100 nuclear weapons.

The Pakistani nuclear program is a proliferation nightmare. The founder of the program, A. Q. Khan, ran a global nuclear smuggling network until it was discovered in 2004. His proliferation supply chain operated in some 20 countries and transferred nuclear weapons technologies to Iran, Libya and North Korea and perhaps beyond.

The Pakistani program is also a terrorism nightmare. Former senior Pakistani nuclear scientists are known sympathizers of al-Qaeda. One of the country's chief nuclear reactor engineers, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, reportedly met with bin Laden in 2001 to discuss al-Qaeda's nuclear aspirations. As political turbulence and extremist influences spread within Pakistan, concerns grow about the government's ability to control its nuclear arsenal. Terrorism and proliferation dangers could worsen greatly if state authority and governance capacity erode further.

International nonproliferation concerns have focused mostly on North Korea and Iran. Since the early 1990s the regime in Pyongyang has produced enough plutonium for several nuclear weapons, conducted two nuclear tests, withdrawn from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and trafficked nuclear materials to Syria, Burma and other countries. Over the years Pyongyang has become known for bombastic rhetoric and military threats, but last year its bellicose words turned into provocative action with the sinking of a South Korean warship in March and the shelling of a South Korean island near Inchon in November. A definitive solution to the military and nuclear standoff is unlikely short of a fundamental change in the nature of the regime.

Diplomats have occasionally achieved temporary success in restraining North Korea's nuclear program—notably the Agreed Framework negotiated during the early years of the Clinton administration and the 2005 Statement of Principles signed during the Six-Party Talks—but Pyongyang has often reneged on its denuclearization commitments. The U.S. and South Korea have occasionally offered incentives to the North, but they have been unable to sustain conciliatory efforts in the face of the North's truculence and political skepticism in Seoul and Washington. The UN Security Council has imposed targeted sanctions that have slowed the

North's nuclear program and impeded its ability to earn revenues from weapons trafficking, but these measures are not capable by themselves of stopping the nuclear program. A diplomatic solution combining both sanctions and incentives will ultimately be necessary to resolve the crisis.

Iran also poses major problems of proliferation. If Iran were to get the bomb, Arab states in the region might follow suit, and Israel would be tempted to launch military strikes—which would be supported by some in Washington. The consequences of such events would be catastrophic for the region and the world. Resolving the Iranian dispute, on the other hand, could be of decisive importance to regional and global nonproliferation efforts—lowering military tensions in the region and giving the global nonproliferation regime a major boost.

Iran does not yet have nuclear weapons capability, so there is time to seek a diplomatic solution—although negotiating with the regime will be difficult given the unstable and divisive political situation within the country. The core ingredients of a future solution can be envisioned—assurances from Iran, rigorously verified, that its nuclear program is entirely peaceful; a willingness by the U.S. and the European Union to accommodate Iran's desire for uranium enrichment; and an end to the decades-long enmity between Iran and the U.S., leading to normalized diplomatic and commercial relations.

As in the case of North Korea, the UN Security Council has imposed targeted sanctions to restrain Iran's nuclear program. These and other international measures have slowed and complicated Iran's nuclear development, but they are not able to prevent Iran from building the bomb if the regime makes a decision to do so. As with North Korea a long-term solution will require patient and persistent diplomacy that combines incentives with sanctions. The diplomatic process also must include a commitment to lower military tensions between Iran and its neighbors and between the U.S. and Iran.

Success in stemming the dangers of nuclear proliferation and terrorism depends on progress toward achieving global disarmament. Shultz, Perry and other former officials argue that preventing the spread of nuclear weapons requires giving up all such weapons, including those of the major powers. The U.S. cannot convince others to forgo the nuclear option if it retains thousands of weapons itself. That is like preaching temperance from a bar stool.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the broader nonproliferation regime are based on a bargain according to which most states agree not to develop nuclear weapons in exchange for a commitment by the five recognized nuclear powers to negotiate for disarmament. At the international conferences held every five years to review the NPT, nonnuclear states regularly criticize the major powers for insufficient progress toward denuclearization. Many states bristle at the inequity and double standard of an arrangement whereby a few states keep the bomb while all others give it up. The resulting resentments make it more difficult to agree on urgently needed steps to prevent nuclear terrorism and stop the spread of weapons technology.

By their very existence, nuclear weapons foster proliferation. Their presence is an inducement to acquisition, since the possession of nuclear weapons by one state impels another to seek the same capability. This has been the historic dynamic among states and is especially evident today in the accelerating arms race between India and Pakistan. After India tested its first nuclear weapon in 1974, leaders in Pakistan vowed to "eat grass" if necessary to marshal the necessary resources to match India's nuclear capability.

Jonathan Schell has termed this dynamic the "proliferance" effect: when a country acquires or seeks nuclear weapons it prompts other states to seek countervailing capability. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a similar point in remarks at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington in October 2009: "The nuclear status quo is neither desirable nor sustainable. It gives other countries the motivation or the excuse to pursue their own nuclear options."

The fact that nuclear weapons states are permanent members of the UN Security Council sends the perverse message that these weapons are a source of prestige and the currency of great power status. India is seeking a permanent seat on the Security Council in part on the basis of its status as a nuclear weapons power. As long as the U.S. and the other major powers continue to possess these weapons, nuclear nonproliferation efforts will be hampered.

Addressing nuclear dangers and achieving further progress in denuclearization will require determined U.S. leadership. The most urgent task is building security cooperation with Russia and negotiating additional agreements to follow the positive example of the New START treaty (see sidebar). Discussions are underway with Moscow to reduce short-range tactical nuclear weapons and achieve cooperation on missile defenses. The two powers also must work together to ease regional tensions

on the Korean peninsula, in the Middle East and in South Asia. If the U.S. leads by example in building cooperation with Russia and reducing its own nuclear arsenal, it will be in a better position to address regional proliferation challenges and move the world closer to the declared goal of a future free of nuclear weapons.