

**62<sup>nd</sup> annual DPI/NGO Conference Afternoon Workshop: International Decade for Disarmament: How NGOs Can Advocate Human Security and Nuclear Disarmament**  
**Presentation: Nuclear Weapons and Security Discourses**  
**Ray Acheson, Reaching Critical Will, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**  
**Friday, 11 September 2009**

This presentation will focus on one small element of what NGO representatives can do to prepare for the decade on disarmament: specifically, creating a new discourse for disarmament and human security.

The relationship between nuclear weapons and human security is similar to that of the relationship between economic inequalities and social justice: If you have one, the other is very difficult to obtain.

Nuclear weapons are not normally part of the human security discourse. However, they make the practical development of human security very difficult. Nuclear weapons act as an existential threat to humanity and life on this planet. They also maintain the structural inequalities between the elite, technologically proficient classes and the rest of humanity, between those with power and money and those without either.

Nuclear weapons are part of a different security discourse, that of so-called “national security”. It is “so-called” because this discourse ensures the security—economic security, security of their position in society—of the elites who seek to maintain instruments of violent destruction for their own benefit, not of the nation itself. This national security paradigm is problematic, as it is not about national security but elite security.

The “national interest,” as it is typically invoked in this sense, does not refer to the well-being of the general population but of those managing the military-industrial-academic complex. Whether the complex is in the United States, India, or France, it is in its interest to keep money pumping into its nuclear weapon programmes. For the United States, as Andrew Lichterman of the Western States Legal Foundation points out, “The nuclear weapons establishment constitutes a formidable set of institutions. And they are part of a far broader constellation of powerful institutions and organizations, never far, if at all, out of power, that see their interests as being well served by a mode of US global military dominance ultimately underwritten by nuclear weapons.”<sup>ii</sup> This current, highly militarized order also benefits those who profit from all the other elements of an economically stratified world maintained in large part by force or threat of force.

Thus, nuclear weapons are not about real national security at all. In fact, they are about insecurity. They are about governments trying to assert their dominance by threatening the death and destruction of other states and their people, in turn bringing the threat of death and destruction of their own state and people upon themselves.

Insecurity is necessary to maintain the status quo—the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of the powerful. Through the propaganda of national security, the powerful maintain this status quo, because without it, the inequalities between the powerful and the subservient domestically and internationally would erode. The elite would lose their dominant position.

A dominant perspective on the function of the state is that it provides security for its citizens from threats from other states. A state's ability to do this is secured by its “war potential”. Anatol Rapoport, a famous game theorist, has noted that within this framework, the survival of the institution of war and the survival of the current nation-state are closely related.<sup>ii</sup>

It is this relationship between state and war, state and military, state and weapons, that undermines human security.

To advocate successfully for nuclear disarmament and human security, civil society needs to take apart these discourses. We need to get away from the language and politics of the elites and create our own discourse—a discourse that helps us understand the relationship between nuclear weapons and the structures that maintain them. We must take care to identify who benefits from the maintenance of nuclear weapons—what their interests are and what their role is in sustaining high-tech militarism.

We should look to other movements and initiatives for help. John Borrie, who works for the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, has looked at the initiatives to eliminate cluster munitions and landmines and has tried to think through how these lessons can be applied to the elimination of nuclear weapons. He notes that for starters, work on cluster munitions and landmines reframed the discourse and acceptability of these weapons in broader terms than before. Campaigners focused on the human impacts of the weapons alongside their purported military advantages and consciously shifted the burden of proof for the continued acceptability of a weapon onto users and producers.<sup>iii</sup> In our case, this means forcing those who want to keep nuclear weapons to try to make a convincing case for their acceptability in humanitarian terms, regardless of their purported military advantage.

Another key element is building legitimacy for the movement toward the abolition of nuclear weapons through the inclusion of a diverse range of actors. In order for nuclear disarmament to work for human security, disarmament folks have to work with development folks and social justice folks and they need a common discourse.

An example of this last point can be found in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. It's New York office hosts two projects, Reaching Critical Will and PeaceWomen. While Reaching Critical Will advocates for nuclear disarmament, PeaceWomen focuses on the implementation of government commitments to women, peace, and security. When my colleague Sam Cook, who runs the PeaceWomen project, talks about ending impunity for sexual violence against women in conflict, she talks about ending militarism, she talks about disarmament.<sup>iv</sup> For her work, sexual violence is a weapon. Ending impunity is only a step—an important strategic step—toward ending violence against women, toward ending human rights violations. This step, and all the others toward human security, can't be worked upon independently from those working to end war, to end militarism, to end the structures, assumptions, and modes of thinking that enable the continued existence of nuclear weapons.

Disarmament cannot be for the sake of disarmament, it must be for the promotion of true human security, security of humanity and the planet. Weapons, least of all nuclear weapons, do not offer security to anyone. We can no longer accept the established discourse and we must offer alternatives that recognize everyone's right to security and survival.

- i Andrew Lichterman, “Disarmament work amidst a global economic crisis,” address outside Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Hiroshima Day, 6 August 2009.
- ii Jozef Goldblat (ed.), *Nuclear Disarmament: Obstacles to Banishing the Bomb*, Tokyo: Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, 2000, p. 14.
- iii John Borrie et al, “Learn, adapt, succeed: Lessons from the Ottawa and Oslo processes for other disarmament and arms control challenges,” *Disarmament Forum*, one & two, 2009, Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2009.
- iv For example, see Sam Cook, “Security Council Resolution 1820: On Militarism, Flashlights, Raincoats, and Rooms With Doors—A Political Perspective on Where It Came From and What it Adds,” *Emory International Law Review*, Volume 23, Issue 1 (2009).