

Steps toward nuke-free world

Feb 16, 2010

In recent years there has been a growing chorus of calls for a world free from nuclear weapons. The Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference scheduled for this May will be a crucial test of the international community's ability to unite toward this goal.

Two keys to realizing a breakthrough will be creating institutional frameworks for pledges of nonuse of nuclear weapons and establishing clear norms for their prohibition.

We should work, based on the existing NPT system, to expand the frameworks defining a legal obligation not to use nuclear weapons, in this way laying the institutional foundations for reducing their role in national security, while establishing international norms for their eventual prohibition. This can challenge the thinking that justifies nuclear weapons — the willingness to eliminate others for the sake of one's own objectives — clearing the way for their abolition.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has stated that nuclear weapons are immoral and should not be accorded any military value. As this indicates, nuclear weapons are not only an absolute evil, entirely impermissible from a humanitarian perspective; they epitomize the military spending that continues to absorb vast amounts of the world's limited human and economic resources — resources that are needed to respond to the common challenges facing humankind, such as poverty and environmental destruction. Their continued existence represents a fundamental threat to humanity.

Today, the thought of the possession, much less the use, of chemical or biological weapons inspires widespread revulsion in the international community. We need to give concrete form to a similar recognition regarding nuclear weapons, which are undoubtedly the most inhumane of all.

As a concrete step toward this, I urge that the Statute of the International Criminal Court be amended to define the use or threat of use of nuclear

weapons as a war crime. The objective here is obviously not to punish the actual use of nuclear weapons but to establish a clear norm that such use is always and under any circumstance unacceptable. This could in turn open the way to the eventual adoption of a convention comprehensively banning nuclear weapons.

An indispensable aspect of this effort must be a redefinition of security policies. The nuclear-weapon states must develop a shared vision of a world without nuclear weapons and break free from the spell of deterrence — the illusory belief that security can somehow be realized through threats of mutual destruction and a balance of terror. A new kind of thinking is needed, one based on working together to reduce threats and creating ever-expanding circles of physical and psychological security until these embrace the entire world.

In this context I urge the nuclear- weapon states to undertake the following three commitments at this May's NPT Review Conference and to work to fully implement them by 2015:

1. To reach a legally binding agreement to extend negative security assurances — the undertaking not to use nuclear weapons against any of the nonnuclear-weapon states fulfilling their NPT obligations.
2. To initiate negotiation on a treaty codifying the promise not to use nuclear weapons against each other.
3. Where nuclear-weapon-free zones have yet to be established, as a bridging measure, to declare these as nuclear nonuse regions.

Declaring nuclear nonuse regions would encourage progress toward global denuclearization. It could be part of a comprehensive system to prevent the proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction and forestall the dire possibility of nuclear terrorism. The key aim would be to encourage shared efforts to reduce threats, which would in turn reduce motivations for countries to develop or acquire nuclear weapons.

If progress can be made toward these goals, it will make even more obvious the benefits of participating in existing frameworks, as opposed to the further deepening of isolation on the outside. Overlapping assurances of physical and psychological security can encompass not only countries relying on the nuclear

umbrellas of nuclear-weapon states, but also North Korea and Iran as well as countries such as India, Pakistan and Israel that are currently not part of the NPT framework.

None of this will be easy. But no matter how great the divide between our ideals and reality, there is no need to give up hope or accept this with resignation. Instead, the ordinary citizens of the world should come together to create a new reality. The prohibitions on land mines and cluster weapons that have been realized in recent years are the fruit of such solidarity.

To quote U.S. President John F. Kennedy: “There is no single, simple key to this peace — no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts.”

We must remember that there is always a way, a path to the peak of even the most towering and forbidding mountain. Even when a sheer rock face looms before us, we should refuse to be disheartened, and instead continue the patient search for a way forward.

What is most strongly required is the imagination that can appreciate the present crises as an opportunity to fundamentally transform the direction of history. Mustering the force of inner will and determination, we can convert challenges into the fuel for positive change.