

# **Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition**

**A Contribution of the Holy See**

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**Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other  
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Nuclear weapons are a global problem. They affect not just nuclear-armed states, but other non-nuclear signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, non-signatories, unacknowledged possessing states and allies under “the nuclear umbrella.” They also impact future generations and the planet that is our home. The reduction of the nuclear threat and disarmament requires a global ethic. Now more than ever the facts of technological and political interdependence cry out for an ethic of solidarity in which we work with one another for a less dangerous, morally responsible global future.

## **Breaches of Trust**

Our existing disarmament treaties are more than just legal obligations. They are also moral commitments based on trust between states and their representatives, and they are rooted in the trust that citizens place in their governments. Under the NPT, the duty of the nuclear powers and all other parties under what has been described as “a grand bargain” between nuclear and nonnuclear states is to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures to disarm. In the case of nuclear weapons, moreover, beyond the details of any agreement, there are moral stakes for the whole of humanity including future generations.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage discussion of the factors that underpin

the moral case for nuclear disarmament, and, in particular, to scrutinize the counter-argument for the belief that nuclear deterrence is a stable basis for peace. The strategic nuclear situation has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Rather than providing security, as the defenders of nuclear deterrence contend, reliance on a strategy of nuclear deterrence has created a less secure world. In a multi-polar world, the concept of nuclear deterrence works less as a stabilizing force and more as an incentive for countries to break out of the non-proliferation regime and develop nuclear arsenals of their own.

Contrary to the frequent assertions of nuclear strategists, the history of the nuclear age has shown that nuclear deterrence has failed to prevent unanticipated events that might have led to nuclear war between possessing states. These include: nuclear accidents, malfunctions, mishaps, false alarms and close calls. Even the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, previously characterized in popular literature as a success for diplomatic brinksmanship, involved events that all too easily could have launched a nuclear war independent of the intentions of national decision-makers.

### A Changed Strategic Environment

Today because of the changing strategic environment, the structure of nuclear deterrence is less stable and more worrisome than at the height of the Cold War. The contemporary global environment includes the dangerous proliferation of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states, as well as a growing risk of nuclear terrorism and nuclear weapons use. Possessing states believe preventing proliferation to some countries is necessary, while they have for years ignored the unacknowledged growth of nuclear arsenals in others. This double standard undermines the universality on which the NPT was constructed.

Under the weight of these developments, the architecture of nuclear deterrence has begun to crumble. The expansion and fears of expansion of the nuclear club bring new, unpredictable forces to bear on the bi-lateral strategic balance that has constituted nuclear deterrence. The superpowers no longer seem to share an acute risk of mutual nuclear war. Instead, the proximate threat of nuclear war mainly comes now from regional powers.

Furthermore, the merchandizing and export of nuclear material and expertise for civilian nuclear energy purposes has also increased the risk that terrorist groups will acquire nuclear weapons. In addition, instability threatens nuclear-armed states with the capture of nuclear weapons and related materials by insurgents with aspirations for global violence. The spread of global terrorism through weak and failed states, together with sustained insurgencies in nuclear-armed states, further complicates efforts for arms control and disarmament.

In addition, the process of disarmament by the major nuclear powers has slowed. The most recent arms reduction treaty between the superpowers (2010) fell far short of expectations; it left the world far from the goal of nuclear disarmament. Many more missiles remain on both sides than what even at the height of the Cold War was thought to be the minimum needed for stable deterrence. In

addition, certain nuclear weapon possessors have taken actions or articulated policies which continue to make nuclear war-fighting an option for the future even where there is no nuclear provocation.

While the superpowers now deploy fewer weapons on alert, their numbers are still worryingly large. In addition many more thousands are stored in readiness for deployment. There are big gaps in accounting for fissile material over many decades, and the pace of re-processing materials for peaceful purposes has slowed. Missiles and other vehicles for weapons transport have yet to be reduced. Controls on delivery systems are lacking.

For sixty years nuclear deterrence has been thought to provide only “a peace of a sort.” Nuclear deterrence is believed to have prevented nuclear war between the superpowers, but it has also deprived the world of genuine peace and kept it under sustained risk of nuclear catastrophe. Since the end of the Cold War more than twenty years ago the end of the nuclear stand-off has failed to provide a peace dividend that would help to improve the situation of the world’s poor. Indeed, enormous amounts of money are still being spent on ‘modernizing’ the nuclear arsenals of the very states that are ostensibly reducing their nuclear weapons numbers.

Finally, it must be admitted that the very possession of nuclear weapons, even for purposes of deterrence, is morally problematic. While a consensus continues to grow that any possible use of such weapons is radically inconsistent with the demands of human dignity, in the past the Church has nonetheless expressed a provisional acceptance of their possession for reasons of deterrence, under the condition that this be “a step on the way toward progressive disarmament.” This condition has not been fulfilled—far from it. In the absence of further progress toward complete disarmament, and without concrete steps toward a more secure and a more genuine peace, the nuclear weapon establishment has lost much of its legitimacy.

### The Problem of Intention

It is now time to question the distinction between possession and use which has long been a governing assumption of much ethical discourse on nuclear deterrence. Use of nuclear weapons is absolutely prohibited, but their possession is judged acceptable on condition that the weapons are held solely for deterrent purposes, that is, to dissuade adversaries from employing them.

The language of intention obscures the fact that nuclear armories, as instruments of military strategy, inherently bear active disposition for use. Nuclear weaponry does not simply lie dormant until the conditional intention is converted into an actual one at the moment when a nuclear attack is launched by one’s adversary. The machinery of nuclear deterrence does not work that way. It involves a whole set of acts that are pre-disposed to use: strategic designs, targeting plans, training drills, readiness checks, alerts, screening for conscientious objectors among operators, and so on.

The political and military officials of nuclear possessing states assume the responsibility to use these weapons if deterrence fails. But since what is intended is mass destruction—with extensive and lasting collateral damage, inhumane

suffering, and the risk of escalation—the system of nuclear deterrence can no longer be deemed a policy that stands firmly on moral ground.

### Toward a Non-nuclear Peace

The time has come for new thinking on how to challenge complacency surrounding the belief in nuclear deterrence. Changed circumstances bring new responsibilities for decision-makers. The apparent benefits that nuclear deterrence once provided have been compromised, and proliferation results in grave new dangers. The time has come to embrace the abolition of nuclear weapons as an essential foundation of collective security. Realists argue that nuclear deterrence as a security framework must be abandoned slowly and with calculation, if at all. But, is it realistic to allow the current unstable nuclear environment to persist with minor, incremental and essentially bilateral changes? Shall we continue to ignore the conditions that lead to nuclear instability, as systems of international control remain unable to restore stability? Is it realistic, moreover, to deny that the disparity between nuclear and nonnuclear states is one of the major factors resulting in destabilization of the Non-Proliferation Regime? Can we count on strategic ‘realism’ to build us a secure peace? We would be foolish to imagine so.

A genuine peace cannot grow out of an instrumental prudence that establishes a precarious ethics focused narrowly on the technical instruments of war. What is needed is a constructive ethic rooted in a deeper vision of peace, an ethic in which means and ends coincide more closely, where the positive components of peace inform and limit the use of force. World leaders must be reminded that the commitment to disarm embedded in the NPT and other international documents is more than a legal-political detail, it is a moral commitment on which the future of the world depends. *Pacta sunt servanda* (“Treaties must be observed”) is a first principle of the international system because it is the foundation on which trust can be built.

### **Solidarity and a Global Ethic of Abolition**

Responsibility for the abolition of nuclear weapons is an essential component of the global common good. Abolition is one of those tasks that exceed the capacity of any single nation or any set of nations to resolve on their own. Reduction and disarmament of nuclear arsenals requires a global ethic to guide global cooperation.

On this issue in particular, now more than ever, the logic of technological interdependence cries out for an ethic of solidarity in which we work with one another for a less dangerous, morally responsible global future. It diminishes our humanity when the development of harmful technologies so often controls the imaginations and moral judgments of the brightest among us. To dwell in a humane society, we must govern our technologies with conscious attention to our global responsibilities.

In search of the political will to eradicate nuclear weapons, and out of concern for the world our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will inherit, the

human family will have to become united in order to overcome powerful institutionalized interests that are invested in nuclear armaments. Only in solidarity will we recognize our common humanity, grow in awareness of the threats we face in common, and discover the paths beyond the impasse in which the world now finds itself.

The process of nuclear disarmament promised by the Non-Proliferation Treaty and repeatedly endorsed by religious and civic leaders is far from realization. At a time when political will among world leaders for the abolition of nuclear weapons is lacking, solidarity across nations could break through the blockages of diplomacy-as-usual to open a way to the elimination of these weapons of mass destruction. In the 1980s people round the world voiced their “No” to nuclear war-fighting. In this decade, the time has come for people of all nations to say, in solidarity, once and for all “a ‘No’ to nuclear weapons.”

Fifty years ago Pope John XXIII proposed that “nuclear weapons should be banned” and “all should come to agree on fitting program of disarmament.” Since that time the Holy See has repeatedly called for the abolition of nuclear weapons. At the General Assembly last September, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti endorsed the Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon’s “Five Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament” and called for a worldwide conference to draw up a convention on abolition. “The Holy See,” he explained, in another talk, “shares the thoughts and sentiments of most men and women of good will who aspire to the elimination of nuclear weapons.” Chief among these are the former American statesmen who have become advocates of abolition. Their conversion from proponents of nuclear deterrence to advocates of nuclear abolition is a sign of the times that solidarity in this cause is possible between secular and religious leaders as well as between possessing and non-possessing states. Now is the time to affirm not only the immorality of the use of nuclear weapons, but the immorality of their possession, thereby clearing the road to nuclear abolition.

### **Other Ethical Issues Pressing for Disarmament**

With solidarity as a basis for a global ethic of abolition, let us examine some of the particular factors that put in question the moral legitimacy of the architecture of the “peace of a sort” supposedly provided by deterrence between the major nuclear powers. We propose looking at four specific concerns: (1) the costs of the nuclear stalemate to the global common good, (2) the unstable security inherent in the current nuclear environment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, (3) the built-in injustice in the NPT regime, and (4) the price to the poor and vulnerable of current nuclear policies.

#### **Threats to the Global Common Good**

Last year’s international conference in Oslo highlighted the egregious-humanitarian consequences that inevitably result from any use of nuclear weapons. These consequences amount to basic offenses against humanity and the global common good. So, too, would such use bring about widespread harm to other life forms and even eco-systems. In addition, maintenance of the world’s nuclear weapons establishment results in misallocation of human talent,

institutional capacities and funding resources. Promotion of the global common good will require re-setting those allocations, re-ordering priorities toward peaceful human development.

Though it may be said, by way of a narrow casuistry, that possession of nuclear weapons is not per se evil, it does come very close to being so, because the only way such weapons work, even as a deterrent, is to threaten death to masses of human beings. And even should nuclear weapons be employed for narrowly restricted military goals, - so called “tactical” nuclear weapons - civilians would nonetheless be killed as “collateral damage”. Contaminants would be dispersed far into the future, resulting in harm to the environment for decades, even centuries, to come.

While most attention is giving to the mass-killing power of nuclear weapons, scientists and international lawyers are now giving attention to the “unnecessary suffering” inflicted by the use of nuclear weapons. It has been observed that survivors of a nuclear conflict will envy the dead. The infliction of unnecessary suffering has long been banned by military codes and international law. What is true in conventional war is all the more true of nuclear conflict.

To the immediate and long-term effects of radiation sickness must be added the suffering due to starvation, the disruption and contamination of water supplies, the spread of disease across a newly vulnerable population, and the inability of ecosystems to restore themselves to sustainable levels after nuclear detonations. The continuing radioactive disaster at the civilian nuclear energy plant at Chernobyl and Fukushima should be a stark reminder to us that technical fixes are non-trivial and certainly not feasible in the far worse situation of a nuclear weapon detonation in conflict. Not only human lives but the land and water and marine resources would be damaged for the foreseeable future.

### Illusions of Security

Proponents of nuclear weapons and opponents of abolition have often presented nuclear deterrence as a major pillar of international peace. Some historians, however, offer a different perspective. Despite the common assertion that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved lives and brought the Japanese to sue for peace, records of the deliberation of the Japanese government, revisionist historians argue, show that it was not the dropping of the atomic bombs but the entrance of Soviet Union into the war that led to the collapse of Japanese resistance and its surrender to the U.S. Even before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese Empire had already suffered more death and destruction in “conventional” fire-bombing of Japanese cities without surrendering than from the dropping of the two nuclear bombs.

Nuclear arsenals, moreover, have proved no obstacle to conventional war in the nuclear era. They did not intimidate smaller powers from going to war or fighting against nuclear adversaries in different regions at different times. Indeed, nuclear weapons have themselves been a casus belli in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Other examples of cyber or conventional attacks were conducted because of real or alleged nuclear weapons programs. In the lead up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, moreover, both sides had engaged in provocative acts that led them to the brink.

In 2003, false assessments of weapons of mass destruction development became a pretext for a war of choice against Iraq that unleashed a cascade of problems we too antiseptically call “instability” that continues to roll through that country and across the region.

The possession of nuclear weapons, moreover, seems to have posed little deterrent to attacks on nuclear powers from smaller, non-nuclear powers and non-state actors. It has not prevented conventional war between nuclear-armed states, and it has not dissuaded terrorists from attacking the nuclear powers. All the nuclear weapons states have endured terrorist attacks, often repeated ones.

Thus, the argument that nuclear deterrence preserves the peace is specious. The “peace of a sort” provided by nuclear deterrence is a misnomer and tends to cloud our collective vision. Prolongation of the current nuclear polyarchy has set the stage for wars and for ongoing tensions. It is an expensive system that can’t protect from prolonged low-level wars, inter-state wars or terrorist attacks. Accordingly, the misleading assumption that nuclear deterrence prevents war should no longer inspire reluctance to accepting international abolition of nuclear arsenals. If it ever was true, today it has become a dodge from meeting responsibilities to this generation and the next.

### Inequality among NPT Signatories

The non-proliferation regime is rooted in inequality. In the grand bargain at the treaty’s foundation the non-possessing powers granted a monopoly on nuclear weapons to the possessing powers in return for a “transformative” good faith pledge by the nuclear weapons states to reduce and disarm their existing nuclear arsenals. What was intended to be a temporary state of affairs appears to have become a permanent reality, establishing a class structure in the international system between possessing and non-possessing states.

While other factors also underlie national status, the inequality between non-nuclear and nuclear states matters enormously because it appears to establish a unique kind of security which makes a nuclear-armed country immune to external pressures and so more able to impose its will on the world. For that reason, the nuclear disparity becomes an incentive for non-nuclear-armed states to break out of the NPT agreement in pursuit of major power status. Thus, the asymmetry of the relationship between nuclear and non-nuclear states affects the stability, the durability and the effectiveness of the nonproliferation regime.

In the absence of effective practical disarmament, efforts to enforce nonproliferation give rise to suspicions that the NPT is an instrument of an irretrievably unequal world order. With the Cold War now a quarter century behind us, nonnuclear states increasingly perceive the regime as managing the system to serve the interests of those with nuclear weapons. Without solid progress toward disarmament as pledged under the NPT, questions continue to grow over the legitimacy of the system. Non-possession begins to appear inconsistent with the sovereign equality of nations and the inherent right of states to security and self-defense. Nuclear capability is still regarded in certain countries as a prerequisite of diplomatic influence and great power status, building incentives for proliferation and thus undermining global security.

Furthermore, at the same time as the nuclear powers enforce, with the assistance of the IAEA, strict non-proliferation measures on potential break-out states, there is no international monitoring and enforcement mechanism to implement the disarmament provisions of the NPT. There are no agreed-upon means to insure that the promise of transformation to a nuclear-arms-free world moves ahead. In the absence of a functioning Conference on Disarmament, those decisions are left to bi-lateral negotiation and unilateral policymaking, yielding slow and sometimes near-meaningless shifts in the nuclear balance. Under the 2010 NPT Action Plan, the nuclear-weapon States have committed to accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament, contained in the Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference, in a way that promotes international stability, peace and undiminished and increased security. So far, the only accountability has been via non-governmental organizations monitoring the implementation of the 2010 NPT Action Plan. However, the nuclear weapons States are required to report their disarmament undertakings to the NPT Review Conference Preparatory Committee in 2014, and the 2015 Review Conference will take stock and consider the next steps for the full implementation of article VI. Re-establishing the stability, legitimacy and universality of the NPT regime demands the establishment of norms and mechanisms for supervision of nuclear disarmament on the part of all nuclear weapons states. If there is little or no progress toward disarmament by the nuclear states, it is inevitable that the NPT will be regarded as an unjust perpetuation of the status quo. Only insofar as the nuclear-armed states move toward disarmament will the rest of the world regard the nonproliferation regime as just.

### Neglect of the Poor and the Vulnerable

For decades the cost of the nuclear polyarchy to the world's poor has been evident. Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council declared, "[T]he [nuclear] arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an incredible degree." Today, the production, maintenance and deployment of nuclear weapons continue to siphon off resources that otherwise might have been made available for the amelioration of poverty and socio-economic development for the poor. The prolongation of the nuclear establishment continues to perpetuate patterns of impoverishment both domestically and internationally.

In most societies, duties to the poor and vulnerable are primary moral obligations. In 2005 the international community in adopting the Responsibility to Protect agreed that it is the responsibility of government to protect its populations from basic deprivation, and it has allowed the international community to intervene when governments fail to do so. Humanitarian agencies and world religions likewise see support of the poor and promotion of development as essential to the global common good. But, after establishing the reduction of extreme poverty as one of the Millennium Goals in 2000, the United Nations' goal of the reduction of the numbers of people living in absolute poverty by one half by the year 2015 is far from realization. Contributions by developed nations to this important developmental contribution to peace have fallen short.

Further delay in meeting those goals could be satisfied by matching savings from cuts in spending for nuclear weapons to expenditures in support for poverty reduction.

The re-allocation of funding from arms to development is essential to social justice. For social justice consists in the justice of our institutional arrangements. The disparity of resources between situations dedicated to human development and those dedicated to nuclear armament is a fundamental injustice in the global political order. Re-allocation of resources from wasteful and dangerous weapons programs to the constructive and peaceful purposes of global human development would undo shameful imbalances in public funding and institutional capacities.

Peace does not consist in the mere “absence of war,” but rather in enjoyment of a full set of rights and goods that foster the complete development of the whole person in community. The Millennium Development goals provide a handy summary of the material goods a peaceful life would include: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, the empowerment of women, reduced childhood mortality, maternal health, combatting HIV/AIDs and other diseases, environmental sustainability, and a global partnership in development.

The philosopher William James sought a “moral equivalent of war,” a fulsome commitment of personal energies to a cause that would substitute for war as a great human undertaking. Writing at the time of the First Gulf War, Saint John Paul II called for “a concerted worldwide effort to promote development” as an endeavor of peace. He wrote, “[A]nother name for peace is development. Just as there is a responsibility for avoiding war,” he wrote, “so too there is a collective responsibility for promoting development.” Through their own work, he argued, the poor should be trusted to make their own contributions to economic prosperity. But to do so, they “need to be provided with realistic opportunities.” Re-allocation of resources from nuclear armaments to development programs is an eminently appropriate way to make those opportunities possible by further contributions to attaining the newly-updated Millennial Development Goals. In one move, there would be a double contribution to peace: reducing the danger of nuclear war and satisfaction of the collective responsibility for promoting development.

### **Reason, Rationality and Peace**

As U. S. president John F. Kennedy began his work toward a nuclear test ban, he asserted in a June 1963 speech at American University that peace through nuclear disarmament is “the necessary, rational end of rational men.” The rationality that gives rise to peace is not the technical reasoning of weapons scientists and arms-control specialists. It consists rather in the broad moral reasoning that arises from examined living and is sourced by our historic wisdom traditions. At its best, it posits a morality of ends as the basic architecture of politics. Technical reason—the morality of means—should be its servant, not its governor. It is moral reason that tells us nuclear abolition is possible. It is moral reason that tells us how to utilize technocratic reason in the work of

disarmament. It is moral reason that recognizes deterrence as an obstacle to peace, and leads us to seek alternative paths to a peaceful world.

Moral reasoning is not a simple rational calculation. It is reasoning informed by virtue, that is, "right reason"; it is reason shaped by the examined experience of moral lives, what the ancients called "wisdom." Autonomous technical reason, unguided by a deeper moral vision and tempered by the virtues of the good human life, can result in catastrophe, as the misuse of the Just War Tradition in support of unjust wars over the centuries demonstrates. Moral reason is a beacon to a fully human life. It is only reason, in this larger sense, the logic of ends, which can lead us to a nuclear-free world.

In short, to achieve nuclear abolition, we need to resist succumbing to the limits set by political realism. While recognizing how these concepts can provide a prudent curb on unwarranted exuberance, we must ultimately reject them as the defining outlook for our common political future. The fear that drives the reluctance to disarm must be replaced by a spirit of solidarity that binds humanity to achieve the global common good of which peace is the fullest expression.