

# Nuclear Weapons present a real and present Danger to Humanity and Life on Earth

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Nuclear weapons present humankind with an immense challenge, one far greater than most people understand. Many people realize, of course, that nuclear weapons are dangerous and deadly, and that in the past they were used to destroy the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with a single weapon demolishing each city. But few people have grappled with the proposition that these weapons are omnicidal; they go beyond suicide and genocide to omnicide, the death of all.

In a cataclysmic strike, resulting in the destruction of present life forms on the planet, these weapons would also obliterate the past and future, destroying both human memory and possibility. They would obliterate every sacred part of being, leaving vast ruin and emptiness where once life, love, friendship, decency, hope and beauty had existed.

Despite the omnicidal capacity of nuclear weapons, leaders of a small number of countries continue to maintain and develop nuclear arsenals and rely upon these weapons for national security. They justify this reliance on the basis of nuclear deterrence, arguing that the weapons prevent war by the threat of retaliation with overwhelming destructive force. This argument has many flaws, the most important being that deterrence is only a theory and is subject to human fallibility.

Deterrence theory posits rational decision makers, but it is highly unlikely that all political leaders will act rationally at all times, particularly under conditions of high stress. Deterrence is also widely understood to be ineffective against non-state actors, such as extremist groups, which cannot be located and whose members are suicidal. In other words, deterrence may fail, and such failure would be catastrophic.

Unfortunately, leaders of the major nuclear weapon states are continuing to drag their feet on nuclear disarmament, sometimes rhetorically expressing the vision of a nuclear weapon-free world, but resisting serious actions toward the abolition of their arsenals that would provide assurance of their commitment. For example, in his much heralded Prague speech in April 2009, President Obama said, "I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he quickly followed this visionary statement with a lowering of expectations. "I'm not naïve," he said. "This goal will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence."

President Obama is a relatively young man, who is likely to have a long life. He is to be commended for his vision of a nuclear weapons-free world, but his lack of urgency in

seeking the elimination of nuclear weapons opens the door to the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and their potential use. There are still some 23,000 nuclear weapons in the world, far more than are needed to end civilization, the human species and other forms of complex life on the planet.

The next major international event at which the subject of nuclear weapons will be before the international community is the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, which will take place in May 2010. This treaty calls for both nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. In their deliberations, the states parties to the treaty should bear in mind the following points in seeking a comprehensive solution to the omnicidal threat of nuclear weapons:

- Nuclear weapons continue to present a real and present danger to humanity and other life on Earth.
- Basing the security of one's country on the threat to kill tens of millions of innocent people, perhaps billions, and risking the destruction of civilization, has no moral justification and deserves the strongest condemnation.
- It will not be possible to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons without fulfilling existing legal obligations for total nuclear disarmament.
- Preventing nuclear proliferation and achieving nuclear disarmament will both be made far more difficult, if not impossible, by expanding nuclear energy facilities throughout the world.
- Putting the world on track for eliminating the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons will require new ways of thinking about this overarching danger to present and future generations.

The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation supports the following five priority actions for agreement at the 2010 NPT Review Conference:

1. Each signatory nuclear weapon state should provide an accurate public accounting of its nuclear arsenal, conduct a public environmental and human assessment of its potential use, and devise and make public a roadmap for going to zero nuclear weapons.
2. All signatory nuclear weapon states should reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies by taking all nuclear forces off high-alert status, pledging No First Use of nuclear weapons against other nuclear weapon states and No Use against non-nuclear weapon states.
3. All enriched uranium and reprocessed plutonium – military and civilian – and their production facilities (including all uranium enrichment and plutonium separation technology) should be placed under strict and effective international safeguards.
4. All signatory states should review Article IV of the NPT, promoting the “inalienable right” to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, in light of the nuclear proliferation problems posed by nuclear electricity generation.
5. All signatory states should comply with Article VI of the NPT, reinforced and clarified by the 1996 World Court Advisory Opinion, by commencing negotiations in good faith on a Nuclear Weapons Convention for the phased, verifiable, irreversible and transparent elimination of nuclear weapons, and complete these negotiations by the year 2015.

The most important action by the 2010 NPT Review Conference would be an agreement to commence good faith negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Such an agreement would demonstrate the needed political will among the world's countries to move forward toward a world without nuclear weapons. If the United States fails to lead in convening these negotiations, I would urge Japan to do so. Regardless of which countries provide the leadership, however, I would propose that the opening session of these negotiations be held in Hiroshima, the first city to have suffered nuclear devastation, and the final session of these negotiations be held in Nagasaki, the second and, hopefully, last city to have suffered atomic devastation.

If agreement could be reached to begin these negotiations for a new treaty, a Nuclear Weapons Convention, we would be on a serious path toward a nuclear weapon-free world, one that would allow the hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to know that their pleas have been heard.

If climate change is an "inconvenient truth," as Al Gore argues, then the potentially omnicidal consequences of nuclear weapons are an even more critical inconvenient truth. Perhaps the greatest contemporary challenge confronting humanity in the 21st century is urgently ending the nuclear weapons era. To move from omnicide to abolition will require a major outpouring of support from people everywhere. The task cannot be left to political leaders alone. Without a strong foundation of public support, political leaders are unlikely to be courageous and persistent in seeking to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. Ordinary citizens must overcome their disempowerment and propensity to defer to experts in order to act for the benefit of all humankind and demand the change they seek, in this case the abolition of nuclear weapons.

*David Krieger is President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and a Councilor on the World Future Council.*

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