



# Nuclear Risks: Reduction or Elimination?

**July 2021 TGCI Blog Post by: Sergio Duarte**

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NEW YORK (IDN) — “We escaped the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust by some combination of skill, luck and divine intervention—probably the latter in greatest proportion.”

— Gen. Lee Butler, former commander of U.S. nuclear forces.

On June 16 Presidents Joseph Biden and Vladimir Putin jointly reaffirmed the principle that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and announced the intention of Russia and the United States to start soon an integrated strategic dialogue aimed at launching the basis for “future arms control and risk reduction measures”. Although the declaration does not indicate the objective of completely eliminating nuclear weapons, it does reflect the concern, shared by the rest of humanity, with the existential threat of nuclear weapons.

A few days before that meeting, a study was published by the American non-governmental organization “Nuclear Threat Initiative” with timely proposals that deserve further consideration and encouragement, for the reduction of nuclear risks. One of the suggestions is that the five countries recognized by the NPT as possessors of nuclear weapons should also reaffirm the principle revived by Biden and Putin. Their declaration should now help convince the other three to join in a pronouncement to that effect, perhaps under the aegis of the UN Security Council.

The NTI document also points out that fortunately the majority Americans no longer remain awake at night fearing a nuclear war, yet recognizes the “disquieting reality” that nuclear risks have been increasing in the past few years and that the threat of use of nuclear weapons is greater today than at any time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. That concern is shared by the rest of the world, which has a clear notion of the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear conflagration and in fact cannot sleep peacefully as long as nuclear weapons exist. All nations must strive to reduce and finally prevent such a confrontation that can lead to the extinction of human life and civilization on our planet. This responsibility rests particularly on the shoulders of the states that possess such arms (from now on referred to as NWS and the non-possessors as NNWS).

The nine NWS are currently engaged in a race for new war-fighting technologies. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) recently disclosed that those nine states spent 72.6 billion dollars for nuclear weapons in 2010, that is, 1.4 billion more than in the previous years. This total encompasses the expenditures of the different ministries and governmental agencies for the production, maintenance and management of nuclear weapons and the contracts with private companies that manufacture them, which add up to US\$27.7 billion. Still according to ICAN, many of those companies spent between 5 and 6 million US dollars in contributions to research institutions on questions related to nuclear arms and policies in different countries.

The NTI paper leaves no doubt about the current state of uncertainty and insecurity in the world by stating that the “cataclysmic threat” of the use of nuclear weapons is of maximum priority in view of the growing tensions among the countries that possess such weapons. To this worrying factor it adds the erosion of the structure of arms control agreements during the last few decades and the development of new technologies for weapons purposes.

To confront these challenges, NTI rightly believes in the leadership of the United States and in a renewal of the commitment with diplomacy and engagement with other countries—that is, the abandonment of negativist and isolationist attitudes. NTI proposes changes in the policies and postures of the United States aimed at the reduction of the role of nuclear armament: greater cooperation with Russia on strategic issues, deepening of the dialogue with China on nuclear questions and a new commitment with the search for multilateral solutions for the strengthening of the global non-proliferation regime and the reduction of nuclear risks. If adopted, those proposals would require a 180-degree shift in the mindset and postures that have prevailed in the relationship among the main powers during the last decades.

The NWS, however, do not seem willing to part with their nuclear arms. Indeed, the NTI paper states that “In today’s world, it is understood that the United States will continue to possess and deploy nuclear weapons for its security and that of allies and partners for as long as it is necessary”. The attitudes and statements of the other eight possessors make clear that their intentions are similar. It must be observed that the remainder of the international community does not share that understanding.

The main measures suggested by NTI for immediate adoption by the American government can be summarized as follows:

1. Strengthening of the command and control systems and of warning against cyberattacks, as well as identification of steps to increase the time available to leaders in times of crisis to reduce the risks of assessment errors that could lead to a nuclear conflict by mistake or incompetence. Other NWS could be encouraged to adopt similar measures;
2. Adoption of a new declaratory policy that limits the scenarios in which the U.S. could consider the use of nuclear weapons, including a declaration that the “sole purpose” of those weapons is to deter nuclear attacks against the U.S. and its allies and partners;
3. In the short run, the U.S. and Russia could adopt reciprocal commitments toward “modest” reductions of their warheads below the limits of the New START treaty and to immediately initiate negotiations for more ambitious reductions;
4. Re-establishment of a verifiable prohibition of intermediate range missiles west of the Urals;
5. Promotion of attitudes that favor the stability of strategic and non-strategic forces in Europe;
6. Widening of the bilateral dialogue with Russia, to include anti-missile defenses;
7. Within the bilateral process described above, search for greater engagement with China on strategic issues;
8. Even if formal trilateral agreements do not look probable in the short run, develop of a constant dialogue with China on strategic issues with the objective of reducing the risk of use of nuclear weapons, containing a potential armaments race and providing greater transparency and strengthening of confidence.
9. In the context of the NPT, to intensify efforts toward non-proliferation and disarmament and work with the other NWS to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, increase transparency about arsenals, reaffirm the moratorium on nuclear tests and declare a moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons and other explosive devices.

All the suggestions and intentions set above would obviously be useful to reduce —although not to prevent—the risk of use of nuclear weapons, since they presuppose the indefinite permanence of the arsenals and admit their possible qualitative improvement and quantitative increase. Therefore, they would not lead to the complete elimination of the existential threat represented by such weapons. Concrete results in nuclear disarmament require complementary measures, such as:

1. Active dedication to compliance with the obligation of nuclear disarmament contained in Article VI of the NPT, including in the so-called "P-5 process", within which the five NWS recognized by that Treaty have been holding a regular dialogue, and communication of the respective results;
2. Ratification of the Comprehensive Test-ban Treaty (CTBT) by the states mentioned in its Annex II that have not yet done so, given that the existing moratoria on such tests are based on unilateral declarations by the majority of the NWS and for that reason can be changed or revoked at any time. An alternative constructive step would be to transform such moratoria into a joint, legally binding commitment;
3. Resumption of bilateral negotiations between the United States and Russia for further reductions of existing arsenals, as announced by the two presidents, with a view to eliminating them. The inclusion of China and later of other NWS in this process would be highly desirable. Reductions should not be seen as an end in themselves, but rather as a path to the elimination of the nuclear weapons of all NWS.

NTI calls attention to the need to establish an institutional structure for a regular dialogue between the United States and China to promote greater transparency and mutual confidence, in order to ensure strategic stability and avoid misunderstandings and suspicions about the intention of both parties. A similar step could be taken by Washington and Moscow and by New Delhi and Islamabad. It is interesting to remark that none of the nine NWS have governmental institutions devoted to nuclear disarmament, but only to arms control and the promotion of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The very expression "nuclear disarmament" appears only sporadically in their statements and even as a distant objective to be attained in an undefined future and subject to several conditionalities.

The NTI study promotes the "intensification of efforts" toward disarmament but does not indicate ways to reach that objective. It only mentions the negotiation of a future treaty to prohibit the production of fissile material for weapons purposes (FMCT). Some members of the Conference on Disarmament have pointed out that the production of such materials is already prohibited to the NNWS under the NPT. For them, an FMCT as proposed would be redundant from the point of view of proliferation. Furthermore, if the future treaty does not contain the obligation to destroy existing stocks it would also be innocuous from the point of view of disarmament.

One of the most sensitive aspects in the postures of the nuclear armed countries is the role of anti-missile systems in the prevention of attacks. China and Russia have expressed preoccupation over the development of American defensive capabilities, which they consider as a destabilizing factor, inasmuch as such capabilities would require modernization of their own forces in order to penetrate the adversary's defense.

Another reason for China's worries is the announcement contained in the 2018 American Nuclear Posture Review of the development of a new nuclear warhead for the ballistic missile to be

launched by submarine (SLBM) and of studies for a new cruise missile also for submarine launching (SLCM). Beijing justifies the expansion of its nuclear forces on the basis of concern that such systems become part of American naval forces in the Asia Pacific region. For its part, Washington ascribes little credibility to the reiterated Chinese assertions of non-first use of nuclear weapons and worries at the continuing increase China's nuclear arsenal.

NTI's suggestions to reduce the risk of use of nuclear weapons are certainly constructive and aim at increasing security in the world. It must be reiterated, however, that the mere reductions imply the continued existence of such weapons, albeit at a lower level, and not their elimination. Despite having stated their agreement with the need to reduce the risk, the nine NWS do not seem willing to consider constructive proposals to achieve disarmament. Much to the contrary, they remain engaged in a race for new offensive technologies that increase the threat of a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons.

The recent entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapon (TPNW) offers an opportunity of constructive cooperation between NWS and NNWS. For this it would be necessary for the NWS to abandon their current hostility to the Treaty, a posture that seems inconsistent with their stated intention to seek a world free of nuclear weapons.

The well-known saying that "the best is the enemy of the good" need not apply to the relationship between disarmament and risk reduction. It is certainly important to reduce the threat of use, but it is more urgent and necessary to completely and absolutely abolish the existential danger inherent to the existence of nuclear weapons by means of legally binding, irreversible, time-defined and verifiable measures of disarmament. A smaller risk will not produce a more secure world, but just a less insecure one. [IDN-InDepthNews — 23 June 2021]

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