

# Nuclear Weapons Elimination: A Process

*Thomas Graham Jr.*

PAUL NITZE WAS the archetypical Cold Warrior and nuclear weapon strategist. As the author of National Security Council Report 68, commissioned by President Harry Truman in 1950, he helped set the ground rules for the Cold War and the thermonuclear confrontation. However, nearly fifty years later, in the last op-ed that he wrote at the age of 92 in 1999 entitled “A Danger Mostly to Ourselves,” he said:

I know that the simplest and most direct answer to the problem of nuclear weapons has always been their complete elimination.

Senator Sam Nunn, in an article in the *Financial Times* in December 2004, pointed to the immense danger that exists as a result of the fact that fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, the United States and Russia still maintain, on fifteen minutes alert, long-range strategic missiles equipped with immensely powerful nuclear warheads capable of devastating each other’s societies in thirty minutes. In 1995, Russia mistook the launch of a test rocket in Norway for a submarine-launched nuclear missile aimed at Moscow and came within two minutes of ordering a retaliatory nuclear strike on the

Ambassador Thomas Graham Jr. participated in a senior capacity in every major arms control/nonproliferation negotiation involving the U.S. from 1970 to 1997. Currently he is Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Cypress Fund for Peace and Security and an adjunct professor at the University of Washington, Seattle.

United States. Senator Nunn said in his article that our current nuclear weapon policy, which in effect relies on the deteriorating Russian early warning system's continuing to make correct judgments as it did during the Cold War, "risks an Armageddon of our own making."

And former Defense Secretary William Perry, a scientist not given to exaggeration, said not long ago that in his judgment there could be a greater than 50 percent chance of a nuclear detonation on U.S. soil in the next decade.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the centerpiece of world security. President John F. Kennedy truly feared that nuclear weapons might well sweep all over the world. In 1962, there were reports that by the late 1970s there could be twenty-five to thirty nuclear weapon states in the world, with nuclear weapons integrated into their arsenals. If that had happened, there would be many more such states today than there actually are—in September 2004, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed El Baradei, estimated that more than forty countries had the capability to build nuclear weapons. Under such conditions, every conflict would carry with it the risk of going nuclear, and it would be impossible to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of international terrorist organizations, they would be so widespread.

But such weapon proliferation did not happen, and the principal reason that it did not was the negotiation of the NPT and its entry into force in 1970, buttressed by the policies of extended nuclear deterrence—the nuclear umbrella—followed by the United States and the Soviet Union with their Cold War Treaty Allies. Indeed since 1970 until now, there has been very little nuclear weapon proliferation. In addition to the five nuclear weapon states recognized by the NPT (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China), three states (India, Paki-

stan, and Israel, and perhaps North Korea) have built nuclear weapon arsenals (but India and Israel were already well along in 1970). This is far from what President Kennedy feared.

But the success of the NPT was no accident. It was rooted in a carefully crafted central bargain. In exchange for a commitment from the nonnuclear weapon states (today more than 180 nations, most of the world) not to acquire nuclear weapons and to submit to international safeguards to verify compliance with this commitment, the NPT nuclear weapon states pledged unfettered access to peaceful nuclear technologies and undertook to engage in nuclear disarmament negotiations aimed at the ultimate elimination of their nuclear arsenals. It is this basic bargain that for the last three decades has formed the central underpinnings of the international nonproliferation regime.

However, one of the principal problems with all this has been that the nuclear weapon states have never really delivered on the disarmament part of this bargain, and the United States in recent years appears to have largely abandoned it.

And now the other side of the bargain has begun to fall apart. India and Pakistan eroded the NPT from the outside by each conducting a series of nuclear weapon tests in 1998 and declaring themselves to be nuclear weapon states. India, Pakistan, and Israel maintain sizable unregulated nuclear weapon arsenals outside the NPT. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and may have built as many as eight or nine nuclear weapons. Whereas the new agreement with North Korea is promising, elimination of this possible arsenal is far in the future. The secret and illegal A. Q. Khan nuclear weapon technology transferring ring based in Pakistan has been exposed, but who can be sure that this is but the tip of the iceberg? Iran is suspected of having a nuclear weapon program and admitted in late 2003 that contrary to its IAEA safeguards agreement,

it failed to report its acquisition of uranium enrichment technology. The Iranian case appears to be growing more serious and has become a major international issue. However, the threat is long-term, not immediate. Military action against Iran is not the answer; rather it is patient, careful diplomacy. To quote a comment by Zbigniew Brzezinski: "I think of war with Iran as the ending of America's present role in the world." Hopefully, the resumption of the negotiations between the European Union and Iran, with the United States participating, will lead to a solution.

And why might Iran want the nuclear fuel cycle and the attendant option to construct nuclear weapons? The nuclear program is very popular in Iran. It appears that some countries believe that ultimately the only way that they can gain respect in this world, as President Lula of Brazil declared during his first election campaign, is to acquire nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons distinguished "great powers" from others countries. The permanent members of the Security Council are the five recognized nuclear weapon states. Forty years ago, Great Britain and France both asserted that status was the real reason they were building nuclear weapons. India declared in 1998 that it was now a big country, it had nuclear weapons. This high political value of nuclear weapons has not changed since the Cold War.

In view of all this, it is of paramount importance to attempt to revive the NPT as a treaty system based on law and to restore its credibility. A first and probably essential step would be to bring into force the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Other urgent and far-reaching steps would be required. However, we must recognize that it may now simply be too late to attempt to change the course of nations and return to policies that will strengthen and support the NPT and the international nonproliferation regime. The NPT does not

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have the support today that it had in the past. In the context of a breakdown of world order and the war on terror, with the potential failure of the NPT and the ensuing likelihood of the widespread nuclear proliferation that President Kennedy so rightly feared many years ago and with nuclear tension a growing threat with thousands of strategic nuclear weapons still on high alert and a Russian early warning system continuing to decline in effectiveness, there is a real possibility that it is too late for nuclear arms limitation. In the interest of the security and safety of us all, perhaps a way must be found to proceed directly to the elimination of nuclear weapons, as Nitze suggested more than seven years ago.

How could nuclear weapons actually be eliminated? A possible course of action could be for the president of the United States to call for an extraordinary session of the United Nations General Assembly and ask to address the Assembly. In his speech, the president could call for the worldwide elimination of nuclear weapons (as well as all other weapons of mass destruction) and request that the Security Council be charged to carry out this task. The Security Council could then call for the negotiation of a treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons. This would require worldwide intrusive onsite inspection and probably security guarantees to a number of states on the edge of conflicts and where nuclear programs are or may be present, such as Israel, Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea. North Korea would return to the NPT as a nonnuclear weapon state. There would need to be an agreement by all states to apply economic and, if necessary, military pressure to any state that did not comply with this program or that subsequently violated the negotiated arrangements. In an interim stage, the five NPT nuclear weapon states and the three other longtime holdouts from the NPT would be required to remove all nuclear weapons from alert status and then to eliminate almost all of their

arsenals, bringing them down to very low levels. A second and later stage would require elimination of weapons but for these eight states, which would be allowed to keep a relatively limited amount of nuclear explosive material (highly enriched uranium or plutonium) that could be converted into a small number of weapons as a hedge. This could amount to roughly enough material for five weapons each for India, Pakistan, and Israel, fifteen weapons each for Britain, France, and China and thirty weapons each for the United States and Russia. The material would be maintained under very high levels of national security protection at designated depositories and would also be under international safeguards implemented by IAEA inspectors. Under various programs, all other nuclear explosive material would be eliminated worldwide. Nuclear power production would be reconfigured so as to make no more plutonium, by the use of nonproliferative fuels and advanced reactors. The plutonium in existing spent nuclear fuel around the world would have to be eliminated as well. Such an arrangement would take a long time to negotiate and even longer to implement—but we must try, for the hour is late. A final stage, years in the future, could be the verifiable elimination of the fissile material retained by the eight nuclear states, but only after the issue of “missing” fissile material, a feature of the nuclear weapon inventories in probably all of the nuclear weapon states, has been effectively addressed.

Some might say that this is unrealistic. How could we ever hope that the U.S. government, or any other government possessing a nuclear arsenal, would even contemplate such a thing? I would say in response that we must press for and hope for the best and remember that nothing good is ever impossible. Who would have thought that the zero intermediate-range nuclear forces missile option proposed by President Reagan in 1981 would ever happen? Who would have thought the

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Cold War would end in the foreseeable future? Who would have thought the Soviet Union would cease to exist? But all of these things did happen.

However, in order to achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons and to establish a peaceful and secure world community in the twenty-first century, the United States must lead—there is no alternative. But for this to happen, the United States must be believed and trusted. On September 12, 2001, the United States had the trust and support of the entire world. Now that support and trust is gone, and the United States is reviled and feared in many quarters of the world. Senator John McCain said a few months ago that “America’s position in the world is at an all-time low.” How can we regain the trust of the world community? How can we return to our historic destiny of keeping the peace and fostering the development of the community of nations, democracies, free market economies, the international rule of law, international institutions, and treaty arrangements?

Among other things we should:

First, recognize that in the wake of the Cold War, the world has fundamentally changed: the nation state system that has dominated international life for the last 350 years is rapidly deteriorating. Perhaps some fifty to seventy nations around the world are inexorably slipping into the category of failed states. We cannot go it alone. Poverty, disease, cultural misunderstandings, and machine-gun societies around the world are central national security threats; these are the principal causes of international terrorism. The primary weapons in the battle against terror and a declining world order are economic, political, social, cultural and diplomatic, and only rarely military.

And second, for more than fifty years the United States pursued a world order built on rules and international treaties that permitted the expansion of democracy and the enlargement of

international security. In April 2005, in a speech before the American Society of International Law, the secretary of state said that when the United States respects its “international legal obligations and supports an international system based on the rule of law, we do the work of making this world a better place, but also a safe and more secure place for America.” We should take such steps as ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, joining the Ottawa Land Mine Convention, becoming a part of the International Criminal Court, and in general, establishing ourselves again as strong advocates of the international rule of law.

In this way we can regain our historic role, and we can and we will effectively lead the world community to a safe, secure, stable and just twenty-first century.