

A World of Threats; A World of Solutions

Comments for the CTBTO Symposium on Science and Diplomacy for Peace and Security

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I regret I could not attend this crucial international gathering in person. The issues you will discuss, the solutions you will propose are among the most urgent facing our planet. I hope I can offer a few words to help with your deliberations.

Rising Nuclear Tensions

You are here this week because the world faces real threats and genuine crises. For those dedicated to reducing and eliminating nuclear dangers, the most critical are the tensions between the United States and Russia and the programs underway in some half dozen nations to expand their nuclear arsenals.

The hopes that the New START negotiations of 2009-2010 would lead quickly to a treaty making deep cuts in the world's two largest nuclear stockpiles, to US Senate approval of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and to an accelerated effort for global reductions have been dashed. The two nations have grown further apart, exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

US political and military leaders had concluded that the US strategic arsenal could be cut by an addition one-third (to 1000 to 1100 operational strategic warheads, down from the 1550 New Start ceiling). However, still following Cold War doctrines of strategic parity, they are unlikely to proceed without equivalent cuts by Russia. Russia is not interested, at least currently. This has halted US progress on a range of nuclear arms control measures, including the test ban treaty. Additionally, Republican control of the Senate and the intense politicization of national security issues make it unlikely that any treaty could win approval in that body with the current balance of forces.

This has meant that a policy-procurement gap has opened up in the United States. US nuclear policy is frozen, but procurement of new nuclear weapons races ahead. If not reversed, contracts for a new generation of nuclear-armed bombers, submarines, missile and warheads will soon be locked in, resistant to reversal.

The US drive to build new nuclear weapons is matched by efforts in Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, France and the United Kingdom. All are buying or considering buying new weapons with new military capabilities.

This is why former Secretary of Defense William Perry [warns](#) “I believe that we are now on the verge of a new nuclear arms race, and that we are drifting back to a Cold War mentality.”

The World is Not a Mess, It's Just Messy

If that were not bad enough, everywhere we turn we are told that the world is in crisis. There is a palpable sense of despair, even panic. Tough talk and proposals for higher walls, more restrictions, more weapons, and more military interventions proliferate. Media, both mass and social, fans the flames. Crises grab audiences in ways diplomacy cannot. Personalities trump policy. Continents at peace are ignored for regions at war.

This fear further dims prospects for reducing nuclear dangers. When people are afraid, or made to feel afraid, they are reluctant to give up weapons, reluctant to try diplomacy. They are more susceptible to the siren songs of demagogues. But is the world really more dangerous?

No. As Steven Pinker [notes](#), “headlines are a poor guide to history.” His exhaustive research definitely documents a world decline in violence and deaths by war and homicide. The jihadist wars, the Ukraine conflict and other local wars have killed tens of thousands. But over the past several decades many other wars and conflicts have ended, including those that caused massive death tolls in countries including Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Chad, Sri Lanka, Peru, Central America and – going further back – in Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia. By almost every standard, we live in better times than most any decade of the past several centuries.

A principle reason is that, unlike the past six centuries, there has not been a war between major powers for over six decades. The great wars of the first half of the 20th Century alone killed over 100 million people. “The most concentrated forms of destruction our sorry species has dreamed up are world war and nuclear war,” says Pinker, “and we have extended our streak of avoiding them to 70 years.”

The conflicts in the Middle East are terrible and not likely to end soon. The Sykes-Picot colonial order that divided up the Ottoman Empire and gave birth to decades of dictators is collapsing. As President Obama observed in his State of the Union address “The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.”

As we fight with the people of this region against the brutal, jihadist groups that now threaten them, however, we should not exaggerate the dangers. “Over-the-top

claims that this is World War III just play into their hands,” Obama said. “Masses of fighters on the back of pickup trucks,” he cautioned, “pose an enormous danger to civilian; they have to be stopped. But they do not threaten our national existence.”

The world is not coming apart.

The Good Nuclear News

In fact, there is considerable good news on our continuing efforts to reduce nuclear dangers. Global stockpiles have plummeted from their peak of 70,000 nuclear weapons in the 1980s. When I wrote my book, *Bomb Scare*, in 2007, I tallied a total of 27,000 nuclear weapons. Nine years later, we are down to 15,000.

In the past thirty years, more nations have given up nuclear weapons and weapons programs than have tried to get them. These were tough cases, including Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, Libya and Iraq, Brazil and Argentina, and South Africa.

And we have just achieved what may be the strongest nuclear non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated. The nuclear agreement between Iran and six world powers is a global security victory, a diplomatic triumph that ends the threat of an Iranian Bomb and prevents a major new war in the Middle East.

The poisonous politics of Washington prevented a full national appreciation of this victory, but among nuclear policy experts there is an overwhelming consensus applauding this agreement.

On January 8, for example, 53 national security leaders released a [statement](#) praising the agreement as “an unprecedented success in the longstanding international effort to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.” They added that the Iran “is now under some of the most sweeping inspections and transparency obligations in history, many of which will remain in place for decades.”

Signers include senior officials in both Republican and Democratic administrations, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, Paul O’Neill, William Perry, Ryan Crocker, Richard Lugar and Carla Hills. No one believes the final agreement is perfect; all agree it is far better than any reasonable alternative.

Just five years ago, the [talk](#) in Washington was about war. Some wanted to carpet bomb Iran, even send in tens of thousands of U.S. troops to seize the nuclear plants.

But diplomacy proved superior to military action. Iran has surrendered its nuclear weapon capabilities. It has ripped out two-thirds of its centrifuges for enriching uranium, shipped out 98 percent of its stockpile of uranium gas and accepted strict limits on all its activities for at least 15 years. The ban on Iran ever developing nuclear weapons and the unprecedented inspection regime praised by experts have

no expiration date. Instead of soldiers, we have inspectors patrolling Iran's nuclear complex, monitoring the facilities 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Perhaps the most significant victory is with the plutonium reactor. Iran pulled out its core, drilled it full of holes and filled it with concrete. Like Monty Python's parrot, it is no more. It has ceased to be. It is expired. It is an ex-reactor. If Iran rebuilds the reactor, it must do it in a way that does not produce weapons-usable plutonium.

Experts praise what politicians criticize because they understand that this level of voluntary destruction has few historic precedents. One has to go back to the agreements negotiated by Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton in the early 1990s that convinced Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan to destroy thousands of nuclear weapons. But those weren't *their* weapons; they had inherited them from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Iran surrendered facilities in which it had invested years of labor, billions of dollars and enormous national pride.

Closer, perhaps, is South Africa's destruction, during the H. W. Bush administration, of six nuclear weapons in 1991. But the apartheid regime had secretly built those and was eliminating them prior to the transition to majority rule, muting the political impact of its disarmament.

The closest comparison has to be President Ronald Reagan's historic negotiations with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that led to the destructions of thousands of US and Soviet nuclear missiles based in Europe and, later, a 50 percent cut in their global arsenals.

The Soviet-US arms race was considered the gravest nuclear threat of its era; diplomacy defused it. Many considered the Iranian program the gravest nuclear threat of this era, not just for the danger Iranian nuclear weapons would have presented but for the regional arms race it could have triggered and the increased risk that terrorist groups would get some of these weapons.

Diplomacy defused this crisis. This is why many consider the agreement one of the strongest and most important nuclear security accords in history, praised by world leaders and nuclear policy experts around the globe.

Enforcing the Ban on Nuclear Testing

Can we leverage this remarkable victory to accelerate our efforts to finally bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force? Maybe.

We have several trends in our favor. First, is the nearly universal halt in nuclear testing. Nations that used to explode nuclear bombs like firecrackers have not tested for over two decades, and even India and Pakistan's spasm of tests was nearly 18 years ago.

Second, and related, is that the global norm against nuclear testing is now clearly established. “North Korea is the only country in the world that has tested a nuclear weapon in the 21st Century,” US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power [points out](#).

Third, thanks to the extensive global monitoring network established and maintained by the CTBTO, secret nuclear tests are a thing of the past. A “flash in the South Atlantic” is now inconceivable. No state should believe that they could conduct a covert test and have a high probability of avoiding detection.

Fourth, political shifts are coming in the U.S. There is a decent [chance](#) that the Democrats could retake control of the US Senate in 2016. Even if they don’t and depending on who becomes president, there may be enough Republican Senators who swing to support the CTBT that the treaty could have a shot in 2017, if the new president makes it a priority. This is certainly the thinking of the current Administration. Secretary of Energy Ernie Moniz, Secretary of State John Kerry and Undersecretary of State Rose Gottemoeller are earnestly [working](#) to persuade the Senate to reconsider a treaty it shelved in 1999.

Fifth and finally, shifts may come internationally as well. Russia cooperated fully with the United States and the other nations to forge the agreement with Iran. There are signs that it may work constructively to end the bloodshed in Syria. With the collapse of oil prices, Russia’s economy is suffering and it is bogged down in two conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Vladimir Putin may decide it is in his interest to reengage with the United States, though the odds of this are not great.

Short of the approval of the CTBT by the United States and some of the other holdout nations, there are steps we can take to strengthen the CTBTO and increase the global barriers to nuclear testing.

The CTBTO global monitoring network has proved its value. It is time to give this remarkable scientific achievement a permanent foundation and provide full funding assurance. We should all be working to find a reasonable formula for bringing the CTBTO more firmly into the United Nations system and ensure that in the coming decades we will continue to enjoy the benefits of the security, expertise and diplomatic tools the organization provides.

United Nations General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon [said](#) that North Korea’s recent and fourth nuclear test, “is profoundly destabilizing for regional security and seriously undermines international non-proliferation efforts.” Ambassador Samantha Power [said](#) the tests “threaten the security of all of our nations.” It should be a short step from these proclamations to a new UN Security Council resolution that clarifies that a nuclear test explosion by any nation is a threat to the peace and security of all nations. Such a resolution could give the Security Council new tools for discouraging a fifth, six or seventh North Korean test.

During this 20th anniversary year of the signing of the CTBT, it would be extraordinarily helpful if nations that have already approved the treaty would increase diplomatic efforts to convince the hold out nations to similarly approve the ban. In the United States, nuclear hawks often cite the comments of our allies in arguing for new nuclear weapons for “extended deterrence.” Direct statements from these allies on the critical importance of the test ban treaty to deterrence and security could prove enormously valuable in the United States and other nations.

Finally, we cannot rely on governments alone. As Daryl Kimball has [written](#), non-government organizations should be using this anniversary year “to launch a public campaign to raise governmental and public awareness about the dangers of nuclear testing.” Fresh from the most organized, effective and inspiring campaign I have ever had the pleasure to participate in – the campaign for the nuclear accord with Iran – I believe that we can adapt some of the tools and strategies perfected in this effort to encourage a global NGO effort to promote the test ban.

This are ambitious goals, but I believe all of them are achievable. As Secretary of State Kerry just [told](#) those assembled at Davos for the World Economic Forum:

The world is not witnessing global gridlock. We are not frozen in a nightmare that we can't wake up from. The facts and the lessons are clear: If we stay at it, if we stay serious, if we're willing to work in good faith to resolve problems, not create them, then we can make progress.

I agree. If our work were not so important, perhaps we could afford to give in to discouragement, to turn to other issues. But we are closer to our goal now than we have ever been. This is no time to ease up. The next few years may be the most exciting ones of all.

Joseph Cirincione is president of Ploughshares Fund. He is a member of the Secretary of State's International Security Advisory Board but the views expressed herein are his alone and do not represent the views of the Secretary, the Department or the United States Government.