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## The Political and Strategic Conditions of Nuclear Disarmament

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### I.

Thank you for coming. My purpose here today is to imagine under which conditions it would become realistic to expect that nuclear capable States give up their nuclear weapons. I am known to some of you as being on rather conservative on these matters, and you probably expect here a hawkish, if not cynical approach of the question of nuclear disarmament. That is not the way I want to deal with the matter. I have no vested personal interest in the existence of nuclear weapons and if they were to disappear without any net security loss for the international community, I would be glad to focus my attention elsewhere. I began my career nearly 20 years ago dealing with human rights issues and I would be more than happy to go back to them.

The late Sir Michael Quinlan used to describe the conversation on disarmament as having been for a long time a dialogue of the deaf between what he called the “righteous abolitionists” and the “dismissive realists”. I do not claim to have Michael’s intellectual and rhetorical skills, and even less to have his delightful mastery of the English language. But I would like to consider this lecture as a modest tribute to his intellectual legacy and to his immense contribution to an enlightened dialogue on the question of nuclear weapons, in an effort to reduce the existing division in two firmly entrenched camps, each side being intimately persuaded that he is right and the other is wrong.

I have always encouraged the French government to be a full participant in this debate, and to deal with

the question of disarmament with an open mind. I would like to thank the ambassador for his hospitality and I trust that this is a symbol of France's readiness to support and encourage this discussion. I do think that the agenda currently promoted by France and the European Union – which as you know focuses on transparency and irreversible moves to demonstrate our goodwill on disarmament issues – is the right one for now. I also do think that the possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear-capable State is a much bigger and immediate threat to the regime than the alleged “non-compliance” of Nuclear-Weapon States with Article VI of the NPT. But I also think that one can effectively deal with short-term issues only when one has a broader view of the longer-term context.

## II.

There are several different scenarios under which the end of nuclear weapons could be considered. I will describe three – which taken together will, I believe, pretty much cover the realm of the thinkable. I will call them the “abolition scenario”, the “interdiction scenario”, and the “elimination scenario”.

One first scenario would be a deliberate decision to get rid of nuclear weapons after a major nuclear event – be it an act of terrorism or a nuclear war. The impact and outcome of such a horrible event would not be preordained. It is possible that a successful use of nuclear weapons – or rather one *perceived* as having been successful, whatever the meaning of that word – would actually lead to a nuclear free-for-all, and even herald a shift towards nuclear war-fighting doctrines. But there is also a significant probability that it would trigger a political process leading to rapid nuclear disarmament, accompanied with immense global public pressure. For heuristic purposes I call it the **abolition scenario**. While the word “abolition” has recently become a synonym for total nuclear disarmament, I believe that it carries a moral dimension that is particularly appropriate to such a scenario.

## III.

A second scenario is that of a deliberate, thoughtful decision to reduce the role and numbers of nuclear weapons with a view to achieving a nuclear weapon-free world in a reasonable timeframe – a matter of a few decades, but still in our lifetime. This is a favorite of many in the disarmament community. I call it the **interdiction scenario**. Let me spend a few minutes on this one before moving to the main thrust of my presentation. I believe that a deliberate political process of nuclear disarmament would have to be led by the United States. I do not think that non-nuclear

countries could band together to force nuclear-capable States to disarm. Neither do I believe that global public pressure – absent the aforementioned scenario of a nuclear event – could be mobilized in a way that would make a significant enough impact on world leaders (with or without flashy documentaries, T-shirts and e-mail campaigns). And only the United States has the capability and the potential will to attempt such a historical move.

Of course this would not be enough. Washington would need to enlist one other major power in its crusade to obtain what could be called a political “critical mass”. Russia could be one, assuming that there was a *modus vivendi* on the political and security issues pertaining to the Eurasian landmass that satisfied its ambitions. China could be another, if the Taiwan issue was solved in a way that satisfied its wishes and its relationship with India takes a turn for the better.

But my main point here is the following: this scenario assumes *significant* changes in the political and security environment, but not *radical* changes. And absent such radical changes, the interdiction of nuclear weapons is, from my point of view, a seriously dubious prospect.

The main reason behind my skepticism is that many will resist the interdiction of nuclear weapons for fear that a non-nuclear world would make major war “much less unthinkable”. I share this concern, and I am largely in tune with Sir Michael in this regard (even though I prefer the cautious expression that I just used to the more brutal assertion that it would make the world, quote, safe for conventional war, unquote). As Harry Truman once said, “let us not become so preoccupied with weapons that we lose sight of the fact that war itself is the real villain”. The last time the deadly mechanics of war among major powers were put into motion was exactly 70 years ago. Children born in 1945 are now reaching retirement age without having ever seen major war. It is a remarkable exception in historical terms. While there may be other reasons for this state of fact, it is very hard for me to believe that the caution induced by the possession of nuclear arms did not play a *very significant* role here.

Bear in mind also that in the absence of nuclear weapons, some UN-mandated military interventions might be made more difficult. Do not get me wrong: of course the possession of nuclear weapons is not needed to send forces abroad in the service of the world community. But I would like you to think about the following: would it have been as easy for the United States and its partners to mobilize such broad coalitions in 1950 for South Korea, and in 1991 for Kuwait, if they had not known that their vital interests would be protected whatever hap-

pened? I offer this *Gedankenexperiment* as food for thought. My point is that we need to be careful of what we wish for. To some extent, the possession of nuclear weapons may be a form of “common good”. And it also gives – or should give – those who are endowed with them a special responsibility towards the maintenance of global peace and security.

I do not want to dwell on the immense problems that would also need to be addressed should there be, tomorrow (all things equal – that is, with a broadly unchanged strategic and political context), a serious drive towards the interdiction of nuclear weapons. Suffice it to say that the current US quantitative and qualitative superiority in long-range conventional strike platforms – to say nothing of non-nuclear missile defense, space and cyberwarfare capabilities – would constitute an unacceptable American edge over Moscow and Beijing even assuming that there is a long-term *détente* between them and the United States. I am not certain either that countries currently protected by the US umbrella would be satisfied by the idea that this protection could equally be applied with conventional weapons. When one faces a nuclear-armed major power, one always faces *the possibility of a rather quick, almost certain, and probably painful* death as an organized entity. That is, the possibility of inflicting unacceptable damage (an expression adopted by almost all nuclear capable countries). Maintaining the same level of deterrence, both for the protector and the protected, would not be easy with conventional weapons only, especially if there are still significant chemical and biological programs in some countries. More precisely, it is possible that an adversary could bank on the fact that our societies would not have the stomach for a sustained conventional strategic bombing campaign against a major power. This could make deterrence much less credible.

#### IV.

This leads me to my third and main scenario, the one that I call the **elimination scenario**. What distinguishes it from the two previous ones is that it supposes that the utility of nuclear weapons has been dramatically reduced, allowing first for massive and rapid reductions – for going to the “base camp”, in reference to an ongoing study supported by the Nuclear Security Project – and then to elimination – that is, to the mountaintop. (To be sure, I am not entirely certain that the mountaineering metaphor is actually the most relevant one, because in fact, the trekking might be longer and more difficult than the climbing. For once nuclear-capable countries have stopped investing in their deterrent, the cost-effectiveness of maintaining nuclear forces may decrease rather quickly. But that is another story.)

My elimination scenario comprises two discrete variants. The first variant assumes that alternatives to nuclear weapons have been brought to existence. It happens in a world that remains dominated, as is the case today, by national rivalries and insecurities. The second variant assumes that nuclear weapons *or any equivalent thereof* are not needed anymore. It happens in a world where strategic and political conditions have been fundamentally altered. I am assuming here that most of the nuclear programs have been driven by perceived deep insecurities and – to a lesser extent – by the need for national power and influence.

If you allow me an easy intellectual shortcut, let us say that the first one is dominated by Thomas Hobbes, and the second one by Immanuel Kant. Or, to use a more trivial but perhaps more illuminating expression especially for science fiction buffs, let us say that the first one happens in a *Mad Max* world – that of today – and the second in a *Star Trek* world. (I am indebted to a well-known Swedish verification expert for that metaphor).

Let me start with variant one. From a political standpoint, one could imagine that the value of nuclear weapons would greatly decrease if there was, for instance, a serious reform of the UN Security Council. It may help avoiding another “India”, so to say, that is, a country going nuclear at least partly for reasons of prestige and influence – nuclear testing as blowing your way to global power, so to say. (France and the United Kingdom reasoned along similar lines in the 1950s even though they were members of the Security Council.) But from a strategic standpoint, there is no alternative to nuclear weapons on the horizon. Biological weapons have been banned – and this ban, incidentally, was made possible in part by the existence of nuclear weapons. Their effects are most of the time uncontrollable, and most importantly, they cannot threaten the destruction of political, military and economic targets. Advanced conventional weapons and electronic warfare do not scare leaders and populations the way nuclear weapons do. And I know no realistic prospect in the scientific world for making cost-effective means of destruction that would be as efficient and as scary as nuclear weapons. Antimatter, for instance, has about zero prospect for becoming a tool of war in the foreseeable future. (That is good news, by the way.)

Variant two of my scenario is different. It assumes that the strategic and political functions traditionally assumed by nuclear weapons have *no value whatsoever* anymore. It assumes that the perceived need for protection of vital interests, and the urge for international recognition and influence have largely disappeared. This supposes in particular

that some of the key regional crises that have been with us for more than 60 years have been solved for good. I'm talking about Kashmir, Palestine, Taiwan, or the division of the Korean peninsula. It would be a necessary prerequisite, but not the only one – to say that “one can solve the proliferation problem by solving regional crises” has always sounded to me as a very incomplete and in fact rather lazy approach. Another condition, for instance, would be the absence of any significant State-based biological threat.

But it would not be enough for nuclear-endowed countries to voluntarily give up their nuclear weapons. What would more likely be needed in fact is a *profound transformation of international relations*. There should be the perception that we are on our way to reach some form of “global democratic peace”. The very notion of using significant military force without a collective mandate would be on its way to become obsolete. The same goes for the sanctity of national sovereignty. I am not saying that we could get rid of nuclear weapons only if we lived in Heaven. I am saying that a realistic prospect for elimination without very, very significant changes in the political and strategic parameters that rule the world is hard to imagine. At least for what is generally called the foreseeable future, that is the coming 30 or 40 years. In that sense, I agree with Barack Obama: elimination will probably not occur in my lifetime.

In a sense, Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty has it exactly right: there *has* to be a link between nuclear disarmament on the one hand, and general and complete disarmament on the other.

I have not dealt with the thorny issue of enforcement, or with that of verification – the latter a well-worn hobbyhorse of our British friends, who have devoted considerable energy to this question, to the benefit of the whole community. But I would like to submit the following hypothesis: such issues would be much easier to resolve in a world which is the one I just described. *By definition*, it assumes a degree of trust among nations and an ability to cooperate that would be unprecedented. (I am reminded of an argument that was heard in US policy circles in the run-up to the Iraq war. The idea was that we were asking so much of Saddam Hussein in terms of intrusive inspections and loss of sovereignty that it was *by definition* unacceptable for him, because it would in effect mean the end of his grip on the country and thus on his regime.) I am not claiming that enforcement and verification would not be a problem. I am just saying that the causality factors should not be reversed: the political and strategic conditions that would allow for the elimination of nuclear weapons would be the *same* as those which would be needed for efficient enforcement and verification. The exist-

tence of a few holdouts and of potential cheaters would be a problem, but a secondary one. Likewise for the question of know-how. One *could* disinvent nuclear weapons. Many ancient crafts have been in effect disinvented. For instance, it is not easy today to do the same kind of cooking as was done in the Middle Ages, because in addition to the recipe, you need the right tools and the right ingredients – and many of them are just not available anymore. So, for all these reasons, in the world that I just described, assuming we have solved the issue of fissile materials, nuclear hedging would by and large be a non-issue.

## V.

I have painted a picture with a very broad brush, and there are many, many issues that I have not dealt with. And perhaps some of you will have been discouraged by my certainties. However, I am also an optimist and make no apologies for being one. I *do* believe that whereas the idea a world without war cannot be on the radar screen of most of our policy makers, it should not be discarded as an illusion by policy thinkers. The urge for collective violence in order to gain territory and resources may have been a useful evolutionary strategy for millennia, but societal and cultural changes are going so fast today that to claim that it is irreversibly part of “human nature” is, I believe, increasingly imprudent. I take solace, in this regard, in the fact that interstate war in the classical sense of the term has now become, in statistical terms, an exceptional event. What I hope is that it will not take another global catastrophe – a major war, another kind of man-made event, or an environmental disaster – to get to the Kantian world I described.

I cannot support the goal of a “nuclear-free world” without qualifications or conditions. Aside from the moral undertones it carries, this expression fails to see that nuclear weapons carry terrible risks but have also been a *source of freedom*. I have already mentioned the two global police operations of 1950 and 1991, but the point also works in reverse. Another favorite working hypothesis of mine is the following: most supporters of nuclear disarmament also opposed the Iraq war, and were glad that the French took the lead in global opposition to the intervention. But I am not entirely certain that France would have done so in such a confident way had it not been a nuclear power.

I will leave it to that at this point. But I would like to conclude by saying that the vision I *can* subscribe to is that of a “*peaceful, safe nuclear-free world*”, to use the words of Japanese Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone. A key operating principle here is the notion of “undiminished security for all”, which has

appeared several times in NPT documents. This includes the majority of the world population which benefits, directly or indirectly, from security provided by nuclear weapons. What we need to find is

an agreement on the most cost-effective steps towards reducing *the need* for nuclear weapons. It will be hard. But that is not a reason not to try. Thank you.

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