

Webinar: “Reckless Spending to Increase Nuclear Danger?”

The NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace and Security

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“Somehow we must transform the dynamics of the world power struggle from the negative nuclear arms race which no one can win to a positive contest to harness man's creative genius for the purpose of making peace and prosperity a reality for all of the nations of the world. In short, we must shift the arms race into a ‘peace race’.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1964)

Let me say a little more about the relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons. This is important to understanding the nature of arms racing and the dangers of nuclear escalation.

The United States military dominates the globe through its operation of 11 Unified Combatant Commands. Composed of forces from two or more armed services, the Unified Commands are headed by four-star generals and admirals who operate under the direct authority of the Secretary of Defense, accountable only to the President. Six of the Commands are responsible for designated regions of the world and four others for various operations. When establishment of the U.S. Northern Command was announced in 2002, the official press release declared, “For the first time, commanders’ areas of operations cover the entire Earth.” The new Space Command was established in 2019. Tying all the Commands together is United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM), at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1992 President George H. Bush established STRATCOM, which for the first time brought the planning, targeting, and wartime employment of nuclear forces under the control of a single commander.

Previously limited to nuclear weapons, STRATCOM’s role was expanded, consistent with provisions of the George W. Bush administration’s 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (completed after the 9-11 terrorist attacks) to encompass all aspects of assessing and responding to nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons worldwide. Nuclear weapons are not segregated either operationally or doctrinally from conventional weapons. This was not reversed in the subsequent Nuclear Posture Reviews, in 2010 and 2018.

In describing the transition to a “new” strategic triad, the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review provides a useful tool for understanding how the U.S. plans to carry out its global war fighting strategy. In one corner of the new triad, new non-nuclear weapons capabilities have been added to the “old” Cold War strategic triad, consisting of submarine-based ballistic missiles, land-based intercontinental missiles, and strategic bombers – still very much there. This category was designated “offensive strike systems.” The other legs of this new triad are “defenses” and a “revitalized defense infrastructure that will provide new capabilities in a timely fashion to meet emerging threats.” These three elements are bound together by “enhanced command and control” and intelligence systems.

As military affairs analyst William Arkin warned at the time, tearing down the firewall that has separated nuclear weapons from other weapons lowers the threshold for U.S. nuclear use.

The three legs of the new strategic triad are designed to work together, to enable the United States to project overwhelming military force. Considered in this context, it becomes easier to understand that so-called “defenses” are not really to defend the United States from a surprise attack. These “layered” systems include both “national” missile defense systems in the form of ground-based interceptors, initially in Alaska and California, and “theater” missile defenses, deployed at foreign bases or on ships at sea. New air-borne missile defense technologies are in development. These missile defenses are intended to work together with the offensive weapons systems, like swords and shields, to protect U.S. troops and bases and other U.S. “strategic assets” around the world.

According to STRATCOM’s official website: “The mission of US STRATCOM is to deter strategic attack and employ forces, as directed, to guarantee the security of our Nation and our Allies. The command’s assigned responsibilities include strategic deterrence; nuclear operations; space operations; joint electronic spectrum operations; global strike; missile defense; and analysis and targeting. US STRATCOM's forces and capabilities underpin and enable all other Joint Force operations.”

The nature of these interrelated operations brings home the complications of what is referred to as “strategic stability”, the intrinsic relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons. Russia has consistently called for inclusion of strategic stability in nuclear arms control discussions, while the U.S. has until now categorically refused.

In 2009, former Soviet President Mikael Gorbachev warned that the pursuit of “military superiority would be an insurmountable obstacle to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. Unless we discuss demilitarization of international politics, the reduction of military budgets, preventing militarization of outer space, talking about a nuclear-free world will be just rhetorical.”

We are living in a time of extraordinary nuclear dangers. A couple of years ago, Derek Johnson, executive director of Global Zero, assessed today’s nuclear threat as “an unprecedented moment in human history. The world has never faced so many nuclear flashpoints simultaneously. From NATO-Russia tensions, to the Korean Peninsula, to South Asia and the South China Sea and Taiwan — all of the nuclear-armed states are tangled up in conflicts and crises that could catastrophically escalate at any moment.”

An alarming but often overlooked trend is the increased scale and tempo of war games by nuclear-armed States and their allies, including nuclear drills. Ongoing missile tests, and frequent close encounters between military forces of nuclear-armed states including the U.S. and Russia, the U.S. and China, and India and Pakistan exacerbate nuclear dangers.

There has been a lot of talk lately about calling on the U.S. to declare a No First Use (NFU) policy, but not much analysis of what that would actually mean.

Warning that the danger of nuclear war with Russia or China is “a very real possibility”, Admiral Charles Richard, Chief of U.S. Strategic Command, in charge of integrated nuclear and conventional war planning, just last month declared: “For China, we must pay attention to PRC’s actions more than its stated policies. While the PRC has maintained a “No First Use” policy

since the 1960s—contending it will never use a nuclear weapon first—its buildup of advanced capabilities should give us pause. This policy could change in the blink of an eye. Beijing is pursuing capabilities and operating in a manner inconsistent with a minimum deterrent strategy, giving it a full range of options, including limited use and a first-strike capability.”

Why wouldn't Russia and China view a U.S. NFU policy the same way? It is unlikely that a declaratory policy without significant and verifiable changes in U.S. nuclear force structure and deployments would be meaningful.

Keep that in mind when considering how Admiral Richard reaffirmed the relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons in current U.S. warfighting plans: “We must acknowledge the foundational nature of our nation’s strategic nuclear forces, as they create the ‘maneuver space’ for us to project conventional military power strategically.”

How would this stark reality be impacted by the significant and verifiable changes in U.S. nuclear force structure and deployments necessary to make a NFU policy meaningful and credible? And how much political will would be required to bring about these fundamental changes? In my estimation it could be nearly the same amount as would be required to make the decision to eliminate nuclear weapons and commence the process of negotiations with first Russia, then the other nuclear-armed states to make that possible. It’s a pretty high bar.

So, the question for me (and for all of us) is how to create that political will. It is clear to me that the multiple national and global crises we are confronting, including nuclear weapons, climate change, systemic racism, a growing wealth gap and rising national authoritarianisms arise from the same foundational causes, and that we are unlikely to win on any of them as single issues. We need to come together as never before to build political power through durable, diverse, multi-issue coalitions, networks, and networks of networks based on our shared commitments to universal, indivisible human security. And we need to fundamentally challenge the dominant definition of “national security” through military means, at any cost.

There is an emerging movement which, I believe, has the vision and potential to bring together such a coalition and to build powerful political pressure from the bottom up - The Poor People’s Campaign; A National Call for Moral Revival.

Exactly one year before his tragic assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared: “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.... we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, has picked up Dr. King’s unfinished work, weaving the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, systemic poverty, environmental devastation, militarism and the war economy and a distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism, into one “moral fusion” campaign.

The Poor Peoples Campaign Moral Budget calls for cutting U.S. military spending by half (\$350 Billion) including by closing 60% of U.S. foreign military bases, ending the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, and *dismantling and eliminating nuclear weapons*.

With active state-based organizations in 46 of the 50 United States, the burgeoning Poor People's campaign is being supported by an extraordinary range of constituencies including labor unions, faith organizations, racial justice, anti-poverty, environmental and peace groups, and is building political power through its We Must Do M.O.R.E. campaign – Mobilizing, Organizing, Registering and Educating for a movement that votes. I urge everyone to find out more about the Poor People's Campaign and consider joining your State-based Poor People's Campaign organization.

More narrowly, I think the Back From the Brink Campaign is about the best nuclear disarmament advocacy approach currently available in the U.S. It addresses the reality that the dangers of nuclear war are real, and it puts NFU in the context of eliminating nuclear weapons—which is what will be required to actually abolish them.

Back from the Brink: The Call to Prevent Nuclear War calls on the U.S. government to lead a global effort to prevent nuclear war by: renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons first; taking U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert; cancelling the plan to replace its entire nuclear arsenal with enhanced weapons; and actively pursuing a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

The Back From the Brink Campaign has been endorsed by more than 250 health, environmental, academic, peace, faith, and justice organizations. Back From the Brink Resolutions have been adopted by 52 cities including Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Des Moines, San Francisco, and Honolulu, as well as the state legislatures of California, Maine, New Jersey, and Oregon. And the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the non-partisan association of cities with populations over 30,000 has three times adopted resolutions, championed by U.S. members of Mayors for Peace, incorporating the five planks of the Back From the Brink platform.

Speaking of Mayors for Peace, since I serve as its North American Coordinator, I'd like to encourage you to engage with and enroll your Mayor and use the annual Mayors for Peace resolutions adopted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors as a tool in your advocacy kit. I think the potential power of mayors to influence national policy on nuclear weapons and redefining security in human and environmentally centered terms is real, but so far largely untapped.

Let me close with a quote from Mayor Frank Cownie of Des Moines, Iowa. Mayor Cownie is the U.S. Vice-President of Mayors for Peace, which is led by the Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with over 8,000 member cities in 165 countries. (There are 218 U.S. members.) He also serves as interim President of Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), a global network of more than 1,750 local and regional governments which played a leading role in pushing forward the Paris Climate Agreement.

He recently told a group of students: "I believe that it was local government that caused the Paris Climate Agreement to happen. We showed heads of State what happens and why we at the local

government level support the engagement of all heads of State in the Paris Climate Agreement. Without that support, without Mayors going to their heads of State and telling them the consequences of not committing to that agreement, it would not have happened.” Noting that over 500 mayors from all continents were in Paris for the negotiations, he added, “It was everybody coming together. We need to do that on all subjects, all of us working together and showing the local commitment and the need to work for peace and climate stabilization that are so imperative to the future of this planet.”