

The New Nuclear Arms Race and Movements for a Fair and Democratic Society in Balance with the Planet

Western States Legal Foundation

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The questions of peace, democracy, economic equality, and the ecological requisites for human survival never have been as inextricably intertwined as they are now. The ecological and economic challenges we face are both a cause and effect of the deteriorating political conditions that drive international conflict. The loss of varied, human-scale organizations in the social and political world, combined with the concentration of economic power in organizations of ever greater scale and scope, has left us vulnerable to authoritarian politics. The dynamic that drives the global economy—endless competition for material wealth and social power—is straining the limits of the ecosystems we all depend on. Yet the main solution offered to us by governments is to gird for more competition and more war. Nowhere is this more evident than in the resurgence of nuclear arms racing.

Nuclear weapons pose an imminent, existential threat to humanity, one that we must respond to with all the power and urgency we can assemble. But those who long have campaigned for nuclear disarmament and for peace cannot be successful alone. To stem the risk of war in the near term and to set society on a path towards the elimination of these terrible weapons, we must weave the thread of peace and disarmament work into a broader fabric of movements that can address the causes of war.

In early May, governments met at the United Nations in the last round of preparatory meetings for the 2020 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference. Peace and disarmament experts and activists from around the world gathered alongside those meetings to assess the risks posed by nuclear weapons in this century, and how we might respond to them.

At the level of governments, prospects are bleak. Governments everywhere are in the grip of authoritarian forces committed to preserving unjust orders at home while pursuing a new round of economic competition and arms racing abroad.

The Nonproliferation Treaty has been deadlocked for decades, with the nuclear-armed states united in their determination to ignore their disarmament obligations. The broader arms control regime, centered on agreements between Russia and the United States, the two countries that hold over 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, is crumbling, with one of its two key treaties in the last stages of collapse and the other unlikely to be extended. All the nuclear-armed countries are upgrading their nuclear forces, with the United States and Russia apparently determined to embark once again on a dangerous and increasingly unstable arms race.

There already are enough nuclear weapons in the world to destroy civilization in a day, at the same time inflicting long-term damage on the ecosystem that could threaten human survival. Even a relatively “small” nuclear war involving tens of nuclear weapons could cause a “nuclear autumn” that put the survival of a billion or more people at risk.

These civilization-destroying nuclear arsenals exist in a world where the risk of war among the great powers that possess them once more is on the rise. It is a mistake to compare this moment too easily to any in the past. This time combines old antagonisms with novel elements that pose challenges on a world scale, and that threaten humanity's future.

The post-Cold War period, with the opportunities it might have presented for the elimination of nuclear weapons and the creation of a more peaceable international order, is now definitively in the past. Despite the resurgence of nuclear tensions this is not a new Cold War, with the main danger concentrated in the confrontation between two superpowers locked in a confrontation perhaps more ideological than material. Some have compared this moment instead to the run up to World War I, a rough parallel in that new economic and military powers were rising to challenge old ones, with friction and potential flashpoints focused on the margins of declining great powers and their spheres of influence. Another similarity to the conditions that brought the world wars of the 20th century is the proliferation of “blood and soil” nationalisms in a time of wealth extremes and economic crisis, and their use by powerful factions to acquire and hold state power.

And yet that comparison too fails to encompass the magnitude of the dangers we face now. What is new about this moment is that *all* of these dangers and challenges are with us today, the unsolved inheritance of a global society that has achieved great technological power, but far less fairness, justice, and democracy. And today we face another existential threat which, like nuclear weapons, is a consequence of the kind of technological power we have developed: the impending collapse of the ecosystems we all depend on, with global warming being just one of the ways our form of modernity has overburdened our planet’s capacity to sustain life.

The time is ripe for movements that are broad and that are willing to go deep, joined in an effort to understand the common causes of the dangers and injustices we have been struggling against separately up to now. There is reason to believe that such movements will emerge, as resistance grows in many places to authoritarian governments defending an order of things that is undemocratic, unjust, and unsustainable. The first step is a conversation among emerging movements, one that begins with questions rather than conclusions, for while we can see the outlines of the connections, a full understanding of our common ground can only be developed through work together, and the building of trust.

But we must also be aware that we are living in a state of emergency, faced with growing repression and violence from above. We do not get to choose the terrain of struggle. Everywhere refugees, immigrants, and national minorities are on the front line. The nationalist rhetoric of fear and hate that is employed to target them and to divide us from one another is the same kind that will be used to march our young people off to war, war that might well be the last. We must find a way to defend those most vulnerable, to resist the slide towards confrontation among nuclear-armed states, and to begin the long task of building a fair and sustainable world, all at once. Let us begin.

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