The Nuclear Danger Today: Existing Nuclear Arsenals are the Greatest Nuclear Threat

*Presentation of the Western States Legal Foundation to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, New York, May 1, 2015, by Andrew Lichterman**

Five years ago at the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to a "diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination."[i] Since that time, there have been no initiatives from nuclear-armed states that hold promise to reduce nuclear arsenals below civilization-destroying numbers.[ii] Instead, they are modernizing their arsenals to last far into the future. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists *Nuclear Notebook* states that "[n]ew or improved nuclear weapon programs underway worldwide include at least 27 ballistic missiles, nine cruise missiles, eight naval vessels, five bombers, eight warheads, and eight weapons factories."[iii] To take just one example, the United States is planning to build 12 new ballistic missile submarines, each with 16 missile tubes that can launch multiple warhead missiles. They are expected to remain in service well into the second half of the 21st century.[iv]

More alarming still, nuclear weapons have once more taken center stage in confrontations between the United States, its NATO allies, and Russia—countries that together possess most of the nuclear weapons that exist. These countries have turned a civil conflict in Ukraine into a violent proxy war in the borderlands of Europe. The tensions engendered by this confrontation have been intensified vastly—and potentially catastrophically—by the brandishing of nuclear arms by both sides. This has included forward deployments of strategic bombers to Europe by the United States, positioning of Russian strategic bombers in Crimea, and an accelerated tempo of military exercises and patrols both conventional and nuclear. And the confrontation in Europe is only one of several potential nuclear flashpoints, with new tensions and arms-racing from the Western Pacific to South Asia.

The possibility of an unintended incident spiraling out of control is real. But the greater danger is that the rulers of one nuclear-armed state will miscalculate the interests and fears of another, pushing some geopolitical gambit to the point where economic pressures, covert actions, low-level warfare and displays of high-tech force escalate into general war.

Those who rule in the nuclear-armed states have shown a shocking lack of judgment and foresight regarding what always has been the greatest danger: their own nuclear arsenals. Year after year, the five original nuclear weapons states issue joint statements congratulating themselves on their disarmament progress, which they apparently see as more than adequate.[v] Only five years ago, in a statement issued just before the 2010 NPT Review, the President of the United States proclaimed that "[t]oday, the threat of global nuclear war has passed."[vi] Less than two years ago, the U.S. Defense Department declared the most pressing nuclear dangers to be proliferation and "nuclear terrorism."[vii] The time that has passed between those complacent statements and today's renewed nuclear confrontation is only the blink of an eye on the time-scale for disarmament contemplated by the nuclear-armed states.

Today's nuclear dilemma is clear. Without a profound change in the behavior of nuclear-armed governments, civilization-destroying arsenals will remain for many decades to come. The intertwined ecological, economic, and political crises of the 21st century are hurtling ahead at the pace of a modernity dependent on exponential growth heedless of nature's limits. This now is generating tensions that raise the danger of war among nuclear-armed countries on a time-scale measured in months and years, not decades and decades.

National security technocrats talk of "managing" the rise of new powers. But a social order rapidly approaching its limits will generate conflict in ways both expected and unpredictable—and likely unmanageable. Most unmanageable of all is the discontent generated by a global economy that serves only a fraction of the population, leaving hundreds of millions of people utterly desperate and billions more with little hope for a better future. Those who rule the most powerful countries seem determined to repeat the mistakes of the past, manipulating the resulting rage and despair to set us against each other in their struggles for wealth and power without end. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate expression of the irrationality of this order of things, and may also be the instrument that ends it, destroying all of our futures.

It may seem impossible to address all of these crises at once, but we have no choice. Our survival depends on transforming mutually reinforcing patterns of injustice and distrust, self-sustaining cycles of violence, and unsustainable ways of living into their opposite. Our common future rests on our willingness to trust that committed, urgent efforts to build a fair and democratically controlled economy, develop sustainable technologies, and to disarm and disassemble the military-industrial complexes of the 20th century will build upon and reinforce each other. Those at the apex of the global war system must start taking apart the apparatus of annihilation that has distorted human development immeasurably for generations. It is up to all of us to take apart the machinery of injustice and oppression, and to build a new economy and society in balance with the ecological rhythms of our planet. It is long past time. Let us begin.

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See appended list for endorsing organizations.

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[i] 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document, Volume I, NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), p.15; reaffirmed by 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document, Volume I, p.19.

[ii] "Not one nuclear weapon has actually been eliminated by a treaty commitment—we have witnessed instead only the voluntary retirement of certain obsolete weapons, with some caps on various deployments. And no nuclear disarmament negotiations have been underway in the 45-year history of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite its obligation to undertake them." Angela Kane, United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, "The Nuclear Disarmament Regime?" EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference, Brussels, Belgium 30 September 2013

[iii] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Slowing nuclear weapon reductions and endless nuclear weapon modernizations: A challenge to the NPT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2014*, Vol. 70(4) 94–107, 96.

[iv] See generally Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Ohio Replacement (SSBN[X]) Ballistic Missile Submarine Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, March 24, 2015.

[v] "See, e.g., "Joint Statement from the Nuclear-Weapon States at the London P5 Conference," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, February 6, 2015; "Joint Statement on the P5 Beijing Conference: Enhancing

Strategic Confidence and Working Together to Implement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Outcomes," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, April 15, 2014; "Fourth P5 Conference: On the Way to the 2015 NPT Review Conference," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, April 19, 2013.

[vi] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by President Obama on the 40th Anniversary of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, March 05, 2010.

[vii] U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, June 12, 2013, p.2.