Feature article

Nuclear Weapons: An Existential Threat to Humanity

by Max M. Kampelman and Thomas Graham, Jr.

Sixty-three years ago last month, the beautiful city of Hiroshima was devastated by the explosion of an atomic bomb. The bomb released the explosive equivalent of 12,500 tons of TNT and killed – outright, or over time by radiation poisoning – nearly 75 percent of the population of that city. Three days later similar devastation was brought to the city of Nagasaki, and a few days after that, the Second World War, the bloodiest and most destructive in the history of humanity, came to an end.

Capability to destroy the Earth several times over

Many thought then, and in subsequent years, that the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the harbingers of the future and that nuclear weapons were destined to spread around the world and be part of future wars, threatening the survival of humanity. These views were reinforced by the commencement in a few years of a vast nuclear arms race with both the United States and the Soviet Union rapidly developing the capability to destroy the Earth many times over.

Over 40 States have capacity to build nuclear weapons

President John F. Kennedy was one of those who feared that nuclear weapons would inherit the Earth. There were predictions during his administration that, by the end of the 1970s, there could be as many as 15 to 20 nuclear weapon States in the world, with nuclear weapons fully integrated into national arsenals. If this had happened, there would likely be twice or more that many today. In 2004, for example, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, asserted that there were more than 40 States in the world that currently could build nuclear weapons, if they so chose. Such a development would have placed the world community in a situation where every conflict would run the risk of going nuclear and there would be no way to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorist organizations. Such an international security situation would have made today's time of troubles seem like paradise by comparison.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty prevents catastrophe

Fortunately, such nuclear weapon proliferation did not happen. President Kennedy's darkest fears of catastrophe were not realized. The chief reason that this did not happen was the entry into force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970, along with the extended deterrence policies of the United States and the Soviet Union. The NPT converted what had been an act of national pride into an act of international outlawry.

In 1960, after the first French nuclear test in the Sahara, the French newspapers were overflowing with nationalistic sentiment: "Vive La France" and "Vive De Gaulle." Switzerland held two national referenda and the Swiss public twice voted to build nuclear weapons. Sweden had an active nuclear weapons research program. After the NPT was in force, however, when India conducted its first nuclear weapon test in 1974, they were condemned by the entire world and they had to hasten to declare that their nuclear explosion was "peaceful."

184 non-nuclear weapon States agree not to acquire nuclear weapons

The NPT essentially drew the line where the world was in 1970; it recognized five existing nuclear weapon States: the United States, the Soviet Union (Russia), Britain, France, and China. It provided that the rest of the world would agree not to acquire nuclear weapons. And most of the world did agree to that proposition. Today, 184 NPT non-nuclear weapon States are committed to this obligation.

Non-proliferation in exchange for nuclear disarmament

But the NPT did not come as a free gift from the rest of the world to the five nuclear weapon States; rather it is a strategic arrangement founded on a central bargain. That bargain was, and is, non-proliferation in exchange for the sharing of peaceful technology and nuclear disarmament. Nuclear disarmament was perceived by the non-nuclear weapon States as the five nuclear weapon States agreeing over the long term to negotiate away their nuclear arsenals so that ultimately all States would receive equal treatment under the NPT.

A comprehensive nuclear test ban

Since it was recognized that this would take significant time, the non-nuclear weapon States pressed the nuclear weapon States to agree to interim measures to include a comprehensive nuclear weapon test ban, a prohibition on the further production of nuclear explosive material, a significant world-wide reduction in the number of nuclear weapons, and binding obligations not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear NPT parties.

None of these measures 40 years later has been realized. One of these measures, which was seen in 1970 as a sort of litmus test which would indicate whether or not the five nuclear weapon States would, over time, live up to their side of the central bargain was a comprehensive nuclear test ban, which was included in the preamble to the NPT. Review conferences failed several times over the years because of disagreement over this issue. When the NPT was made a permanent treaty in 1995, there was a recommitment to conclude a test ban in one year - that is, by 1996. The non-nuclear weapons States' view was, and is, that, if they are going to give up nuclear weapons, the five nuclear weapon States could at least agree to stop testing their weapons.

CTBT rejection contrary to wishes of most Americans

A Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was in fact agreed to and signed in 1996, but it was defeated in the U.S. Senate in 1999 and has not yet come into force - some 12 years later and some 40 years after entry into force of the NPT itself. The U.S. Senate's rejection of the CTBT in 1999 was, incidentally, contrary to the wishes of the American public. A poll taken immediately thereafter disclosed that two thirds of the American public disapproved of the Senate's action. This remains a problem.

The next U.S. administration and the CTBT

There are two periods in the four-year cycle of the American presidency when the United States is most likely to review policies and respond to the political exigencies of the moment: during a presidential campaign year when issues are raised, and during the first six months after a presidential election, when a newly-elected or re-elected president is generally empowered to carry out commitments made or judgments held. In that connection, Senator Obama has stated that he will support CTBT ratification and Senator McCain has said he will consider it.

Goal of eliminating nuclear weapons can be realized

Since the publication of two *Wall Street Journal* articles authored by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn in January 2007 and 2008 based on President Ronald Reagan's dream to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide, the world community has taken new hope that some day this objective could actually be accomplished, and the NPT central bargain of non-proliferation in exchange for peaceful cooperation and disarmament finally redeemed. The articles have contributed to paving the way for the realization of the goal of zero nuclear weapons that has been sought since the beginning of the nuclear age. It is recognized that this goal may take a long time to achieve, but for the first time it is actually conceivable - indeed imperative - given the current existential dangers that threaten civilization.

UN can help ensure that the disaster of Hiroshima never happens again

But if there is to be any hope of actually realizing the goal of zero nuclear weapons worldwide, crucial for world security in the long run, it is also essential that the NPT regime not only survive but flourish and act as a real ban against the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Further, proliferation would substantially derogate from the goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons. The near-term ratification by the United States and entry into force of the CTBT would significantly contribute to the strengthening of the NPT. Thus it must be pursued with urgency. In addition, we must look for other more direct ways to outlaw the further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Important to the future of the non-proliferation regime, is the utilization of the United Nations, which represents the people of the world. The United Nations should call for the elimination of nuclear weapons as an integral part of human survival. If we want to be absolutely certain that the disaster of Hiroshima will never happen again, then our dedicated objective must be for the United Nations to propose a negotiating schedule to reach a world-wide, verifiable and enforceable agreement on zero nuclear weapons and declare that the development and possession of nuclear weapons is an international crime punishable by total political, economic, cultural, and if necessary, military world isolation and pressure. The continuing role of the United Nations, after this, would then be to prevent and punish violations. This is something that we can achieve and that we must achieve. Let us all work together to help make it happen. It is appropriate and timely for the United Nations to live up to its potential. ■

Biographical note

Ambassador Max M. Kampelman held major negotiating posts under both Democratic and Republican administrations during the 1980s. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe from 1980 to 1984 and then as Ambassador and Head of the U.S. Delegation to the Negotiations with the Soviet Union on Nuclear and Space Arms in Geneva from 1985 to 1989. Between 1987 and 1989 he also served as Counselor of the Department of State.

Ambassador Thomas Graham Jr. was involved in the negotiation and/or review process of every major international arms control agreement in which the United States participated between 1970 and 1997. These included the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) Treaties, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) Treaties, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty, the NPT, Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, and the CTBT.

Both Ambassador Kampelman and Ambassador Graham acted as motivating forces behind and signatories of the opinion-editorial Wall Street Journal *articles: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons and Toward a Nuclear-Weapon- Free World in January 2007 and January 2008 respectively.* ■