

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT MORE URGENT THAN EVER

By Mikhail Gorbachev



Nobel Laureate M. Gorbachev at a conference - of the World Political Forum on 'Overcoming Nuclear Dangers' - in April 2009 in Rome, with Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini and former U.S. Secretary of State George P. Schultz.

One of the most urgent problems of today's world is the danger of nuclear weapons. The unexpected nuclear test by North Korea on May 25 and the test-firing of a series of short-range missiles is the latest, frightening reminder.

Nothing fundamentally new has been achieved in the area of nuclear disarmament in the past decade and a half. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the arsenals of the nuclear powers still contain thousands of weapons, and the world is facing the very real possibility of a new arms race.

In effect, all that has been achieved in nuclear disarmament until now is the implementation of the agreements that were signed in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 (INF), which eliminated two classes of nuclear missiles, and the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which launched the biggest cutbacks of nuclear weapons ever. Thousands of tactical nuclear weapons were destroyed in accordance with this U.S.-Soviet agreement.

Subsequently, the pace of nuclear arms reduction has slowed and the mechanisms of control and verifications have weakened. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has not entered into force. The quantities of nuclear weapons held by Russia and the United States still far exceed the arsenals of all other nuclear powers combined, thus making it more difficult to bring them into the process of nuclear disarmament.

The nuclear non-proliferation regime is in jeopardy. While the two major nuclear powers bear the greatest responsibility for this state of affairs, it was the U.S. that abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), has failed to ratify the CTBT, and refused to conclude with Russia a legally binding, verifiable treaty on strategic offensive arms.

Only recently have we seen indications that the major nuclear powers understand the current state of affairs is untenable. The presidents of the U.S. and Russia have agreed to conclude before the end of this year a verifiable treaty reducing strategic offensive arms and have reaffirmed their countries' commitment to fulfill their obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. Their joint statement calls for a number of other steps to reduce nuclear dangers, including ratification by the U.S. of the CTBT.

Those are positive steps. But the problems and dangers far outnumber the achievements. The root cause of this is the erroneous evaluation of the events that lead to the end of the Cold War. The U.S. and some other countries saw these as a victory of the West and a green light for unilateralist policies. Accordingly, instead of creating a new architecture of international security based on real cooperation, an attempt was made to impose on the world a "monopoly leadership" by the sole remaining superpower and the institutions and organizations, like NATO, that were inherited from the Cold War and not reformed after it ended.

The use and the threat of force, which, of course, are illegal under the UN Charter, were reasserted as a "normal" mode of solving problems. Official documents rationalized doctrines of pre-emptive strike and the need for U.S. military superiority.

Humanity must be wary of a new arms race. Priority is still being given to financing of military programmes, and "defense" budgets far exceeding reasonable security requirements keep growing, as does the weapons trade. U.S. military expenditures are almost as high as those of the rest of the world combined. Disregard for international law and for peaceful ways of settling disputes, for the United Nations and its Security Council, is being proclaimed as a kind of policy.

As a result, we have witnessed a war in Europe -in Yugoslavia- something that had previously seemed inconceivable; a long-term deterioration in the Middle East; the war in Iraq; an extremely severe situation in Afghanistan and the increasingly alarming nuclear non-proliferation crisis.

Its main cause is the failure of the members of the nuclear club to fulfill their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to move towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. As long as this is the case, there will be a continued danger that other countries may acquire nuclear weapons. Today, dozens of states have the technical ability to do so.

In the final analysis, the nuclear danger can only be removed by abolishing nuclear weapons. But unless we address the need to demilitarize international relations, reduce military budgets, put an end to the creation of new kinds of weapons, and prevent the weaponisation of outer space, all talk about a nuclear-weapon-free world will be just empty rhetoric.

I think that after President Obama's speech on April 5, there is a real prospect that the U.S. will ratify the CTBT. This would be an important step forward, particularly in combination with a new strategic arms reduction treaty between the U.S. and Russia.

Following this, I believe that other nuclear powers, both the "official members" of the club and others, will have to, at the very least, declare a freeze on their nuclear arsenals and state their readiness to engage in negotiations on their limitation and reduction. If the holders of the largest stocks of nuclear weapons embark upon real reductions, others will no longer be able to sit it out and conceal their arsenals from international control.

This is an issue that we must raise now if we are to have the kind of trust without which common security cannot be achieved. (COPYRIGHT IPS)

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