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Taking Disarmament Seriously After 65 Years

By Gareth Evans

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People sometimes forget that the boy who cried wolf ended up being eaten. True, nobody has been killed by a nuclear weapon since the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 65 years ago this month. And, with Cold War tensions long past, it is all too easy for policymakers and publics to resist the doomsayers, to be complacent about the threats that these weapons continue to pose, and to regard attempts to eliminate them, or contain their spread, as well-meaning but futile.

But the truth is that it is sheer dumb luck — not statesmanship, good professional management, or anything inherently stable about the world's nuclear weapon systems — that has let us survive so long without catastrophe. With 23,000 nuclear weapons (equivalent to 150,000 Hiroshimas) still in existence — of which more than 7,000 of them are actively deployed, and more than 2,000 are still on dangerously high launch-on-warning alert — we cannot assume that our luck will hold indefinitely.

We know now — with multiple revelations about human error and system breakdown on both the American and Russian sides during the Cold War years and since — that even the most sophisticated command and control systems are not foolproof. We know that some of the newer nuclear-armed states start with systems much less sophisticated than these. And we know that, across the spectrum of sophistication, the risk of a destabilizing cyber attack breaking through cyber defenses is getting ever higher.

So it should be obvious that maintaining the status quo is intolerable. Moreover, there is the real risk of proliferation, especially in the Middle East, multiplying the dangers that nuclear weapons will be used by accident, miscalculation or willful intent.

There is also the sometimes exaggerated but unquestionably non-negligible risk of nonstate terrorist actors getting their hands on insufficiently secured weapons or fissile material and exploding a bomb in a major population center. And there is the disconcerting prospect that new civil nuclear-energy players will insist on building uranium-enrichment or plutonium-reprocessing plants of their own, rightly described as "bomb starter kits."

President Barack Obama came to office alert to all these threats and determined, as no other U.S. president — and almost no other world leader — has been, to eliminate them. His leadership inspired hope that more than a decade of sleepwalking was behind us, and brought some modest gains over the last 18 months.

They include the conclusion of the U.S.-Russian New START treaty, which would reduce deployed strategic weapons; some modest limitations on the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. nuclear doctrine; a Washington summit that reached useful agreement on the implementation of improved nuclear-security measures; and hard-to-achieve consensus at the recently concluded pentannual Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference on useful steps forward, including a 2012 conference on achieving a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

But New START ratification is going nowhere fast in the U.S. Senate, and progress on other key issues has been slow or shaky: bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force; starting negotiations on a new treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons; strengthening the nonproliferation regime with effective measures to detect violations and deter treaty walkouts; reaching agreement on some form of international management of the most sensitive aspects of the fuel cycle; and, above all, starting new rounds of serious disarmament talks, involving not just the two nuclear superpowers, but all eight nuclear-armed states.

Arms control and disarmament is a grinding, unglamorous business that brings few quick returns. With domestic issues and re-election anxieties now dominating most political agendas, it will be all too easy for commitment to wane. If that is to be avoided, continued leadership from the top — above all from Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev — will be indispensable. But there are a number of major contributions that less powerful states and leaders, as well as civil-society organizations, can make.

The most immediately important task is for those with credible voices to take every opportunity to bridge the complacency gap. The messages must be stark: Nuclear weapons are not only the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever invented, but the only ones

capable of destroying life on this planet as we know it. Carbon dioxide can also kill us, but not as quickly as bombs.

The second major task is to set a clear global disarmament action agenda — with credible timelines and milestones. It is probably too difficult right now to set a reliable target date for getting all the way to "global zero": There are still too many difficult technical problems of verification and enforcement to be worked through, as well as the obvious geopolitical and psychological ones. But it is not incredible to set a date like 2025 as a target for minimizing the world's nuclear arsenal to less than 10 percent of its current size, with very few weapons actually deployed, and their role in all states' military doctrine dramatically reduced.

Nor is it too early to begin work on crafting a new Nuclear Weapons Convention that provides a workable framework for multilateral negotiations, and on devising an independent high-level monitoring mechanism that would spell out clear benchmarks for progress, track how they are being met and create real pressure for change.

These are all recommendations of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. As the world commemorates the 65th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki this August, we should recognize that our luck is running out — and take these recommendations seriously.

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