



What the Commission Report says on:

RESPONSES TO ARGUMENTS FOR RETAINING NUCLEAR WEAPONS

(1) “Nuclear weapons have deterred, and will continue to, war between the major powers”. It is hard to contest the almost universally held view that the absence of great power conflict since 1945 must be at least in part attributed to the fear of nuclear war. On the face of it, nuclear weapons on the other side will always provide a formidable argument for caution, and it does seem that they generated a degree of mutual respect and careful handling between the U.S. and USSR during the Cold War (and, for that matter, between India and Pakistan since 1998 – although they did not stop the bloody Kargil heights conflict in 1999). That said, for all the war plans that were undoubtedly prepared, it is not clear that there is any evidence for the view that Soviet leaders, any more than their U.S. counterparts, were determined to actually go to war at any particular time, and only deterred by the existence of the other’s nuclear weapons. And for all the careful handling, there were dozens of false alarms on both sides during the Cold War years: the fact that nuclear war did not erupt from technical malfunction, operational stress or decision-maker miscalculation should to an important degree be attributed to sheer luck...

(2) “Nuclear weapons will deter any large scale conventional attacks”. Factors other than the possession of nuclear weapons or explosive devices can explain why the U.S., Russia, China, the U.K., France, India, Pakistan and North Korea have not been subject to large-scale attack. States and societies have learned from the devastation of World War II and the defeat of aggressors in almost every war since then. The enormous costs of war have to be weighed against any potential gains in starting them. Globalization intensifies the costs of territorial aggression as economic interdependence, especially in finance, leaves all states susceptible to isolation by others. While it cannot be proved either way, it does not seem likely that large-scale confrontations would

become more likely in the absence of nuclear weapons: there would still be compelling economic, political and military incentives to prevent disputes between major powers escalating into all-out confrontations...

(3) “Nuclear weapons will deter any chemical or biological weapons attack”. Some nuclear-armed states cite the threat of chemical or biological weapons as necessitating the retention of nuclear weapons. But these weapons do not now have anything like the destructive potential of nuclear weapon. They never will in the case of chemical weapons, and are unlikely to in the foreseeable future in the case of biological weapons, although the risk there is higher. The threat is certainly one that requires effective military deterrence, but this is best provided by the prospect of a crushing conventional response. It is extremely difficult to paint plausible chemical or biological attack scenarios that would threaten destruction on such a scale as to begin to make nuclear, as distinct from conventional, retaliation – with all the downside risks attached to using nuclear weapons – a proportional, necessary, and therefore credible response.

(4) “Nuclear weapons will deter terrorist attacks”. Whether or not terrorism can be deterred, or only prevented and defeated, and whether or not terrorist actors are themselves threatening or using nuclear weapons or explosive devices, nuclear weapons are manifestly neither strategically, tactically nor politically necessary or useful for this purpose. Terrorists do not usually have traditional or convenient sites that could be targeted for the use, or threat of use, of nuclear weapons: territory, industry, a population, or a regular army, which could be targets in a strike of retribution. The military challenge in such cases would be to locate the terrorist threat with enough precision and certainty to justify attacks on it.

The full text of *Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers*, Report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, Co-chairs Gareth Evans and Yoriko Kawaguchi (November 2009), is available at www.icnnd.org

If intelligence were not perfect and a nuclear strike conducted on a wrong target, the backlash would be enormous; and even if high-confidence intelligence did exist, then it is difficult to imagine that non-nuclear means could not be utilized for the target in question. To conduct nuclear strikes on another state, even one demonstrably complicit in a terrorist attack, would raise exceptionally difficult political, strategic and moral issues.

(5) “Extended nuclear deterrence is necessary to reassure allies”. This argument has application to the nuclear umbrella offered by Russia to its allies in the Commonwealth of Independent States Collective Security Treaty of 1992, but arises particularly in the context of the U.S. network of alliances put together in Europe, the Asia Pacific and Middle East in the 1950s... [The short answer is that] “extended deterrence” does not have to mean “extended *nuclear* deterrence”. United States conventional capability, when combined with that of each of the allies in question, constitutes a deterrent to any conceivable aggressor at least as credible as that posed by its nuclear weapons. Allies will certainly need to be totally confident that anything in the nature of an existential threat to them will be met by the full weight of that capability, but given the intensity of shared values and interests that underlie present alliance commitments they should be readily persuadable. Of course the real need over time is to create so stable and cooperative a security environment in every potentially volatile region, including East Asia, that reliance does not have to be placed by anyone on disproportionate conventional capability (with all the disincentives to nuclear disarmament by others that this tends to bring in its wake). [See further *Information Sheet No 11 on Extended Deterrence*]

(6) “Any major move toward disarmament is inherently destabilizing”. An abrupt change from a security system based on a balance of power – with nuclear weapons perceived, for better or worse, as a central element in the global, and some regional, power equations – to one based wholly on cooperation and strong international institutions, would require unprecedented levels of trust and mutual confidence and undoubtedly bring with it many instability risks. But an abrupt change is not what most serious advocates of nuclear disarmament propose. What is required is the progressive delegitimation of nuclear weapons, with states working to reduce the role of these weapons in their security policies, focusing first on getting to a minimization point where a global zero will be within reach, and only then on their total elimination, recognizing that each stage will take many years to achieve...

(7) “Nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented so there is no point trying to eliminate them”. Of course nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented, any more than any other human invention. But, like chemical and biological weapons, they can be outlawed. The two basic requirements for effective abolition, discussed in detail later in this report, are verification and enforcement procedures capable of detecting and responding swiftly and effectively to moves toward rearmament, and states being convinced that they could protect their vital interests without them. No one denies that satisfying these conditions will be extremely difficult in the case of nuclear weapons, but the fact that knowledge of how to make them will persist is not in itself any reason not to try to achieve their abolition.

(8) “Nuclear weapons confer unequalled status and prestige”. While acknowledging the historical force of this argument, it is arguable that the acquisition of nuclear weapons is no longer quite the natural route to political prestige it might once have appeared; nor may be it the case that the mastery of nuclear technology is the mark of an advanced industrial power to the extent it once may have been, given other – and less expensive – ways to make the same point, for example sophisticated information technology. True, the permanent members of the UN Security Council are all nuclear powers but that is not the case with most of the candidates to join them in a restructured Security Council. And conformity to the NPT – with its clear-cut prohibition on member states acquiring such weapons – tends to be claimed as a badge of honour rather than being criticised as a constraint. Equally, leaders of nuclear-armed states rarely acknowledge that they fear they will lose international status if they eliminate these arsenals. Yet it has to be acknowledged that this is clearly a concern in Russia, France and Pakistan, who appear to see a world without nuclear weapons raising the importance of other, currently non-nuclear-weapon, states relative to them. The response must be that as the delegitimation of nuclear weapons proceeds, and the retention of nuclear weapons becomes more and more clearly unacceptable to the rest of the world, and manifestly unnecessary from a security standpoint, then status considerations alone are not likely to prove sufficient to block movement toward minimization and ultimate elimination.

(9) “Disarmament is not necessary to advance non-proliferation”. For many years this has been a mantra for those among the nuclear-armed states who have wanted, usually for good reasons, to stop others acquiring nuclear weapons, but have not been willing to contemplate relinquishing their own. It is a position which not only ignores

the NPT obligations of the nuclear weapon states under Article VI, but also the political and psychological reality that adopting perceived double standards is no way to encourage support. And nothing can be achieved in such crucial areas as formally strengthening the terms of the NPT, strengthening the role of the IAEA, achieving the entry into force of the CTBT, and the negotiation of an effective Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, without the support of a much wider group of countries than just those five nuclear powers. The argument that those who have nuclear weapons continue to need them to deter possible existential threats to their own survival and those of their allies, but that other states who perceive themselves also to face potential existential threats should fend for themselves without the benefit of such a deterrent, is one that is absolutely bound to fall on deaf ears. It is not one that can be put seriously in this day and age.

(10) “Nuclear weapons do not inhibit other security cooperation between nuclear-armed states”. This variation on the previous argument is just as challengeable, at least so long as current force configurations and postures are maintained. A high level of trust and collaboration is manifestly needed for joint military operations against terrorists and states that support and harbour them. It is also needed for common early warning systems for missile launches and the development of joint ballistic missile defence systems; more stringent nuclear and missile export controls; programs to enhance safety and accountability for stockpiles of nuclear weapons and materials, and ultimately the verifiable cessation of production; internationalization of nuclear fuel cycle elements; and eased mutual access to sensitive facilities. It is difficult, to say the least, to imagine such intense cooperation in an environment when the major nuclear armed states still have thousands of nuclear warheads pointed at one another, with more than 2,000 of them on dangerously high launch-on-warning alert, and while all of them are modernizing their strategic nuclear forces to ensure guaranteed devastating strike capability against each other.

(11) “Nuclear weapons cost less than conventional forces”. It is often claimed that nuclear forces cost significantly less than general-

purpose forces, and in the military budgets of any given year, this is true: in Russia and the U.S., for example, 10-15 per cent is allocated to strategic nuclear forces, including support systems. But taking into account the cost of a weapon system's entire lifecycle, which for strategic nuclear forces amounts to two to three decades or more, as well as the cost of safely dismantling and utilizing nuclear weapons after they have been withdrawn from service, not to mention the expense of disposing of the uranium and plutonium contained within warheads, then the calculation changes significantly. And what should be brought into the equation also (apart from the obvious point that the risks associated with the retention of nuclear weapons might be thought to outweigh any conceivable financial advantage) is the opportunity cost of maintaining these weapons rather than applying the resources to solve other military and security tasks. Significant intellectual and technological assets capable of being reallocated to other real and important international security needs are being locked up in support of nuclear confrontation.

(12) “Nuclear weapons establishments are needed to maintain expertise”. If put crudely this argument has an evidently circular quality, in the sense that if nuclear weapons were eliminated expertise would hardly be required to maintain them. But it is fair to make the point that, even on the most optimistic disarmament timetable, nuclear weapons will take a long time to abolish completely and systems need to be professionally maintained meanwhile; that real expertise will be needed throughout the minimization and elimination process to ensure effective verification and other security measures; and that it is important accordingly to ensure the continuing training of new specialists in this area. Acknowledging this reality – and also having governments take steps to identify compelling alternative missions for nuclear weapons laboratories and relevant services as their present roles wind down – may help to defuse some of the interest group political pressures that traditionally come from these areas and make significant disarmament hard to politically deliver.

[Section 6]