

Nuclear Weapons, Human Security, and the Future of Disarmament¹

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Last year, the Olof Palme International Center, International Peace Bureau, and International Trade Union Confederation published a report titled “Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future.” It begins, “The world stands at a crossroads... [We are] faced with a choice between an existence based on confrontation and aggression or one to be rooted in a transformative peace agenda and common security.... [Humanity] faces the existential threats of nuclear war, climate change and pandemics. This is compounded by a toxic mix of inequality, extremism, nationalism, gender violence, and shrinking democratic space.” The report continues, “How humanity responds to these threats will decide our very survival.”² In my view, “humanity” must include all of us, from all walks of life, wherever we live. We cannot leave our future survival to governments alone.

I think the disarmament community needs to return to the basic concepts of nonviolence and human security. At least in part, we need to get out of a short-term perpetually reactive mode and make space to think together about new ways to organize for the future. But first I’ll address the immediate crisis of the nuclear disarmament regime.

Confronting the Doomsday Clock³

“Deterrence,” *the threatened use of nuclear weapons*, has been reaffirmed as the “cornerstone” of U.S. national security by every President, Republican or Democrat, since 1945, when Harry Truman, a Democrat, oversaw the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Russia and other would-be “great powers” have increasingly modeled their own national security policies (and their economies) on the U.S. model.

In fact, nuclear weapons are already being “used” by Russia, the U.S. and NATO to provide top cover for their conventional military operations. In 2021, Admiral Charles Richard, then head of U.S. Strategic Command, in charge of nuclear war planning, wrote: “We must acknowledge the foundational nature of our nation’s strategic nuclear forces, as they create the ‘maneuver space’ for us to project conventional military power strategically.”⁴ We are clearly seeing this concept

¹ This article is based on a 28 February 2023 presentation by the author to the NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace and Security and the All Souls Unitarian Church (NYC) Nuclear Disarmament Task Force.

² *Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future*, p. 5.

https://commonsecurity.org/CommonSecurity_Report_2022_Blue.pdf

³ The Doomsday Clock currently stands at 90 seconds to midnight. [Current Time - 2023 - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists \(thebulletin.org\)](https://thebulletin.org)

⁴ [Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence | Proceedings - February 2021 Vol. 147/2/1,416 \(usni.org\)](https://www.usni.org/Proceedings/Proceedings-February-2021)

being played out by Russia in the Ukraine. Richard also warned: “There is a real possibility that a regional crisis with Russia or China could escalate quickly to a conflict involving nuclear weapons, if they perceived a conventional loss would threaten the regime or state.”⁵

The need to reboot nuclear disarmament has never been more urgent. All of the nuclear-armed states are engaged in costly programs to qualitatively upgrade and in some cases quantitatively increase their nuclear arsenals. A new nuclear arms race is already underway -- compounded by offensive cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, developing hypersonic capacities, a return to intermediate-range delivery systems, and the production of delivery systems capable of carrying either conventional or nuclear payloads.

The speed and complexity of the interactions of all these technologies and the immense volumes of data involved accelerate the trend towards automating elements of decision-making, even where human beings remain formally in the loop. These systems contribute to new imponderables in confrontations between countries that also have nuclear arms. Escalation of this kind of warfare, should it get out of hand, would lead to nuclear war. It also increases the danger of miscalculation in a crisis, amid a global context that is generating crises involving nuclear-armed countries at an accelerating pace.

With Russia’s illegal war of aggression on Ukraine, which could eventually draw the militaries of the U.S., its NATO allies and Russia into direct conflict, exacerbated by Russia’s repeated threats to use nuclear weapons, the specter of nuclear war has risen to its highest level since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Other festering nuclear flashpoints include Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, South Asia, and the Middle East. The scale and tempo of war games by nuclear-armed states and their allies, including nuclear drills, are increasing. Ongoing missile tests, and frequent close encounters between military forces of nuclear-armed states exacerbate nuclear dangers.

All of this reflects a failure of the nuclear-armed states—and most ironically the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council who are most responsible for upholding international security—to honor their disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT was signed in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. Its initial duration was 25 years. In 1995, the treaty was extended indefinitely, with a Review Conference to be held every five years.⁶ Nearly every country in the world (190 in all) is a party to the NPT, 186 of them non-nuclear-armed states. Four countries remain outside the treaty: India, Israel, and Pakistan (all nuclear-armed) and South Sudan. North Korea, now nuclear-armed, withdrew from the treaty in 2003.

The NPT’s disarmament obligations, enshrined in its Preamble and Article VI, have been reiterated and reinforced by pledges made in connection with the 1995 Extension Decision, the 2000 and 2010 Review Conferences, and the International Court of Justice’s 1996 Advisory Opinion, which provided the authoritative interpretation of Article VI. The Court found unanimously, “There exists an obligation to pursue *in good faith* and *bring to a conclusion*

⁵ [Charles Richard, U.S. Strategic Command chief: Nuclear war with China or Russia 'real possibility' - Washington Times](#)

⁶ [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(reachingcriticalwill.org\)](#)

negotiation leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.”⁷

The Tenth NPT Review Conference, which took place in August 2022, was an abject failure, not because it couldn’t agree on a final outcome document, but because the nuclear-armed states haven’t made good on their fundamental nuclear disarmament obligations under the treaty.⁸

Failure of the 2005 and 2015 Review Conferences to reach agreement on final outcome documents due to the unwillingness of the nuclear-armed states to implement their disarmament obligations provided impetus for negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) by non-nuclear-armed states in 2017.⁹ This treaty entered into force on January 22, 2021. Framed in terms of deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any nuclear weapons use, the TPNW prohibits states parties from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory, and prohibits them from assisting, encouraging, or inducing anyone to engage in any of these activities.

There are currently 92 signatories and 68 states parties to the TPNW.¹⁰ While all of them are *non-nuclear-armed* States Parties to the NPT, the TPNW is binding *only* on those States which have signed and ratified it. The States Parties to the TPNW maintain that negotiating the treaty was a good faith effort to implement Article VI of the NPT. However, the nuclear-armed states parties to the NPT are hostile to the TPNW, asserting that it undermines the NPT. Since no nuclear-armed state or state under a “nuclear umbrella” has joined the TPNW, it is not yet a disarmament treaty.

The hard truth is that neither the NPT nor the TPNW can achieve disarmament for the foreseeable future because it is clear that none of the nuclear-armed states are willing to reimagine a global system based on Common Security, rather than nuclear coercion—euphemistically called “deterrence.” Russia’s announcement that it has “suspended” its participation in the START Treaty, which is set to expire in 2026 unless a follow-on agreement can be negotiated, threatens to put an end to arms control as we’ve known it.

So, what is to be done?

In 1946, Albert Einstein reportedly sent a fundraising appeal to prominent Americans asking for contributions “to let the people know that a new type of thinking is essential” in the atomic age. Einstein’s telegram included his prophetic warning: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.” From this and other statements, we know that the new thinking Einstein was calling

⁷ [Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons \(icj-cij.org\)](https://www.ijc-cij.org/)

⁸ [A Four-Week Festival of Double Standards - IDN-InDepthNews](https://www.idn-indepthnews.com/)

⁹ [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/20170701.tpnw.shtml), United Nations (2017)

¹⁰ TPNW signature and ratification status. https://www.icanw.org/signature_and_ratification_status

for was to abandon competition and preparation for war, and to focus instead on cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.¹¹

Einstein's counsel was good advice then, now timelier than ever. But what will it take to actually craft security arrangements based on these principles? First, we must recognize that even power holders who are rational and humane as individuals are constrained by military-industrial complexes and national security states that are hell-bent on unlimited war preparations. The shift in consciousness that Einstein called for can only become effective in the halls of power when a mass movement outside those halls forces the hand of policy makers. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt reportedly told a meeting with progressive activists in the 1930's: "Okay, you've convinced me. Now go out there and make me do it." More on this later, when I talk about The Poor People's Campaign.

The Human Security Paradigm

In times of great crisis, there are often calls for new thinking. With the existential threats of nuclear war and climate crisis, rising authoritarian nationalisms, and democracy under attack around the world, we are in a civilizational emergency. It seems clear to me that new thinking is not only in order, but an imperative.

This was the hope when the United Nations was founded in 1945. What if the governments of the most powerful states had enshrined the principles of the UN Charter in their national doctrines and had based their foreign policies on nonviolence, cooperation and common security, and their domestic policies on economic, racial, gender, ethnic, religious and age equity?

This new paradigm is what is meant by human security—arrangements that promote universal human wellbeing and environmental preservation rather than predatory economic agendas maintained by military threats under the pretext of "national security." Human security will not be realized in the short term, but perhaps the forthcoming UN Secretary-General's "New Agenda for Peace" and the September 2024 United Nations Summit for the Future, along with parallel civil society initiatives, offer an opportunity to advance some new thinking. In response to the call for civil society organizations to share priorities and recommendations for a "New Agenda for Peace," NGOs including Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy have submitted comments addressing the commitments to promote peace and prevent conflicts, and abide by international law and ensure justice.¹²

My organization, Western States Legal Foundation, participated in the Peace and Security thematic working group, which developed proposals for the 20-21 March 2023 civil society

¹¹ Robert R. Holt, Meeting Einstein's challenge: New thinking about nuclear weapons (3 April 2015). <https://thebulletin.org/2015/04/meeting-einsteins-challenge-new-thinking-about-nuclear-weapons/>

¹² Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy, [Civil Society Submission to the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Regarding a "New Agenda for Peace."](#) January 2023.

Global Futures Forum,¹³ in preparation for the UN Summit of the Future, as well as the New Agenda for Peace.

Of particular interest to us is a proposal on Implementing the UN Charter Article 26 obligation on disarmament to release resources for peace, the United Nations, and economic and social development, including environmental protection. Article 26 of the United Nations Charter states: “*In order to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources, the Security Council shall be responsible for formulating ... plans to be submitted to the Members of the United Nations for the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments.*”

Unfortunately, the Security Council has failed to implement this obligation, and annual military expenditures, arms manufacturing, and weapons deployments have increased astronomically since 1945. The global combined military budget in 2022 was 2.3 trillion U.S. dollars, approximately ten times (in equivalent value) the global military budget in 1947.¹⁴

In general, the United Nations has failed to link its disarmament and development goals. The former include nuclear disarmament under the NPT¹⁵ and TPNW as well as General and Complete Disarmament.¹⁶ The latter include the Millennium Development Goals, now the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁷

The proposal we submitted in partnership with several other NGOs:

- Reaffirms the obligation under Article 26 of the UN Charter to establish a plan for arms control and disarmament with the least diversion of resources for economic and social development;
- Calls on the UN Security Council, UN General Assembly, and other relevant UN bodies to take action with respect to Article 26; and
- Calls on all States to implement this obligation through ratification of bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements, coupled with progressive and systematic reductions of military budgets and commensurate increases in financing for the sustainable development goals, climate protection and other national contributions to the UN and its specialized agencies.

¹³ [Global Futures Forum – Coalition for the UN We Need \(c4unwn.org\)](https://www.c4unwn.org/)

¹⁴ Exact figures from 1947 are not available, but an assessment based on available sources at the time is made in [Military expenditure data: a 40-year overview](#), by Wuyi Omitoogun and Elisabeth Sköns, in *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*.

¹⁵ The NPT is technically not a UN treaty, though the UN Office of Disarmament serves as its secretariat during the 5-year Review Conferences and Preparatory Committee meetings.

¹⁶ [Rethinking General and Complete Disarmament in the Twenty-First Century](#), UNODA Occasional Paper No. 28 (October 2016). The author of this article is co-author of a chapter titled, “A circle that can't be squared: Broad-spectrum arms racing and nuclear disarmament,” pp. 64 – 74 (<https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210584555>)

¹⁷ [THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/)

Fully cognizant of how unlikely it is that these measures will be implemented by the UN Security Council for the foreseeable future, our proposal recommends that, “The UNGA resolution should also mandate the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs to produce an annual publication providing publics with detailed information on global military spending and the social and environmental impacts of the diversion of resources.” This could be very helpful in raising awareness of publics around the world, who in turn can bring political pressure to bear on their own governments to implement the essence of Article 26 at the national level.

Our proposal also recognizes a number of civil society initiatives and networks campaigning for cuts in national and global military budgets in order to release resources for peace, public health, poverty alleviation, climate protection and sustainable development. Support for these initiatives is of the utmost importance. One of them is the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, led by Bishop William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis in the United States.

It is clear to me that the multiple national and global crises we are confronting, including nuclear weapons, climate change, systemic racism, a growing wealth gap and rising national authoritarianisms arise from the same foundational causes, and that we are unlikely to prevail on any of them as single issues. We need to come together as never before to build political power through durable, diverse, multi-issue coalitions, networks, and networks of networks based on shared commitments to universal, indivisible human security. And we need to fundamentally challenge the dominant definition of “national security” through military means, at any cost. We must recognize and nurture emerging national and global movements for human security that can effect a real change in fiscal priorities and put Einstein’s new paradigm on legislative agendas around the world.

The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

Exactly one year before his tragic assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared: “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.... we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”¹⁸

The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, has picked up Dr. King’s unfinished work, weaving the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, systemic poverty, environmental devastation, militarism and the war economy and a distorted moral narrative of Christian nationalism that blames people for their own poverty and claims there’s “not enough”, into one “moral fusion” campaign. In a 2020 audit, the Poor People’s Campaign found that in the United States, the richest country in history, 140 million people (43% of the population and 52% of children) are poor or low income, unable to afford a \$400 emergency.¹⁹

¹⁸ [American Rhetoric: Martin Luther King, Jr. A Time to Break Silence \(Declaration Against the Vietnam War\)](#)

¹⁹ [There are 140 Million Poor and Low-Income People in the U.S. – Poor People's Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

The Poor Peoples Campaign Moral Budget calls for cutting U.S. military spending by half (\$350 billion) including by closing 60% of U.S. foreign military bases, ending the endless wars, and dismantling and eliminating nuclear weapons.²⁰ With active organizations in some 40 States, the Poor People's campaign is centering the voices of poor and impacted people, supported by an extraordinary range of constituencies including labor unions, faith organizations, racial justice, anti-poverty, environmental and peace groups, and is building political power by mobilizing, organizing, registering, and educating for a movement that votes. I encourage everyone to get involved; visit their website at <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org>

The Doomsday clock is ticking. By doubling down on the concept of national security through military might at any cost, governments of the nuclear-armed states and their allies are putting humanity on the road to Armageddon. People everywhere, together, need to rise up nonviolently and demand implementation of a different concept of security, one based on cooperation among governments to make meeting human needs and protecting the environment their highest priorities. This is our challenge.

Jacqueline Cabasso has been involved in nuclear disarmament, peace, environmental and social justice advocacy at the local, national, and international levels for more than 40 years. Since 1984, she has served as Executive Director of the Western States Legal Foundation (WSLF), based in Oakland, California, a member of the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms. She was a "founding mother" of the Abolition 2000 Global Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons in 1995 and continues to serve on its Coordinating Committee. Since 2007, she has served as North American Coordinator for Mayors for Peace. She also serves as National Co-convener for United for Peace and Justice. Jackie is a co-author of Nuclear Disorder or Cooperative Security? U.S. Weapons of Terror, the Global Proliferation Crisis and Paths to Peace (2007) and the co-author of Risking Peace: Why We Sat in the Road (1985), an account of the huge 1983 nonviolent protest at the Livermore California Nuclear Weapons Laboratory and the subsequent mass trial conducted by WSLF. She is a contributing author to a collection of papers entitled, Rethinking General and Complete Disarmament in the Twenty-First Century, published by the United Nations in 2016. She received the International Peace Bureau's 2008 Sean MacBride Peace Award, and the Agape Foundation's 2009 Enduring Visionary Prize. She can be reached wslf@earthlink.net.

²⁰ [Poor People's Moral Budget – Poor People's Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org)