

# Time for the Abolition of Nuclear Arms

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During the Cold War the dominant strategic doctrine was MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction. The irony of the English acronym was grimly acknowledged by proponents and critics alike. You would have to be crazy to initiate a nuclear war that would bring destruction on a global scale.

It appears, however, that those MAD days are upon us again. On Thursday, August 8, 2019 an experimental Russian rocket exploded over the White Sea off Arkangelsk on Russia's northeast coast. Soon after local officials reported radiation levels 16 times normal background levels. Intelligence analysts suggest that a small nuclear reactor powering what Russians call the Petrel ("*Burevestnik*"), and NATO officials call the Skyfall, missile had malfunctioned. A week later the residents of Nenoska, the locality closest to the missile test site were told to prepare to evacuate, doctors who were treating accident survivors were forcibly evacuated, and the hospital rooms of the patients sealed off.

Petrel is said by some to be the cornerstone of the Russian re-armament program, designed not only to evade arms control treaties but even the most sophisticated anti-missile systems. The nuclear engine would propel it long distances on an evasive course that could not be readily anticipated thereby evading any countermeasures.

Russians are also said to be experimenting with an undersea drone that could operate autonomously as a second strike weapon in the event of a nuclear attack on their country. Better known is a program for a very high altitude hypersonic missile

that flies five times the speed of sound with a capacity for evasive navigation, announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin in a 2018 address. It too would defeat anti-missile technology.

### *A New Nuclear Arms Race*

Though these weapons are only in the planning or development stage, they reveal the enormous risk a new nuclear arms race between Russia and the United States poses for the world. Already in August both governments sent a strong signal, exiting from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) on short and mid-range missiles, and neither is expected to renew New Start, the treaty capping strategic nuclear weapons, when it expires in 2021. Neither is signatory to the 2017 UN Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

What is more, the defense strategies of both Russia and the USA continue to permit the use of nuclear weapons against nonnuclear threats, compounding the risk of irreparable conflict. Russia for some time has openly regarded nuclear weapons as a hedge against U.S. and NATO dominance in conventional war-making capacity.

The February 2018 Nuclear Posture Review of the U.S. administration included the option for use against nonnuclear “significant strategic attacks,” including global terrorists and biological and chemical weapons.

Except for China, no nuclear power has a No First Use pledge. None of today’s nine nuclear powers, not even the five who are signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), declare they hold their nuclear arsenals solely for deterrence purposes, as the U.S. bishops 1983 pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace” requested.

### *What Is To Be Done?*

Against this background, next spring’s NPT Review Conference risks developing into a diplomatic free-for-all with nonnuclear states charging the nuclear-weapons-possessing state parties to the treaty (the U.S., Russia, U.K., France and China) with violations of their commitments to disarmament under Article VI of the treaty.

Already this past spring's preparatory meeting broke up without a consensus statement because the Nuclear-Weapons-Possessing States claimed their interests had not been included in the draft consensus. In the end the chairman issued a report under his own authority.

What should be done to avoid charging down the path to a war Ronald Reagan said "should never be fought and can never be won"? The 2020 NPT Review Conference is sure to be the site of contentious debates and may provide a push to revive prior initiatives that were approved at previous conferences but have yet to be enacted, like establishing a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, as well as renewed collective efforts to build support for the TPNW.

At the very least, the 2020 NPT Review Conference promises to be a contentious, unproductive affair. The nonnuclear states have grown impatient with the nuclear states' double-standards, enforcing the non-proliferation rules while shirking their own responsibilities for nuclear disarmament. It is hard to see it standing while other arms control treaties – including bilateral ones – are abandoned and flouted. Without a new consensus on disarmament, the NPT will be merely a fig leaf concealing the unwillingness of the NWS to disarm.

The 2017 ban-treaty conference displayed an emerging global consensus between non-nuclear states, including the Holy See, and civil society organizations on the abolition of nuclear weapons; and this year's NPT Review Conference showed the resistance of the nonnuclear majority to bullying by the Nuclear Weapons-Possessing States and the willingness of the majority of countries to go it alone in defining the terms of international security until the big powers, their allies and umbrella states are ready to join them.

In the meantime, we can expect activists, arms control experts, think-tanks and pundits to work for the extension of the New Start Treaty and to build public pressure on all sides for commitments to No First Use policies. The renewal of New Start represents the last opportunity to hold in place a significant restraint on an all-out nuclear arms race.

With the U.S. presidential campaign underway, American citizens, in particular, have an opportunity to test potential candidates on their nuclear good sense. There is little likelihood of a Democratic candidate endorsing No First Use in advance of election, but raising consciousness during the campaign increases the chance the issue will be on the agenda of a new administration in January 2021.

No First Use will be a harder sell. A bill (HR 669) was introduced in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-18) with 82 co-sponsors, but failed to reach the floor for a vote. Morally-speaking, No First Use is an elementary commitment for an ethically warranted nuclear policy. But the politics are tough. Nonetheless, No First Use is a check against initiating all-out nuclear war, and a baseline for establishing a path toward Nuclear Zero, eliminating nuclear weapons as instruments of war.

We should not assume that Russia under Vladimir Putin is without its own counter-pressures to the nuclear build-up. A number of serious military accidents in the last year have stirred anxiety in the public and the military itself. There is discontent, even envy, in other branches of the Russian military over the excessive portion of the state budget given to nuclear arms development.

The large allocation for nuclear weapons also aggravates domestic inequalities in Russia and sacrifices basic public services. Likewise, it magnifies regional discontents. During the Petrel incident Muscovites were urged to remain indoors for a couple of days, while those in the Arkangelsk area, fully exposed to the radiation, received no warning. The rush to re-arm has placed strains on Russian society and the Russian military that may encourage the government to slow the pace of re-armament and to re-engage arms control and disarmament efforts.

### *The Church's Role*

Abolition has been the goal of the Church's teaching on nuclear weapons since Saint John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* in 1963. Just two year later, in 1965, the Second Vatican Council,

writing of nuclear weapons, declared that “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and humanity. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 80). In addition, it condemned the nuclear arms race and the issuance of and blind obedience to immoral orders, and urged the re-evaluation of war “with an entirely new attitude.” Those principles remain today the core of the Church’s teaching on war in the nuclear age. They are principles every Catholic should know just like the sacredness of human life (from conception to natural death).

Twenty years later the U.S. bishops, following St. Pope John Paul II’s address to the 1982 UN General Assembly, argued for conditional acceptance of nuclear deterrence, but the conditions they set, particularly that the purpose of nuclear arsenals be solely for deterrence, are no longer satisfied. For a number of years Vatican diplomats protested in international fora that deterrence had been used as a cover for the failure of nuclear-armed states to undertake further disarmament.

In 2017 at a Vatican conference Pope Francis effectively condemned deterrence, declaring, with reference to nuclear weapons, that “the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned.” The first thing that must be done is to make this teaching Church-wide and parish-deep. The Church’s condemnation of deterrence and its support for abolition ought to be publicly taught by bishops, military chaplains, pastoral workers and moral theologians. It should play a role in the advice dispensed by teachers, spiritual directors and pastoral counselors. Like the U.S. bishops’ pastoral in 1983, it should be openly discussed and debated, and it should be communicated in college and university courses as well as in catechesis for young people and adults.

Open discussion of the USCCB’s 1983 pastoral letter altered the opinion of a sizable portion of the U.S. Catholic population. It was taught in military academies and universities and served as a background for policy debates in Congress. As the debate over the new nuclear arms race grows Catholics in nuclear-

armed countries should be in the forefront of the debate making the case for halting the arms build-up, strengthening policies of disarmament, and laboring for the ultimate abolition of nuclear weapons.

Encouragement needs to be given to support measures to strengthen the TPNW and bring it into force, as also the elaboration of safeguards and disarmament mechanisms that the treaty left vague.

In addition, the Holy See, in continuity with its earlier policies and with the help of bishops in nuclear-weapons-possessing, allied and “umbrella” states, will have to work for other much-needed initiatives, like the adoption of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and a Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).

As old safeguards go by the way and aggressive new policies are put in place we can expect that public opposition will grow around the world to the folly of today’s “anything-goes” nuclear era. Clamorous events like the recent Petrel/Skyfall explosion, or funding controversies along with testing and deployment efforts will be points of contestation where committed Catholics can and should engage.

Lay groups like Pax Christi, Pax Romana and Caritas Internationalis as well as national and diocesan justice and peace commissions ought to educate their people on the issues and Church teaching. As in the 1980s, it is time for Catholics and all Christians to join with men and women of goodwill “to say ‘No’ to nuclear war.”