

Nuclear Deterrence and Conventional Weapons Control

Presentation to the International Conference “Building a Nuclear Weapon Free World” in Astana by Kevin Miletic, SCRAP project, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London

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Mr Minister,

Excellencies

Ladies & Gentlemen,

On behalf of my Director, Dr Dan Plesch – Director of the Centre for International Studies & Diplomacy at SOAS University of London – who unfortunately could not be here today, I would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament for their invitation to participate in this Conference.

I intend to address an issue that usually makes disarmament practitioners very uncomfortable. This issue is the relationship between nuclear deterrence and conventional weapons.

As you know, certain countries perceive conventional weapons as a major threat to their national security. For them, nuclear deterrence is a means to offset a perceived conventional inferiority by threatening nuclear retaliation in the event of a major conventional attack.

This argument has become firmly anchored in the military doctrine of these countries and used as a primary reason for the justification of nuclear deterrence policy and the subsequent retention of nuclear weapons.

This literally amounts to saying that as long as there is a perceived threat of major conventional attack, those countries are entitled to hold on to nuclear deterrence. Following this logic, conventional disarmament becomes a prerequisite for nuclear disarmament to happen.

Now, this issue will not be solved by dismissing or ignoring it. If one really wants to make progress on phasing out nuclear deterrence, we have to constructively address this delicate relationship and develop a sound counter-argument with a view to reconciling conventional and nuclear disarmament.

We can start by having a look at historical cases to give us an idea of how this relationship really works:

A case in point is New Zealand. New Zealand, as a member of the Western nuclear alliance, were drawn into various wars (Korea and Vietnam) and maintained conventional military forces suitable for attacking other countries. They abolished nuclear weapons in 1987. This shift also transformed their perceptions and policies on conventional weapons and war. They abolished fighter aircrafts and cancelled orders to buy Frigates, and instead re-oriented their policy and military capacity to participation in UN peacekeeping and other UN sanctioned operations.

We should also recall that during the late 80s and early 90s, many nuclear and conventional disarmament negotiations were conducted in parallel (INF 1987, CFE 1990, START I 1991, Chemical Weapons Convention 1993) and these were successful partly because they generated de-linked synergies.

Perhaps it is no surprise and may even sound commonsensical to say that simultaneous efforts in the fields of conventional and nuclear disarmament are mutually reinforcing. But lately, conventional arms control has rarely been mentioned in the context of nuclear disarmament, except for those who use it as a rationale for indefinite possession. The fundamental difference here is that conventional or nuclear disarmament are not seen as preconditions for the other **to** occur, but rather measures that energize and sustain disarmament **as**

it occurs. This challenges directly the dominant discourse based on a fallacious notion of conditionality and thereby changes completely the nature of the debate.

This is why it is essential to find a way to reconcile conventional and nuclear disarmament. In this regard, a comprehensive approach to disarmament has the advantage of providing a framework that makes thinking about conventional and nuclear disarmament not incompatible but complementary.

At first sight, it may seem bizarre, if not completely off topic, to focus on comprehensive disarmament while talking about nuclear deterrence but, whether we like it or not, proponents of nuclear deterrence establish “hard linkages” between conventional and nuclear weapons. If this relationship is not addressed it will remain a major road block on the path to nuclear disarmament. So one way to go about it, would be to explore this comprehensive disarmament agenda in pragmatic and operational detail – not just vague aspirations.

I concede that it is not an easy exercise to conceptualize what shape this comprehensive approach would take, whether a single comprehensive disarmament treaty; a comprehensive “framework convention” that sets forth principles for future multilateral negotiations based perhaps on an update of the McCloy-Zorin agreement; or even a sort of Helsinki process-bis where baskets of issues that have an impact on strategic stability are identified and discussed in parallel and where each basket would deal with a specific system of weapons.

It seems appropriate to conclude by quoting the former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ms Angela Kane, who said that (and I quote): “ *Perhaps the time has come (...) to revisit the McCloy and Zorin agreement on comprehensive disarmament. Some useful questions to ask would include – how are they (these measures) still relevant, can they be adapted to present conditions, do they offer a means to reconcile WMD disarmament with conventional arms control (...) This might also offer the best*

scenario for the future of the NPT, the future of the non-proliferation regime, and the future of international peace and security”¹.

In this regard, I must highlight President Nazarbayev’s Manifesto “The World. The 21st Century” in which he calls for the adoption of a comprehensive program for disarmament. This bold initiative is a very very important step in the right direction and needs to be built on.

Thank you for your attention. These remarks draw on a soon to be released UN paper titled “Rethinking General and Complete Disarmament in the 21st Century” and I hope you found them of interest.

1 Remarks at the 2014 Moscow Nonproliferation Conference – “Outlook for the 2015 NPT Review Conference and Beyond: The Roles of the Russian Federation and the United States”