

NOT A OPTION! Don't even think of starting nuclear war.

Announcing a long-term, international campaign which aims to have all nuclear armed states permanently disavow the option of initiating nuclear war. Regarding states which are allied to nuclear armed states, the aim is to have them explicitly reject that nuclear warfare would be initiated – or even threatened – on their 'behalf'. These stances must be regardless of circumstances, i.e. without exceptions.

In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we have seen the horror of deliberate initiation of nuclear warfare. The absence of such warfare since 1945, suggests that the world learned a lesson. However, most nuclear armed states persist in asserting the 'right' to initiate nuclear warfare. If we are to avert another Hiroshima or Nagasaki – or something far, far worse – we must categorically reject any such 'right' and with it the threat to exercise that 'right', i.e. the option to initiate nuclear warfare.

A majority of the countries of the world recently concluded negotiations on the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons. It is anticipated that in the coming years, fifty of them will bring the Treaty into force. Unfortunately, it can also be anticipated that they will get little or no help from nuclear armed states and their allies. However, the campaign proposed herein is motivated by the belief that one the Treaty's key prohibitions can be partially fulfilled in the years ahead; namely the prohibition on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

While directly addressing only the initial use or threat of use of nuclear weapons and perhaps achieving only majority acceptance of this norm among the nuclear armed states, we believe that progress on this front will be of immense long-term significance. In order to fully appreciate this crucial point, it is necessary first to spell out very clearly what is meant by "initiating nuclear warfare." This covers four categories:

(1) "Preventive" first strike. Before the adversary has even prepared an attack, attacking them with nuclear weapons in hopes of thwarting their ability or 'sharply' degrading their capacity to retaliate, thereby 'winning'. This option is rarely if ever openly discussed. As a threat it is not credible. (If one were serious about a preventive strike, one would not talk about it, one would do it.) Against an adversary who has not yet achieved nuclear capability it might 'succeed', but it would be morally bereft – "using nuclear weapons to prevent the use of nuclear weapons." (And it would open the proliferation floodgates.) Against a nuclear armed adversary, its chances of success are poor and breaking the nuclear taboo by choice rather than necessity would make one an eternal enemy of humankind.

(2) "Preemptive" first strike. Launching an attack when convinced by some line of evidence (short of detecting the actual launch of an attack by the adversary) that a nuclear attack is "imminent" and "inevitable" in the hope of 'significantly' degrading that attack, thereby sustaining less damage than the adversary. This stance forecloses any last-minute resolution of a crisis – or change of heart of the adversary. It also risks that the "line of evidence" is faulty (or even intentional misleading). But most importantly, it makes every confrontation between nuclear armed rivals highly unstable. (Again it is not a threat one normally makes, rather it is implicit in how one deploys ones weapons, especially during a crisis.)

(3) "Launch on warning." Launching when convinced by warning-system signals that an attack has already been launched (but before the actual impact of such an attack). This is meant to ensure that nuclear weapons systems which are vulnerable to preemption can serve their 'retaliatory' function. It does little or nothing to lessen damage to ones country. Warning systems are imperfect, being made and operated by fallible human beings. Since it is perfectly possible to make weapon systems which are invulnerable, it is not clear what is achieved by retaining vulnerable systems; they simply exacerbate instabilities. The launch-readiness required by launch on warning is virtually indistinguishable from that required for a preemptive strike, exacerbating the fears and instabilities associated with that scenario.

(4) “Nuclear escalation.” Resorting to nuclear weapon use when ones non-nuclear-weapons means of countering a non-nuclear-weapon attack are proving insufficient. The threat by a conventionally weaker adversary to drag the conventionally stronger adversary down with it may seem credible if the stronger adversary is not nuclear armed. But if the adversary is nuclear armed it is far from clear that nuclear escalation will actually engender restraint. It is more likely to elicit a tit-for-tat retaliation and, thus, risks a further bouts of escalation. For many nuclear war planners, this means that one should only threaten nuclear escalation if one is in a position of “escalation dominance” – a huge arms race driver. When, within an alliance, nuclear escalation is threatened on behalf of a weaker country, the threat’s credibility is inherently unconvincing. Forward deployment is meant to alleviate this problem, by creating a “use it or lose it” dilemma, in which the stronger ally’s hand is forced by the prospect of having its nuclear weapons captured by the adversary.

“Initiating nuclear warfare”, does not cover nuclear retaliation in the event of a confirmed nuclear attack. The campaign will NOT take a stance for or against such retaliatory use. The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons is very clear on this point: retaliation is also unacceptable, i.e. illegal. Many organizations in the campaign coalition may feel compelled to uphold this position and participating in the campaign will not restrict them from doing so. Contrarily, advocates of strictly retaliatory deterrence may feel compelled to defend the value of threatening nuclear retaliation to nuclear attacks; participating in the campaign will not restrict them either. Those that collaborate in the campaign will hold in common the belief that achieving global agreement on such retaliatory use can wait until after the option of initiating nuclear warfare has been renounced universally – or nearly so. The use of the phrase “never initiate nuclear warfare” is used precisely to make such collaboration more feasible, whereas “no first use or threat of first use” could be problematical.

With these definitions and clarifications in mind, let us return to the question of why getting nations to disavow the option of initiating nuclear warfare is so important. There are two overriding reasons:

Risk reduction in a nuclear-weapon-plagued world

First, it will materially improve the chances of humanity surviving until the day when all states are prepared to live in a nuclear weapon free world. Security crises are automatically nuclear crises when both adversaries assert the ‘right’ to initiate nuclear warfare, i.e. threaten to strike first. Conversely, when both adversaries disavow this ‘right’ there is no nuclear crisis. Even when just one adversary avers nuclear escalation, crises, while still unstable, are significantly less so.

When nuclear powers abandon launch on warning, the dangers of inadvertent launch associated with that stance will be eliminated, and perception of potential preventive or preemptive attack greatly alleviated.

While there are other ways of reducing nuclear risks, these are certainly among the most important.

Without the ‘need’ for battlefield weapons and escalation dominance, there will be no arms races and massive reductions in US and RF arsenals should be possible.

Opening the way to a nuclear-weapon-free world

Second, it will materially improve the readiness of states to proceed to a nuclear free world. States that retain the option of nuclear escalation (i.e. preparing for and threatening it), are not ready to relinquish their nuclear weapons even if all other states were willing to do so since they rely on nuclear weapons to deter non-nuclear-weapon threats. To participate in good faith on efforts to achieve a nuclear disarmament, a state or alliance must at the very least have a plan for ending such reliance within a time-frame which does not unduly delay the establishment of a nuclear weapon free world.

Some who see value in continuing to rely on retaliatory deterrence may not place great store in this second point. But, for the following reason, this should nonetheless be part of the coalition’s basis of unity even if it means leaving out some people who might otherwise support no first use:

(a) No first use is an inherently unstable stance; one either moves forward to a nuclear weapon free world (down into the Promised Land) or slides back into a world of first-use schemes and threats (the

Valley of the Shadow of Death). It is the prospect of the former that will best motivate the constant effort needed to preserve no first use.

(b) Only blind faith in nuclear deterrence (including the strictly retaliatory variety) can induce comfort in relying upon it indefinitely. The science-based realities of the possibility and consequences of catastrophic failure are so vast that it is profoundly unwise to prolong the risks associated with nuclear deterrence any longer than absolutely unavoidable.

Indeed, the crowning achievement, from the point of view of those who have been willing to run those risks at all, will be the establishment of a nuclear weapon free world. After the fact, they can continue to believe – if they so desire – that it was nuclear deterrence (of the retaliatory variety) which got us safely past humanity's introduction to nuclear explosive power. And, of course, those who never put stock on nuclear deterrence can celebrate the establishment of a nuclear weapon free world on the basis that the fundamental humanitarian instincts of humanity prevailed over the death-wish of the nuclear mandarins.

The work ahead

If the basis for unity described above is close enough to spot-on to go to work upon, these are some of the urgent tasks ahead of us (not necessarily in order of importance).

I. Reach out to expert/activists and NGOs, with an emphasis on recruitment in nuclear armed states and alliances. Develop relationships with nuclear armed states which adhere to no-first-use policies (China and India, others?) and explore the significance of no-first-use mutual agreements (Russia-China, others?). Sound out the readiness of TPNW signatories (e.g. Mexico and Indonesia and, of course, the Europeans, Austria, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland) to be part of this effort (without distracting them from the TPNW entry-into-force effort).

II. On a country-by-country basis identify the path toward the earliest possible concrete results. Likewise for NATO (while also clarifying the situation for the CSTO). Develop a methodology for sharing reproducible experiences internationally. Bringing international pressure to bear on countries as requested by local coalition partners, particularly in conflict hot-spots (Korea, Middle East, Ukraine, etc.).

III. Establish healthy relations (mutual web links, etc.) with coalitions working on other aspects of the nuclear conundrum, other security threats (including climate change), and peace and justice generally.

IV. Develop a capacity for public outreach and a high profile media presence. Hone our arguments; create memorable slogans and eye-catching materials; pick a date for the public launch of the coalition international (November 11th?).

V. Develop a governing structure that is light and flexible and which is accountable to all coalition members while recognizing that some partners are weightier than others. If a significant course correction seems necessary, it should be adopted in a way that preserves as much of the unity that has been developed as possible.

VI. Develop a broad base of financial support. Operating costs of the coalition should be covered by the coalition members. Special project costs can be covered by grant, but care should be taken not to become overly dependent on a small number of government agencies or private foundations.

Let's get on with it!