

Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty in the Context of Heightened Military Tensions

by Jon Atkins

**Address at International Day of Peace Event
Marrickville Peace Park - Saturday 16th September 2017**

No doubt everyone has heard about the Doomsday Clock that members of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists re-set every year.

The Doomsday Clock has served as a globally recognized arbiter of the planet's health and safety. In symbolic terms, the closer the clock's minute hand is to midnight, the closer the world is to a global catastrophe.

In January 2015, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists advanced its Doomsday Clock to three minutes before midnight, a threat level that had not been reached for 30 years.

In 2016 the Doomsday Clock remained the same. Then in January 2017 the clock was advanced to two and a half minutes to midnight.

Dual threats

The Doomsday Clock's setting in 2015 was justified in these terms: "Unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernizations, and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity, and world leaders have failed to act with the speed or on the scale required to protect citizens from potential catastrophe. These failures of political leadership endanger every person on Earth."¹

In advancing the clock yet again this year, the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warned: "In 2017, we find the danger to be even greater, the need for action more urgent. It is two and a half minutes to midnight, the Clock is ticking, global danger looms."²

So it is very clear - today there are two major threats to the very survival of humanity, namely catastrophic climate change on the one hand and nuclear weapons and their modernisation on the other.

Nuclear arsenals

By mid-2017 there were nearly 15,000 nuclear weapons in the world. Approximately 9,400 of these weapons were in military arsenals while the remaining weapons were retired and awaiting dismantlement. Nearly 4,000 were operationally available, and some 1,800 were on high alert and ready for use on short notice.³

There are nine nuclear weapons states – United States, Russian Federation, China, France, United Kingdom, United States, India, North Korea, Pakistan and Israel.

The United States and Russia together possess 90% of these weapons of mass destruction. It should also be noted that the U.S. has nuclear weapons in five host countries – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey.

The global movement to establish a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty (officially known as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) was based upon the fact that these weapons, if used in a war, would bring about a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe.

As such, nuclear weapons pose a most serious risk to the very survival of humanity.

This fact was the driving force behind the adoption of the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty this year.

Nuclear weapon accidents

Apart from hostilities resulting in war between nuclear armed states, there is also the risk of accidents triggering nuclear war.

It is estimated that since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, there have been at least 13 near-accidents when nuclear weapons were nearly employed, many of them resulting from technical or communications near-accidents in either the U.S. or Russia.⁴

As the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) correctly emphasises, our luck is going to run out one day.

As a species, we have been extraordinarily lucky that one of these near-accidents did not result in a catastrophic nuclear exchange.

Significance of the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty

In a world characterised by increasing levels of conflict between nuclear states, the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty adopted at the United Nations headquarters in New York on July 7 this year by 122 nations assumes considerable significance.

This is certainly the case in the light of increased tensions between NATO and Russia where NATO has expanded its military presence right up to Russia's borders.

It is also the case in the light of the United States so-called "pivot" to Asia which is designed to bolster the containment of China. Australia is complicit in this military strategy.

Conflict between the U.S. and North Korea

Given the escalating conflict between the U.S. and North Korea, the adoption of the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty has assumed even greater significance.

It is important to stop nuclear proliferation anyway in the world, including in North Korea.

The question is: How can it be stopped?

As you know, there are a lot of proposals on the table e.g. ever harsher sanctions and President Trump's installation of a new missile defence system in South Korea which also poses a major

threat to China and hence will further increase tensions in the region. As well, there are military threats of various kinds. These are the proposals that prevail – sanctions and the threat of military retaliation.

Are these the only proposals? Well no. Actually there is one proposal that is being ignored by the United States and its allies.

It is a reasonably straightforward proposal. Note that the goal is to get North Korea to freeze its weapons and missiles systems.

This proposal is the negotiating option put forward by China and North Korea.⁵

Their proposal is to freeze the development of North Korean missile and nuclear weapons systems. However this proposal was instantly rejected by the U.S.⁶

It should be noted that the Obama administration did the same thing a couple of years ago when North Korea made a similar proposal.

What is the main reason for Trump rejecting this negotiating option?

The reason is that it calls for a *quid pro quo*.

In return for a nuclear weapons freeze, the negotiating option calls on the U.S. to put an end to threatening military exercises on North Korea's border, which happen to include the sending of nuclear-capable B52s, as well as B1 and B2 bombers, flying right up to the border.

Added to this volatile mix is North Korea's military history, that is their memory of how their country was decimated by American bombing during the Korean War. Having wiped out all military targets, the Americans decided to bomb North Korea's irrigation dams which flooded their valleys and wiped out their rice crops. Such savagery is recognised as a major war crime.⁷

The North Korean government can rightly be described as a dictatorial regime, but is it so difficult to appreciate how upset they become when nuclear-capable B52s etc. fly along their border, together with other threatening military exercises?

It seems inevitable that the North Koreans will continue to develop what they see as a potential deterrent that might protect their regime, as well as their country, from destruction unless there is an end to the military threats against them.

The example of the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies would add to this way of thinking.

My point is this: a negotiated settlement is possible but it requires the political will of leaders who are willing to sit down and negotiate in order to protect their citizens and the world from a potential nuclear calamity.

Progress despite the gloom

Amidst the gloom, it needs to be emphasised that the majority of nations through the United Nations have succeeded in negotiating both the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty and the Paris

Climate Agreement (adopted by consensus on December 12, 2015, although President Trump has announced his intention to withdraw the U.S. from this agreement).

Given the threats posed by nuclear weapons and catastrophic climate change, these agreements are major steps in the right direction.

These successes demonstrate that States and civil society organisations can collectively act to advance the cause of peace and security around the world.

Australia's role

What is Australia's role in all of this?

The problem we have in Australia is that we are lumbered with a political leadership that is actively endangering the peace and security of its own citizens, along with others around the world, due to its monumental failure to support the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty and to decisively act to reduce carbon emissions.

We are also lumbered with a political leadership that has put into place a harsh offshore detention system targeted at refugees and their children who have arrived by boat. While the tenacious advocacy of Prof Gillian Triggs and the Human Rights Commission, combined with ongoing protests from groups within civil society, has lessened the impact on children, it is a fact that Minister Dutton is continuing to make life even harder for 2,000 refugees stranded on Papua New Guinea and Nauru.⁸

The practice of offshore processing has had a hugely detrimental impact. There is a fundamental contradiction in saving people at sea, only to mistreat and neglect them on land.

The flouting of our international legal obligations toward those seeking asylum is but one aspect of this cruel detention system. To quote Julian Burnside, this system is "one of the great, wilful injustices which runs like a poison in the Australian body politic."⁹

Fighting back

But in the interests of peace and justice, we can collectively fight back.

The Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty opens for signature to all member states of the United Nations from September 20, 2017.

While the Coalition opposed the negotiation of the Treaty, support within Parliament is growing. So far 49 Federal parliamentarians – mainly from the Greens and the Labor Party - have signed on to International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) Parliamentary Pledge. These parliamentarians have promised to work towards Australia eventually signing and ratifying the Treaty.¹⁰

The Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty will acquire legal force once 50 nations have signed and ratified it.

Getting the Treaty ratified by Australia is going to be tough assignment.

Nevertheless supporting ICAN's campaign and doing what we can in our own 'spheres of influence' to increase public support for ratifying the Treaty will not only help promote the security and well-being of Australians, but it will also promote the security and well-being of all peoples around the world.

I also believe that it is vital that we strive for a Charter of Rights in this country – but that is another issue.¹¹

Notes

¹ [Timeline 2015](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (accessed Sep 15, 2017)

² [Timeline 2017](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (accessed Sep 15, 2017)

³ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, 'Worldwide deployments of nuclear weapons, 2017' in [Nuclear Notebook](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Sep 3, 2017.

⁴ ['Banning Nuclear Weapons: Labor's Role'](#), Presentation by International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), NSW Labor State Conference, Fringe Program, Feb 14, 2016.

⁵ Refer to Jonathan Marshall, ['The Negotiation Option with North Korea'](#), Consortiumnews.com, Feb 14, 2017.

⁶ David Wright, ['Why Freezing North Korea's Weapons Programs Would Make Us Safer'](#), Union of Concerned Scientists, Mar 20, 2017.

⁷ Chuck Overby, veteran of the Korean War, writes:

It was not until many decades later that I learned from much reading and research on the Korean War and its air operations ... the significance of our bombing on the North Korean dams. In the highly informative book, [Korea: The Unknown War](#), it was pointed out to my horror that "the last time an act of this kind had been carried out, which was by the Nazis in Holland in 1944, it had been deemed a war crime at Nuremberg." (p. 196).

Thus, my B-29 crew and 15 to 20 other B-29 crews in the early morning of June 19th, 1953 were unknowingly committing war crimes by taking out the Toksang irrigation dam and flooding the valley all the way out to the Korean Bay and the Yellow Sea -- thereby, helping to destroy North Korea's ability to feed itself.

Extract from Chuck Overby's article ['B-29 Operations in the Korean War, 1953'](#) on U.S. Veterans For Peace website, [Korea Peace Campaign page](#).

⁸ Gillian Triggs, [Speech on Human Rights and Refugees](#), Llewellyn Hall, Canberra, Apr 27, 2016. (Gillian Triggs' speech begins 10 mins 56 secs into the video).

⁹ Julian Burnside, ['Without justice there will be no peace'](#), 2014 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture, Nov 5, 2014.

¹⁰ ICAN, [Parliamentary Pledge](#).

¹¹ Refer to Gillian Triggs on the need for a Charter of Rights in her speech cited above.