

Risk Without Representation: Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

Presentation of the Western States Legal Foundation to the 2018 Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 2020 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference, by Andrew Lichterman, Senior Research Analyst, Delivered by Jacqueline Cabasso, Executive Director.

In 2006, the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, headed by Hans Blix, issued its report. Regarding nuclear weapons, the report stated that

“The Commission rejects the suggestion that nuclear weapons in the hands of some pose no threat, while in the hands of others they place the world in mortal jeopardy. Governments possessing nuclear weapons can act responsibly or recklessly. Governments may also change over time.”ⁱ

Twelve years later, the correctness of this judgment is beyond dispute. In the Middle East, the two militaries that possess over 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons are actively engaged on different sides of a complex civil war. Their warplanes are flying combat missions in the same national airspace, and their ground troops and armed contractors have in recent months engaged each other directly. The regular military forces of three other nuclear-armed states also are engaged in these hostilities. All of these governments apparently feel free to use military force in ways that undermine the obligations and dispute resolution procedures of the United Nations Charter and the Chemical Weapons Convention. All also ignore the most basic requirements of humanitarian law, variously employing strike aircraft and other weapons designed for total war among the most advanced militaries to combat irregular forces in densely populated urban areas. The results have been predictably disastrous for civilian populations.

And this is in only one of several potential flashpoints where nuclear-armed militaries are arrayed against each other, from the frozen conflict in Ukraine through the border confrontations in South Asia to the Korean peninsula. This last confrontation is approaching its crisis, in the true sense, the turning point where governments will make choices that either greatly increase or reduce the likelihood of disaster.

The difficulty of discerning the likelihood of success of the peace initiatives there epitomizes the nature of this moment, and its dangers. It is apparent that a decisive resolution of the nuclear confrontation, and a true end to the Korean war that provides peace and stability for the Peninsula, is in the interest of the populations there, and everywhere. Yet despite this, prospects for a peaceful resolution are by no means clear. The Korea crisis is embedded in a fast-changing web of antagonisms among the world’s most powerful states. The government of the United States, the world’s dominant military and economic power, appears unstable and adrift, its ruling party and President focused on a battle for political survival. Its leaders may be tempted to take risks abroad to appear strong at home. At the same time, the leadership classes of its adversaries may see U.S. political disarray as an opportunity to press their own narrow interests in areas where the U.S. once seemed unchallengeable. This is a combustible mix, stoking the risks that one nuclear-armed government may misjudge the intentions, the commitments, and the fears of another.

At the height of the Cold War, E.P. Thompson, a founder of European Nuclear Disarmament, asked

“Is nuclear war preferable to being overcome by the enemy? Are the deaths of fifteen or twenty million and the utter destruction of the country preferable to an occupation which might offer the possibility, after some years, of resurgence and recuperation?...

Are we ourselves prepared to endorse the use of such weapons against the innocent, the children and the aged, of an ‘enemy’?”ⁱⁱ

The people of every nuclear-armed country should be asking these questions today. But the vast majority of people have no voice in all this. Even the inhabitants of nuclear-armed countries mostly have been politically marginalized, their politics an assortment of one-party states, corrupt oligarchies, and eroding democracies where immense for-profit media combines and money-driven elections allow concentrated wealth to drown out other voices. It is time for those who rule, and the wealthy who keep them in power, to remember that they too are mortal beings, and to find a way back from the brink.

i *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*, Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, 2006, p. 60.

ⁱⁱ E.P. Thompson, “A Letter to America,” in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds, *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981) pp. 3, 38.