

**International Peoples' Tribunal on Nuclear Powers
and the Destruction of Human Civilisation
University of Sydney
July 7-8 2016**

Defence Brief by Bob Howard

Nuclear Weapons – The Case for the Defence

In 2005, the strategist and game theorist, Tom Schelling, said that “The most spectacular event of the past half century is one that did not occur. We have enjoyed sixty years without nuclear weapons exploded in anger”. Now, in 2016, we’ve gone 71 years without such a catastrophe. If we value human survival we should ponder these observations carefully.

There can be no denial of the fact that a nuclear war would be a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions for our planet. The challenge for us all is to create the conditions that minimize the risks of such a disaster. The sentiments embodied in the Indictment do not advance us much in this direction. Indeed in our view, to proceed in this direction is counterproductive.

It is difficult to separate the sentiments embodied in this indictment from the idea that nuclear weapons should be eliminated. But we should ask ourselves the question whether the world would be safer without some nuclear weapons than it is now. We argue that it would not. We make the following points:

Nuclear weapons can’t be effectively eliminated: the genie is truly out of the bottle. Back in the 1950s it was recognised that the development of the hydrogen bomb discredited plans for general and complete *disarmament* (including nuclear disarmament) and gave rise to the idea of *arms control*. Thereafter, the primary objective was finding ways of stabilizing the strategic nuclear relationship between the US and the USSR and not the elimination, at least in the foreseeable future, of nuclear weapons.

It is at this point that we have to ask ourselves what we mean by nuclear *disarmament*. India once argued that its nuclear test explosions were aimed at creating a “peaceful” nuclear device – one that could be used for things like major civil engineering projects. But everyone knew that nuclear test explosions can be used to develop bombs as well as ploughshares, and that India was well on the way to becoming a nuclear weapons state. The point of all this is that states that can do so will retain what Tom Schelling calls the “mobilization base” to produce nuclear weapons, even in the face of

the most stringent surveillance accompanying any disarmament agreement. They might not have the actual bombs and missiles, but they will retain the capacity to develop them quickly. As Tom Schelling says, "If a world without nuclear weapons means no mobilization bases, there can be no such world".

We must think for a moment what all this means should a major conventional war occur. World War II was conventional, but nuclear weapons were developed during that conflict and used at the very end. This could happen again, and given that mobilization bases are more developed now than they were in the period 1941-45, nuclear weapons could be produced quicker now than then. This is not an encouraging prospect. Whatever stability we have in the present strategic environment has much to do with our knowledge and understanding of the readiness status of the various national nuclear forces. But in the new situation this status will have changed and the risks of nuclear war will have massively increased.

We should also ponder the long peace argument: the peace between the major powers since 1945. Most other rivalries of this nature have resulted in *hot* wars, but this one didn't. In looking for reasons why this is so, surely the existence of nuclear weapons is part of the mix. We might think about this in a longer term historical perspective. Comparing 1914 and 2014 is instructive: the only unambiguous difference between then and now is the existence in 2014 of nuclear weapons. What difference would their existence have made in 1914? We might also ask whether Hitler would have invaded a nuclear armed Soviet Union in 1941 even if Germany had been similarly armed. Arguably, nuclear weapons do alter the equation. And what about India and Pakistan: they fought three wars before becoming nuclear, and none since. For the moment, there is a belief among the nuclear states that nuclear weapons not only provide security in the immediate national sense, but also contribute to the "long peace". So, a world without nuclear weapons might not be a safer one.

But none of this is to suggest that there is complacency about the threat posed by nuclear weapons. Nina Tannenwald has written extensively on the "nuclear taboo" (*The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*). She argues that a nuclear taboo has taken hold in world politics and American policy, and has a lot to do with three things: anti-nuclear public opinion; the role of non-state actors; and, the self-interests of the super powers. Tannenwald further argues that developments of both a material and normative nature have helped facilitate the rise of the taboo: the slow pace of proliferation; the reinforcement of humanitarian norms after 1945; and, the fact that the US rather than the Soviet Union had the bomb first.

There is a taboo with regards to nuclear weapons use, especially for a first strike, and arguably there is a norm of non-proliferation. Other measures, too, have been painstakingly worked out to minimize the risks of nuclear war. These are things for which we should be grateful and we should be wary of developments that undermine this status of relative stability.

The problem of nuclear war cannot be quarantined from the problem of war itself. It seems reasonable to argue that the governments of all the nuclear states are already aware that to engage in nuclear war is to create great evil. But they still inhabit an anarchical international environment: there is no international cop to keep the peace and consequently states still have to look after themselves. This would be uppermost in the minds of national leaders contemplating nuclear disarmament, especially those in the nuclear armed states. They are locked into a situation where war remains a possibility, and given that nuclear weapons cannot be eliminated, their use remains

something that would be contemplated, even if they had been declared illegal. Nuclear weapons *are* unique. This is reflected in the view that they are not just “ordinary” weapons of war, but also in the view that they are “ultimate weapons of defence”. The nuclear states quickly moved to acquire these weapons because they saw them as uniquely important in protecting their sovereignty and interests. Other weapons of mass destruction did not demand the same degree of urgency, nor did they come to occupy the same level of importance in the defensive postures of the nuclear states. And regrettably, there will probably always be circumstances when states see the use of nuclear weapons as preferable to defeat. The old saying of “better dead than red” comes to mind in this context. Back in the days of the Cold War a lot of people in Australia and elsewhere thought this way.

The best way to eliminate nuclear weapons is to create the international security arrangements that will render their possession unnecessary. An indictment of the sort being discussed here would not do this. It labels governments and populations as criminals - hardly a way of encouraging international cooperation. As well, it takes insufficient of the problem of security in an anarchic world.