

The hour is getting late

Joseph Gerson

Joseph Gerson of the American Friends Service Committee and the Campaign for Peace, Disarmament and Common Security addressed an international conference on 'Growing nuclear risks in a changing world' in New York in May 2019, which coincided with the ill-starred NPT Preparatory Committee.

*So let us not talk falsely now
The hour is getting late*

Bob Dylan

The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty came into force in 1987, bringing the Cold War to an end before the Berlin Wall was breached and the Soviet empire collapsed. The Treaty requires elimination and permanent renunciation of future deployment of all US and Russian nuclear and conventional ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges of 300 to 3,500 miles. It greatly reduced (but did not eliminate) the danger of Europe becoming the initial theatre and victim of a US-Soviet apocalyptic nuclear war.

In October 2018, President Trump announced his plans to withdraw the United States from the Treaty, creating the political and strategic environment that is fuelling an unrestrained and extremely dangerous nuclear arms race. Trump is an inveterate liar. The *New York Times* reports that he just notched his 10,000 recorded lie since coming to office. But there are times when he should be taken at his word. He was not fooling when he boasted that 'we have more money than anyone else' and said 'let there be an arms race'. President Putin, in turn, threatened to match any new US missile deployments in Europe. And, with the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction) Treaty unlikely to be extended [beyond 2021], and given the disastrous record of US-Russian relations of the last decade, we are in the early stages of a US-Russian confrontation analogous to the Cold War. Pulling the plug on the INF Treaty demonstrates once again that ignorance compounded by the drive for

domination makes for an extremely dangerous nuclear cocktail.

While the Russian military may indeed have been in breach of the Treaty by testing a new medium-range cruise missile, less well known is that, as Theodore Postol of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has documented, the US Aegis systems deployed in Romania

‘have characteristics that make them especially threatening to Russia ... If the Aegis-based systems in Eastern Europe were supplied with American cruise missiles—either the existing Tomahawk or a new missile that the United States has been developing—they would become fearsome offensive forces, staged on the frontiers of Russia. And there would be little way for Russia to know whether Aegis systems were loaded with missile defense interceptors or nuclear-armed cruise missiles. The offensive capabilities of the US missile defense installations in Eastern Europe are key to understanding the US-Russia standoff over the INF.’

Of course, the proper response to Russia’s cruise missile testing was not to rip up the critically important treaty that functionally ended the Cold War. Instead, it should have prompted intensifying nuclear disarmament diplomacy, as the Russians urged.

Abandoning the Treaty is part-and-parcel of Trump’s unilateralist ‘America First’ vision of US global dominance. Combined with the likely expiration of the New Start Treaty, it will eliminate all nuclear arms agreements between the world’s two largest and most dangerous nuclear powers, paving the way for an unrestrained, dangerous and mind-bogglingly costly nuclear arms race.

Withdrawal from the INF Treaty needs to be understood in the context of more than two decades of increasingly aggressive US military policies in relation to Russia: expansion of NATO initiated by the Clinton administration; withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty by the Bush II-Cheney administration; the Obama administration’s commitment to spend \$1.2 trillion to develop a new generation of US nuclear weapons and their delivery systems; deployment of missile defences that Moscow fears could be converted into nuclear-armed first strike missiles; and the decision to deploy upgraded and ‘more usable’ US nuclear weapons to five European NATO countries.

Committed to ensuring that Russia will not be humiliated again as it was in the 1990s, President Putin has reaffirmed his commitment to mutual assured destruction. Russian nuclear-capable missiles are now in Kaliningrad on the northern fringe of Central Europe. In order to evade or overwhelm US missile defences, Russia is deploying a new long-range

multiple warhead missile, and hypersonic cruise and other missiles reportedly capable of flying up to five times the speed of sound. Putin has also pledged to deploy a nuclear-powered ‘unmanned underwater vehicle’ capable of destroying port cities with nuclear weapons.

These new weapons systems mimic and up the ante of the existential threats of the 1980s.

Beyond Trump’s and National Security Advisor John Bolton’s ostensible concerns about possible Russian Treaty violations, lies their preoccupation with the INF Treaty’s limitation on the Pentagon’s ability to counter China’s military modernization and creation of new island bases in the South China Sea. US withdrawal from the Treaty also needs to be seen in the context of the current struggle for Asia-Pacific – now ‘Indo-Pacific’ – hegemony. We need to understand withdrawal from the Treaty complements the provocative US South China Sea ‘freedom of navigation exercises,’ the deployment of US missile defences to Japan and South Korea, and Trump’s disastrous trade war initiated with China, all elements of Trump’s nationally self-defeating campaign to weaken and contain China.

I’m sorry to say that we likely soon need to be opposing plans to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles to Japan, Taiwan and to a post-Duterte Philippines.

Mikhail Gorbachev was right when he remarked that Trump’s announcement of US withdrawal from the INF Treaty was not the work ‘of a great mind...With enough political will, any problems of compliance with the existing treaties could be resolved’ and, ‘there will be no winner in a “war of all against all” – particularly if it ends in a nuclear war’. Though I have no love for Putin, we should appreciate Russia’s offer that ‘there is still room for dialogue’.

The dangers posed by the collapse of the INF Treaty and likely New START are not abstractions. Both great powers use their nuclear arsenals to dangerously reinforce or expand their imperial spheres of influence. For example, the US threatened possible nuclear attacks on the eves of the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars and former President Obama repeated ‘all options on the table’ threats against Iran. It was South Korean President Moon’s inspired diplomacy that brought us back from the brink of Trump’s ‘fire and fury’ threat against North Korea. The US has not been alone in practising nuclear brinksmanship. Putin stated that he considered the use of nuclear weapons to ensure Russian control of Crimea, and that he is ready for a 21st century version of the Cuban Missile Crisis. All this adds to the danger of miscalculations and accidents.

I don't think most governments, peace movements or broader civil society appreciate the urgency of this moment. We need to find ways to raise the alarm and bring the great powers back from the brink.

The severity of the crisis is real, and it is being driven by powerful forces in the US, Russia and, differently, in China. It can only be transformed through the development of countervailing political, diplomatic and popular power. I don't claim to know precisely how this can be achieved, but I can point to several possible paths.

The first lies in the US House of Representatives, which has the power of the purse, and the Democratic presidential primary elections. Congressman Adam Smith, Chairman of the House Armed Service Committee, has stated his opposition to funding production and deployment of new nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. Those of us in the US need to do all that we can to stiffen his resolve and to press others in Congress to ensure that there be no money for new nukes and delivery systems. This is possible.

Additionally, the presidential campaign has already begun. Like Representative Smith, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders have each stated their opposition to the production and deployment of the new nuclear arsenal. They've set a standard that bird doggers in New Hampshire and Iowa, and voters in other states, can press their competitors to match.

There is also the need for mass action here in the US. With the necessary obsession about Trump and his administration's corruptions and assaults on the Constitution, the rule of law, the climate, and just about everything and everyone else except the super-rich, popular mobilization on nuclear or other foreign policy issues remains a challenge. As in the early 1980s, when Europe was the initial bull's-eye for catastrophic nuclear war, if European popular opinion can be mobilized against the new US and Russian nuclear deployments, it can awaken and spur a significant response in the United States. Here we have to look to the incipient European Nuclear Disarmament movement and its allied organizations to bring people onto the streets. Remember the Nuclear Weapons Freeze movement, the local actions it sparked across the country, and our million-strong disarmament rally in 1982 all came in response to European alarms and forced Reagan to negotiate with the Russians.

There is also a role for the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty. It can play a role in surrounding and isolating the nuclear powers if those who support the Ban in the Global South and in umbrella states have sufficient will. When the Treaty comes into force, states parties to the Treaty are required to

engage and press the nuclear powers to join the Treaty. If those governments are truly serious about creating a nuclear-weapons-free world, they can target sanctions against the nuclear powers' senior officials and nuclear establishments.

And, if umbrella states including NATO members, Japan and Australia are forced by popular movements to sign and ratify the Ban Treaty, or if Jeremy Corbyn comes to power in Britain and signs the Treaty, that would crack the ideological foundations of nuclearism, creating more space and opportunities for forces in the nuclear weapons states to press for meaningful nuclear disarmament

Let me also point to two additional paths away from the new unrestrained arms race. It will cost trillions of dollars, an unimaginable number. But we will see the meaning of those numbers in the funding cuts to social and environmental programmes that are being sacrificed on the altar of nuclearism: access to housing, health care, education, food and much more. This dictates that we must make common cause with forces in our countries struggling for economic, social and environmental justice.

Finally, the nuclear powers tell us that the strategic environment prohibits serious disarmament diplomacy. That environment can be changed, as it was with the Common Security diplomacy of the 1980s. As Georgi Arbatov, who participated in the Palme Commission and greatly influenced Mikhail Gorbachev, wrote, 'we cannot guarantee our own security at the expense of someone else's, but only on the basis of mutual interests'. The common interest then, as now, was 'a commitment to joint survival rather than on a threat of mutual destruction'.

I look forward to seeing where our thinking and actions will take us. Given what we know about the practice of nuclear blackmail, nuclear weapons accidents, miscalculations, and the human costs of the nuclear arms race, 'the hour' to quote my favourite Nobel laureate, 'is getting late'*. Yet we know that another world is possible.

*Bob Dylan, All Along The Watchtower