

Towards a World free of Nuclear Weapons

*Statement from Willy Claes, Jean-Luc Dehaene, Louis Michel and Guy Verhofstadt
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President Barack Obama's commitment to the goal of abolishing all nuclear weapons deserves our full support. While nuclear weapons have in the past perhaps fulfilled a stabilizing role, we live today in a world in which the proliferation of nuclear weapons steadily continues and the risk of a terrorist attack with nuclear weapons demands drastic action. The Cold War is history. It is time to adapt our nuclear policy to current circumstances. Countries like Pakistan, India and North-Korea have recently joined the nuclear club. The chance is high that Iran and other countries in that region will follow, which would provoke unprecedented destabilization in an already volatile region. Therefore, the crucial question is how can we manage this situation?

It is impossible to continue to deny nuclear weapons to other states as long as we ourselves have them. The choice is as follows: a world in which we accept that a growing number of states produce nuclear weapons, or a world in which the nine existing nuclear weapon states greatly reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, and take the goal of their elimination seriously. The nuclear weapon states must respect international agreements calling for the elimination of their arsenals, which they have not done to date despite the obligation to disarm contained in the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), signed by all formal nuclear weapon states. When experts like Henry Kissinger and George Schultz put themselves resolutely behind the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, we can no longer avoid this debate in our own societies. Following similar initiatives in the US, the UK, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Poland and Norway – we also want to make a plea for a world without nuclear weapons. Not as a naïve dream, but as an ambitious and realistic political goal. No fundamental argument exists why this option is not feasible within a foreseeable timeframe.

This problem, just like global warming, needs urgent action which cannot be delayed. In the short term it demands a new commitment of all nuclear weapon states - and not just the US and the UK - to achieve 'global zero'. The NPT Review Conference in May 2010 provides a unique opportunity. At the same time concrete steps have to be made leading to this renewed goal: a drastic reduction of all deployed and non-deployed tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the negotiation of a Fissile Materials Cut Off-Treaty, a no first use declaration, or even better, declaring the use of these weapons of mass destruction illegal. Beyond this, there is a need to begin multilateral negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. This treaty has to prohibit nuclear weapons, just as chemical and biological weapons are prohibited, and this with a fixed timeframe for implementation.

What role can Belgium play?

The American tactical nuclear weapons in Europe no longer have any military use. Their residual political benefit - as a symbol of the transatlantic link - is in no way sufficient to justify their continued presence, since through that presence we signal to the rest of the world that nuclear weapons are "essential". This policy indirectly promotes proliferation and undermines the security of our country, the opposite of what we want to achieve. Moreover, in Belgium today strong support exists for the withdrawal of these nuclear weapons. 348 towns and cities in our country have joined the Mayors for Peace network. We call on our government to take active steps within NATO for the rapid removal of these nuclear weapons, as the German government has done. If swift progress were made, it would send an excellent signal to the non-nuclear weapon states during the upcoming NPT Review Conference, and the review of the NATO Strategic Concept offers the appropriate framework to review the entire nuclear policy of the alliance. Ideally this would take place in

negotiation with Russia, to achieve a proportional reduction of Russian nuclear weapons. But sometimes we must dare to set an example and hope that it will be an inspiration to others.

We find ourselves at a crucial moment. Until recently the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe was diplomatically dead on arrival. The commitments of the Obama administration make change possible. We call on our successors to make the best of this opportunity. It is now or never.

This withdrawal should not be linked to the missile defense debate. What is at stake is the elimination of the threat from weapons of mass destruction, and solid disarmament steps will be more effective than making ourselves dependent on a questionable technology, which furthermore is seen as destabilizing by the great powers who do not possess this technology. A new arms race has at all costs to be prevented. This is our obligation to future generations.

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