A Critical Time for Action

By Jerald Ross

Today we face perhaps the gravest risks to peace since the run-up to either World Wars, and certainly as great a danger of nuclear holocaust as the darkest days of the Cold War. Yet too many people deny the reality of these dangers, believing such a thing could never actually happen. Well, if the Covid 19 pandemic has demonstrated nothing else, it is that very low probability, very high impact calamities do indeed happen, with world shattering results.

The Trump administration is pursuing a Strangelovian recipe for catastrophe – dismantling nuclear treaties and safeguards, hiking international tensions, and bankrupting the nation with a vast expansion of omnicidal weapons. There are very specific steps being taken today inexorably leading toward a cataclysm. As peace activists, as citizens, as rational adults who care about our children’s future, we must act now.

Consider Trump’s most recent steps to wreck the international nuclear arms regime. A week ago, on May 21st, he announced his intention to withdraw from the Open Skies treaty (OST). Signed following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the behest of Bush the Elder, this treaty actually had its origins decades earlier in the Eisenhower administration. It allows it’s 34 signatories – the US, Russia, and most of NATO - to overfly each other’s territories to assure compliance with agreements and prevent any “surprise” military developments. Top military leaders as well as arms control experts have long considered it invaluable in reducing the risks of international conflict. Last year Donald Trump followed a similar path in withdrawing from another cornerstone of international security, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Force (INF) treaty, an agreement that had been a centerpiece of nuclear arms control since the Reagan years

As bad as this latest move is, it bodes ill for any extension of New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) which is scheduled to expire next February. This vital nuclear agreement between the US and Russia, signed in 2010, was the latest in a series of treaties reducing nuclear arsenals from a high of nearly 70,000 weapons in the mid 80’s to under 15,000 today. It actually limited the US and Russia to a maximum of 1600 deployed warheads each and implemented vital new inspection protocols. Though these numbers far exceed what most experts say is actually needed for deterrence (a dubious theory in and of itself), the sustained effort to limit the numbers of weapons has been a unifying element of nuclear policy for nearly a half century under both Republican and Democratic administrations. But with Donald Trump’s dismantling of the entire arms control regime, New Start is one of the last major nuclear arms limitation agreements standing. Failure to extend it would almost certainly spell the demise of nuclear arms control and the beginning of a new and dangerous nuclear arms race.

There is legislation in the current Congress to restrain Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from international treaties and specifically to promote the extension of the New START agreement. Senate bill 845: New START Policy Act of 2019, introduced by Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, forces the Trump Administration to provide certain reports to Congress on the impact of the treaty and any failure to renew it. Our own Massachusetts Senator Markey’s S. 1285: SAVE Act both requires the Administration to justify any failure to extend the treaty and prohibits increases in certain U.S. weapons should they allow it to lapse. In the House, Rep. Jimmy Panetta has introduced H.R. 6991 requiring the President to get approval from both Houses of Congress in order to withdraw from international treaties. These are legislative initiatives we need to support with calls to our own Representatives.

Most troubling of all are recent reports the White House is considering the resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing. Such a move would be a throw-back to the earliest years of atomic weapons development. In the dawning era of the nuclear arms race, the world realized with growing horror that not only was atomic testing leading to the development of new and unimaginably destructive weapons, but producing extreme environmental and health hazards for the entire globe. The Kennedy administration succeeded in halting such testing with the 1963 signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, a partial ban that stopped atomic testing in the atmosphere, under water and in outer space. It was later replaced by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which while never fully ratified, has nevertheless been fully complied with by all the nuclear-armed nations. The Administration’s reckless talk of resuming testing has been condemned by nuclear arms control groups around the globe. Here in Massachusetts, Senator Markey immediately responded by letter to Trump opposing any resumption of testing and will soon introduce legislation to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force.

In point of fact, though, President Trump has already launched a new nuclear arms race through his massive expansion of military spending and a redefined “nuclear posture.” In the beginning days of his administration, Trump issued a new Nuclear Posture Review that, while still cloaked in the misleading language of “nuclear defense,” set out a whole new range of situations that would justify the use of nuclear weapons. And in the actual nature of weapons proposed in the pentagon budget (the NDAA, or National Defense Authorization Act) all pretext is dropped, revealing the true offensive design of these weapons. A prime example is the Stand Off Long Range missile, for which Massachusetts-based Raytheon has been awarded the sole-source contract. This incredibly destabilizing weapon envisions a nuclear-capable, long range cruise missile that will be carried by B-52 bombers cruising outside an adversary’s borders. The fact that it can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads, and reduces a target’s response time to minutes, makes it incredibly destabilizing. There is no doubt this is an offensive, potential “first strike” weapon. And earlier on, despite Congressional efforts to stop him, Trump succeeded in funding and ultimately deploying so-called “low yield” nuclear missiles on Trident submarines, giving the president “more options” in the possible use of atomic weapons.

At this very moment, Congress is in the process of crafting this year’s National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This is the vehicle by which Trump has fueled his massive build-up, to the tune of $738 Billion last year, and our own opportunity to restrain this beast. Last year, there was a concerted effort to insert language in the NDAA that would have limited the development of weapons that violated the intent of the Intermediate Forces Treaty (INF) that Trump dismantled, and even restrain the Administration in its threats to attack Iran without Congressional approval. In return for this language, Democrats agreed to a substantial increase in funding. But by the time the NDAA came out of Conference, all of the Democrats’ restraining language had been stripped from the bill and all of the Republicans’ increase in funding retained. This year’s NDAA could be reported out of committee in the next two weeks, and the lessons from last year must not be forgotten. Particularly in the face of the pandemic, there may be more opportunity to restrain funding, or even to reallocate funding to other social needs. We can support efforts to restrain or even redirect military spending by contacting our local representatives, especially those (aka Lori Trahan, CD-3) who may sit on the House Armed Services Committee.

But the most immediate risks we face come as a result of President Trump’s failed policies and seeming direct attempts to ramp up international tensions. His steps to demolish the JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement have actually decreased the “time to breakout” Iran would need to develop an atomic bomb. Worse yet, his policy of maximum sanctions, his assassination of Iranian General Soleimani, and efforts to starve the Iranian regime in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic, have made war with that country all the more likely. His vaulted negotiations with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, though a welcome retreat from his earlier “rain of fire and fury” bombast, have come to naught, possibly encouraging Kim’s further development of his nuclear arsenal. We cannot discount the damage Trump has done through his disrespect of our long term allies, the undermining of global institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO) and failure of leadership both a home and internationally in response to the pandemic. Even by example he contributes to international tensions. Studies have shown that the United States’ behavior with respect to its own nuclear capabilities is a major factor in the choices other nuclear armed nations make. In light of this, we cannot but be concerned about the nuclear tinderbox between India and Pakistan, and wonder how Trump’s aggressive policies may have contributed to India’s backing away from its “no first use” policy. Finally his lighting fuses with Russia and China is leading the world toward the brink of a new Cold War, or an actual break out of great power conflict.

It is past time for denial. We are in a moment of maximum peril that calls for citizen action. We must raise public awareness of the risks being taken. We must support congressional efforts to restrain this administration’s development and deployment of new and incredibly dangerous weapons. And we must reduce the massive military spending that could very well bankrupt our nation, instead redirect resources to where the Covid pandemic has shown they are most needed, in accordance with the Constitution, “to promote the general welfare” of our People.

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