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New Momentum for Nuclear Disarmament

Shultz, Other Experts Back Nuclear Disarmament

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OSLO, Norway - Former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz today led a chorus of high-level experts supporting the eventual global elimination of nuclear weapons, adding momentum to a renewed international focus on the long-deferred goal of disarmament (see GSN, Jan. 23).

"We are at a tipping point. The danger is all too real," he told a conference hosted by Norway's Foreign Ministry. "The simple continuation of present practice with regard to nuclear weapons is leading in the wrong direction. We need to change that direction."

Shultz's tenure as secretary of state came during iconic Republican President Ronald Reagan's eight-year administration. His support, along with fellow former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, has given new credibility to the prospect of multilateral nuclear disarmament. The two Republicans have co-authored two Wall Street Journal commentaries in the past 14 months calling for steps that could lead to abandoning nuclear weapons. Joining Shultz and Kissinger for the commentaries were two influential Democratic policy leaders, former Defense Secretary William Perry and Nuclear Threat Initiative chief Sam Nunn (see GSN, Jan. 15, 2008 and Jan. 4, 2007).

"We cannot wait for a nuclear Pearl Harbor or 9/11. We must get ahead of the game to prevent an even more catastrophic event than those that have been seared into our memories," Shultz said. "If we wait - if a nuclear accident occurs - the world will be changed so dramatically that we will not recognize it."

"So wake up, everybody. The danger is real and the potential consequences are of catastrophic proportions," he added.

Other high-level nuclear abolition advocates agreed.

"I am not sure that many people realize just how devastating today's nuclear weapons are - hundreds of times more powerful than the bombs which obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki," said International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei. "A handful of missiles carried today on a single bomber or submarine could wipe out the entire population of a country."

The sheer quantities of global nuclear weapons and materials increase risks of accidental use or theft by terrorists, he said.

"Out of 27,000 [U.S. and Russian] warheads and many tons of highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium, what are the chances that some weapons or material might go astray? In the past year alone, we have heard alarming stories about aircraft armed with nuclear missiles going missing and of nuclear facilities and equipment protected by little more than bicycle locks," ElBaradei said (see GSN, Feb. 13).

Shultz and others said the elusive goal of total nuclear disarmament is a problem that can be solved with adequate attention from world leaders.

"A sensible, practical, doable process exists to deal effectively with the problem," he said. "Well, the problem is staggering, but practical doable identifiable steps can be taken that will put us on the road to success."

Some conference participants said the complete elimination of nuclear weapons would probably remain just a goal for decades to come, but that exploring possible paths to the goal is worth pursuing today. This week's conference

was organized to promote such a discussion and includes the participation of the nonproliferation field's biggest names.

Participants today recommended a variety of such steps, such as:

- ▶ negotiating deeper nuclear reductions between Russia and the United States;
- ▶ effecting measures to increase the decision time needed to launch nuclear weapons, in part by removing those weapons from high-alert status;
- ▶ speeding efforts to improve security over nuclear weapons; and
- ▶ beginning talks to remove forward-deployed nuclear weapons with an eye toward their eventual dismantlement.

"The end point seems really quite unachievable and the challenges of getting there seem very daunting, but I haven't heard any ridiculous ideas today. I've heard sensible pathways to elimination that one has to consider very carefully even if only to dismiss them," said Jeffrey Lewis of the New America Foundation. "That's very impressive. I think that's a very different debate than we've had the past 20 years."

"Serious people, who are careful what they say in public so they don't damage their reputation, have gathered at a very expensive hotel to hold a very serious discussion about eliminating nuclear weapons," he added.

One key hurdle to an eventual nuclear weapon ban could be the challenge of describing what elimination entails, that is, the question of to what degree nations would be required to dismantle nuclear weapons, destroy their components and eliminate weapon-grade uranium and plutonium.

"I define a world without nuclear weapons as a world in which nuclear explosive devices are put on the museum shelf. No one makes them anymore, no one has them in their arsenal, no one includes them as weapons. Nuclear explosive devices are disassembled, their fissile pit that makes them up is melted down, destroyed," said Richard Butler, former head of the U.N. Special Commission on Iraq and now leader of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

Historian Richard Rhodes, conducting documentary interviews at the conference, was somewhat more specific. It should take "a year to make a bomb for any country that decided to abrogate its agreements. That would leave a year for the rest of the world to do something about it," he said.

Other participants, however, said such specificity was unnecessary.

"It doesn't matter how it's defined as long as all the major states have agreed on it," said George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "It's not about absolute physical properties, it's about relationships between states and the security that they have and they feel for each other."

"The point isn't that any one answer is right or wrong, or worse or better. The point is that if all the states agree, then that's the answer," Perkovich added.

"Right now we have nuclear order built on the idea that some countries have a bunch of nuclear weapons and that's OK, the rest aren't supposed to get them. That's not stable," he said.

"So now you're looking for a new order that's stable. And people are assuming that needs to be at zero [nuclear weapons]. Well, that could well be, because it's equitable at zero. But as you get closer, you could decide that [low numbers] are stable. As long as people agree, then it's stable."

Above all, progress must begin, ElBaradei stressed.

"We must abandon the unworkable notion that it is morally reprehensible for some countries to pursue weapons of mass destruction, yet morally acceptable for others to rely on them for their security," he said. "Ultimately, the prohibition of nuclear weapons should be a peremptory norm of international law, which is not treaty-dependent, similar to the prohibition of genocide, torture and slavery."