Nuclear disarmament has gone mainstream. Nuclear hawks like Henry Kissinger, who derided the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1983 for their naive and utopian call for an ultimate ban on nuclear weapons, now are inspiring a global chorus of prominent military and political figures—including President Barack Obama—to endorse that very goal. The bishops and other religious leaders were ahead of Kissinger and Obama in calling for nuclear disarmament not just as a moral ideal but as a policy goal, and the bishops continue to offer a moral framework and to advocate for policies in keeping with that goal. But there is a gap in ethical reflection. The moral framework for disarmament that the bishops and the Holy See have developed since the end of the cold war would benefit from deeper reflection by ethicists on the moral issues that arise on the road to nuclear disarmament.

Nuclear disarmament will never be accepted as a moral imperative and will have little traction in policy circles unless people are convinced that it is not a utopian dream but rather a realistic policy objective that can be achieved, and achieved in a way that ensures that the cure (disarmament) is not worse than the disease (deterrence). An abundance of books and high-level reports by nuclear strategists in the past decade have made a convincing case that nuclear abolition is possible and necessary.

The “can” of disarmament is not just about nuclear strategy, however, but also about ethics, and, in particular, moral attitudes. In *The Seventh Decade*, Jonathan Schell describes the “profound fatalism” that has shaped the nuclear debate: “an anxiety or conviction that the bomb, though a human creation, is somehow immune to human control.” This fatalism not only denies our moral responsibility but risks replacing the virtue of hope with the sin of
despair. Nuclear disarmament requires the development of a “can do” ethic. Nuclear ethicists can complement the strategists by reminding people that although nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented, we still have a moral obligation to ban them.

**Deterrence vis-à-vis Disarmament**

In their 1983 peace pastoral, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” the bishops proposed an “interim ethic” whereby nuclear deterrence could be morally acceptable under three conditions: 1) if it is limited to deterring the use of nuclear weapons and not expanded to include nuclear-war fighting strategies or using nuclear weapons to deter against nonnuclear threats (the *sole use* criterion); 2) if the goal is to have enough weapons only to deter nuclear use, not to achieve nuclear superiority (the *sufficiency* criterion); and 3) if deterrence is used as a step toward progressive disarmament (the *disarmament* criterion). This strictly conditioned moral acceptance of deterrence is tied to the bishops’ categorical rejection of nuclear use against civilian populations, opposition to first use and deep skepticism about the morality of a limited retaliatory use. The first two criteria and the analysis of the morality of use constitute a *deterrence ethic* insofar as they define the kind of nuclear deterrent that might be morally acceptable during the interim period before nuclear disarmament is achieved. The third criterion tightly links this deterrence ethic to a *nonnuclear ethic*, one that combines nonproliferation with abolition, such that all countries must do their part both to prevent proliferation and to negotiate a verifiable global ban on nuclear weapons.

The moral status of deterrence and its link to disarmament need to be reconsidered. Nuclear pacifists have long argued that if the church wants disarmament, it must first condemn deterrence. Recent Vatican statements have seemed to do just that. In a talk at Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C., in March 2010, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See’s observer at the United Nations, decried the “second nuclear age” (the first being the cold war) when nuclear weapons are proliferating, nuclear terrorism is a threat and nuclear weapons “are no longer just for deterrence but have become entrenched in the military doctrines of the major powers.”

“It is evident,” the archbishop concluded, “that nuclear deterrence is preventing genuine nuclear disarmament. Consequently, the conditions that prevailed during the cold war, which gave a basis for the church’s limited toleration of nuclear deterrence, no longer apply” [italics in original].
It would be a mistake to interpret this and other Vatican statements as breaking the link between deterrence and disarmament, rejecting the former in order to achieve the latter. Clearly the conditions for the moral acceptability of deterrence are not being met. Supporters of the status quo in U.S. nuclear policy, in 2010 as in 1983, will find little to comfort them in the bishops’ strict conditions for the moral acceptability of deterrence (see pg. 13).

But criticism of existing nuclear deterrents is not tantamount to condemning nuclear deterrence per se. What the church rejects is the widely held view that nuclear weapons bring security but nuclear disarmament would bring insecurity. In order to counter the idea that nuclear deterrence is an end in itself, church statements have dramatically shifted the emphasis from the need to meet the two conditions of the deterrence ethic (the only realistic objective during the cold war) to the need to embrace a nonnuclear ethic, in line with the third condition. Disarmament has become the primary condition (though not the only one) for the moral acceptibility of deterrence, the lens through which other conditions must be viewed.

One implication of this shift is that the disarmament lens refocuses the deterrence debate on how the sole-purpose and sufficiency conditions can contribute to delegitimizing the expansion and modernization of nuclear arsenals and provide a rationale for reducing U.S. and Russian stockpiles to the 100 or so weapons that most experts consider sufficient to deter.

This shift also has implications for the relationship between use and deterrence. If the moral possibility, however remote, of isolated uses of nuclear weapons has been replaced by an unequivocal rejection of any use (in part because use would undermine prospects for disarmament), does that imply that the threat of use is not necessary to deter?
A third issue is how to address the fact that the problem of deterrence is not eliminated by going to zero. Moving to zero could make nuclear weapons even more valuable, more usable and more destabilizing, since keeping a few nuclear weapons or being able to rebuild quickly or reconstitute an arsenal could offer a tremendous strategic advantage. The problem of nuclear terrorism would be reduced but not eliminated with a global ban.

At the low numbers that correspond to the sole purpose and sufficiency conditions, does the case for “existential deterrence” become more credible strategically and offer a morally superior form of deterrence?

The term existential deterrence refers to the theory that if it is known that a country possesses nuclear weapons or can build them, that is enough to deter nuclear use by others. If that theory is correct, it would not be necessary to continue with strategies and doctrines based on a conditional intent to use nuclear weapons in ways that would be indiscriminate or disproportionate. Likewise, in *A World Without Nuclear Weapons*, Sydney Drell and James Goodby argue convincingly that a form of existential deterrence would also work once a global ban is in place, since the capacity to reconstitute a nuclear arsenal would deter other countries from doing so.

An existential deterrent based on the ability to rebuild a nuclear arsenal quickly is not without its own problems, however, since a few states would have such a capacity and most would not. The same disparity in capacity arises if powerful countries rely on conventional forces to deter nuclear cheaters. A world in which a few powers dominate because of their capacity to reconstitute their nuclear arsenal and exercise superiority in conventional weaponry would not be acceptable to other countries, would not reduce the incentive for them to obtain or retain a nuclear capacity and could spark a conventional arms race. Therefore, getting the relationship right between nuclear deterrence, nuclear disarmament and conventional disarmament is a key task for ethicists as well as for policymakers.

**Constraining Counterproliferation**

The invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 and its aftermath should have been the death of the misbegotten doctrine of preventive war, but progress toward nuclear disarmament could give the doctrine new life. If the debate over Iran is any indication, the pressure for preventive force against proliferators and cheaters, especially difficult-to-deter “rogue” regimes with ties to terrorists, will likely intensify in a world of few or no nuclear weapons. Calls for an ethic of “disarmament intervention” akin to humanitarian intervention could emerge. In my view preventive force, even at the end stages of disarmament and under U.N. auspices, should continue to be considered an act of aggression that would threaten the international stability that nonproliferation and disarmament are meant to ensure.

Unlike the rejection of preventive force, however, the ethics of missile defense will need to be reconsidered as the world makes progress toward nuclear disarmament. In 1988, the bishops opposed the deployment of missile defenses by the Reagan administration. They
were not convinced that the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as Star Wars, would make it possible to supersede deterrence. They were concerned about its feasibility, its negative impact on the stability of deterrence and efforts at arms control, and its disproportionate cost. A different assessment will be needed as the world goes to zero. With no or only a few weapons, missile defense becomes more feasible (assuming further technical progress) and could, in fact, supplant some (not all) forms of nuclear deterrence. As David Cortright and Raimo Väyrynen point out in a recent report in the Adelphi Papers monograph series, if it were shared or under international supervision, missile defense would not be destabilizing and an impediment to disarmament.

A Peacebuilding Ethic

Nuclear abolition is a long-term objective that ultimately is as much about politics as it is about arms control. In that sense, the bishops’ “interim” ethic is less a function of time than context. Nuclear abolition does not require a change in human nature or an end to war. It does require a change in politics: a sustained and united political will and, as the U.S. bishops have consistently said, the development of an ethic of cooperative security and peacebuilding that offers effective alternatives to existing nuclear deterrents and preventive force.

The United States and other nuclear powers must lead by example in disarming. But like politics, problems of proliferation are local. Enforcing the Nonproliferation Treaty will probably be less a factor in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, for example, than resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and others in the region and making good on a longstanding commitment to negotiate a nuclear-weapons-free zone there.

Failed states will also remain a source of conflict and will pose a serious challenge to achieving and enforcing a global ban. An often-ignored part of the peace pastoral is the bishops’ call for further development of a theology of peace. Much more needs to be done to develop a peacebuilding ethic to match the sophistication of the just war ethic.

The Security-Sovereignty Nexus

A nonnuclear ethic requires a reconsideration of the relationship between sovereignty and security and a redefinition of the rights and responsibilities of sovereignty. If the nuclear “have nots” have to practice an ethic of restraint in forgoing nuclear weapons to protect their national security in the name of the global good, the shift in duties is even more pronounced for the nuclear “haves.” Because of the risks they have imposed on the world by possessing nuclear weapons, the United States and other nuclear powers bear a heavy burden: to take the lead in global peacebuilding. As they pursue nuclear disarmament, they have a special obligation to forgo pretensions of military, political and economic dominance over other nations and, instead, take the lead in building a system of cooperative security that will make a global ban more likely and sustainable.
How would an ethic of cooperative security and responsible engagement for the global good redefine approaches to strengthening international law and international institutions? If a global ban is to be effective, both nuclear and nonnuclear nations will have to give up some of their rights of sovereignty. For one, the potential doubling of nuclear power generation in the next 20 years will fuel proliferation unless the International Atomic Energy Agency is strengthened and nations agree to much more intrusive inspections, stronger safeguards and tougher sanctions. International measures to verify, enforce and ensure compliance with a ban on nuclear weapons will be even more important. In addition, missile defenses would also have to be shared or put under some common authority. For these and other reasons, the current understanding of the rights of sovereignty and the limits and reach of the authority of the United Nations and other international entities will have to be rethought to make a global ban on nuclear weapons a reality.

Perhaps more than at any other time in the nuclear age, the world is at a critical crossroads: The moral ideal of nuclear abolition is now a realistic long-term policy goal, yet that goal could become unachievable if the world reaches a tipping point in nuclear proliferation. Just as they did with the moral dilemmas of deterrence, Catholic ethicists need to address in a systematic way the moral and strategic challenges involved in going to zero. The end goal is adoption of a nonnuclear ethic whereby any nation that keeps or seeks nuclear weapons would be marginalized as a proliferator. A more sophisticated moral case for nonproliferation and disarmament is essential if the new mainstream support for disarmament is to be sustained over the decades most think necessary for it to become a reality.

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