



# **TIME TO CONTROL TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

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## **SEMINAR REPORT**

Seminar organised by: the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

In co-operation with:

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Ten years ago Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev issued directions to begin one of the deepest and most comprehensive programmes of nuclear weapons reduction the world has yet seen. These reciprocal unilateral Declarations still constitute the only regime covering tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs). At the same time, however, these Declarations suffer from inherent difficulties and weaknesses that mitigate their impact. The seminar focused on further efforts needed from the international community to strengthen and improve the workings of the Declarations. The seminar brought together government officials and diplomats dealing with arms control and disarmament matters as well as selected nongovernmental experts specialised in tactical nuclear weapons. It is a part of a long-term project launched by UNIDIR in order to support efforts to address and curb the problem of TNWs. The seminar was held off the record and therefore all comments made by participants during the meeting are not directly attributed. This report reflects the substance of the lively discussions held, and of the recommendations suggested. UNIDIR will also publish a comprehensive report including some of the papers presented at the seminar.

### ***A - THE 1991 DECLARATIONS AND THE EVOLVING SECURITY FRAMEWORK***

#### **1. The Utility of Unilateral Initiatives**

Unilateral measures are instruments that may be used to enhance the process of arms control. The beneficial effects of unilateral arms control initiatives are weighted against their inherent uncertainties and weaknesses, particularly with respect to their implementation. In the light of growing reliance on unilateral measures, specific

attention has to be devoted to these issues from the perspectives of international law and politics. Although unilateral measures may be an effective means to bring about quick solutions they also often fail to satisfy in the long term. As a result, unilateral regimes may need to be strengthened along the way with different measures and hopefully even be codified into a contractual framework. Legally binding arms control instruments contribute to the stability of the international security system, and are particularly important at a time when the “the crisis of arms control and multilateralism” is becoming commonly acknowledged. The flaws of the existing arms control treaties, particularly reflecting the past adversarial relationship, have to be acknowledged. There is a need to move towards a new structure of a formal strategic framework.

## **2. The 1991 Parallel Unilateral Declaration**

With respect to the 1991 initiatives, ten years ago, at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, the United States and the U.S.S.R. shared grave concerns about the status and high level of operational readiness of tactical nuclear weapons. By mandating the withdrawal of warheads to central storage facilities and the destruction of some of them, the Unilateral Declarations were effective in quickly addressing these issues, but only partially because important questions regarding the implementation and monitoring of the announced provisions remained unresolved. There is a strong need for more certainty, predictability and transparency in the implementation of the 1991 unilateral Declarations.

In this respect, the recent controversial media reports of the possible deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad by Russia are a pertinent example. The likely enlargement of NATO raises fears in some quarters in Moscow of Kaliningrad becoming an isolated island surrounded by a powerful military alliance. Deployment of tactical nuclear weapons for the defence of the enclave is sometimes touted as an option. Such a development, however, would cast serious doubt on the continued viability of the Bush/Gorbachev declarations. One possible remedy identified for precluding this scenario would be providing information on Russia’s stockpiles of TNWs in exchange for a binding obligation by NATO not to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territories of new member States.

Another example concerns the notion of “central storage facilities” in the context of removing warheads from naval platforms and storing them. In the United States, the term central storage means “geographically-central storage” while in the Russian case, the phrase refers to central storage at naval bases. Russian, it seems, prefers to keep weapons close at hand. In this respect there are as yet no agreed definitions, 3 concepts or modalities of implementation and monitoring regarding the control of tactical nuclear weapons.

### **3. Strengthening the Current TNW Regime within the Context of the Current Arms Control Dialogue**

The current political situation does not seem to lend itself to the negotiation of a legally binding instrument on TNWs. Instead, different transparency and confidence building measures could be grafted onto the 1991 regime or additional measures could be evolved to push for the further reduction of TNWs. The United States and the Russian Federation are presently in the process of hammering out a new strategic framework, to be premised on openness, mutual confidence, and significant opportunities for cooperation. Particularly, the two States have indicated that this will include a substantial reduction of offensive nuclear forces. In this respect, it is unclear whether these discussions include the goals outlined in the 1997 Helsinki Agreement that called for transparency in the reduction of tactical nuclear weapons. There is concern over the danger that the issue of TNWs might be dropped from the discussions. It would be strongly desirable, particularly from the point of view of European security, to include tactical nuclear weapons in the planned reductions as well develop new transparency and confidence-building measures related to this category of weapons.

To pave the way for fresh negotiations on TNWs, we propose a set of measures to strengthen the 1991 TNWs control regime. One of the identified priority measures would be the reaffirmation of the 1991 Declarations and the introduction of regular information exchange as well as common guidelines for the implementation of the Declarations. Any of these measures could be introduced as a Memorandum of Understanding or other suitable international instrument between the United States and Russia.

#### ***B - NEW NUCLEAR WEAPONS DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING***

##### **1. Dangerous desire for “mini-nukes”**

There is a growing interest in the development of new nuclear weapons and concerns about the impact that this would have on the nuclear weapons test ban regime. Some prominent advisers in the United States Government who favour a military role for TNWs, now advocate the testing and development of new, smaller, more readily usable nuclear warheads and weapons systems for eventual deployment. However, the evolving new strategic nuclear framework needs to be responsive to terrorist threats. One of the latest envisaged scenarios is the utilisation of “mininukes” for the neutralisation of hardened missile silos and command bunkers of terrorist organizations or “rogue” governments. There are worries about the impact that the 11 September attacks could have on the emerging strategic framework and particularly on the role of nuclear weapons in crisis situations.

## **2. Earth penetrating weapons**

Earth penetrating nuclear weapons amplify the effect of seismic shocks, which may destroy buried hardened targets. It is estimated that an earth-penetrating weapon equipped with a nuclear warhead whose yield is only one ton would still produce highly radioactive debris and cause tens of thousands of casualties. Currently, much discussion centres around whether such new tactical nuclear weapons would have to be tested in order to determine their efficacy. Many are concerned that developing such weapons would involve testing, which in turn would run counter to the objective of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that the United States has signed but not ratified. Some statements from the American nuclear weapons laboratories, however, indicate that testing would not necessarily be required for the development of new, smaller TNWs.

## **3. Implications for the CTBT**

Plans to develop new kinds of tactical nuclear weapons further burden the already aching Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The CTBT is a basic force in the prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons. Some participants felt that tampering with the CTBT could well open a Pandora's box of nuclear proliferation. At the same time it is acknowledged that the CTBT has faults, such as for instance the provisions regarding its entry into force. Ultimately, however, taking into account the importance of the CTBT, it is vital to respect and abide by its provisions regardless of whether or not the treaty is actually in force.

### ***C. TNWs AND TERRORISM***

In the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks against the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon, the UNIDIR seminar was the first event of its kind for which non-member organisations were allowed entry to the United Nations Headquarters. Due to the exceptional circumstances a special Roundtable discussion on tactical nuclear weapons and terrorism was scheduled. The exchange of views was vivid and the participants found the discussion timely. Deliberations focused on three main topics: 1) the threat of the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists; 2) the use of nuclear weapons against terrorists; and 3) regional security considerations in South Asia.

#### **1. Threat of TNW terrorism**

*Threat of terrorists possessing "loose nukes"*

The September 11th attacks have brought attention to the possibility that terrorists might deliberately seek to inflict mass casualties as an objective. The ability to

use weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, as instruments of terror is largely a function of their access to such weapons. It is said, for instance, that groups such as Al Qaida have in the past expressed interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction capabilities. Nuclear weapons possessor countries generally devote considerable effort to protecting this part of their arsenal. Therefore, stealing tactical nuclear weapons should be a difficult task. In this respect chemical or biological weapons might pose a greater danger.

The trouble with tactical nuclear weapons, however, is that these weapons exist in greater numbers than any other types of nuclear weapons, they are not governed by contractual instruments and that their quantity poses a real risk. For instance, in the past, occasional reports have surfaced that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union not all former Soviet tactical nuclear weapons have been properly accounted for. Verifying this claim of “loose nukes” is naturally difficult. Other potential sources of risk derive from the modalities of how these weapons are stored and the lack of exact knowledge of where they are located and of how they are deployed. In particular, concerns are raised over tactical nuclear weapons deployed in the form of aircraft munitions and short-range missile warheads. Complete tactical nuclear weapons systems are still difficult to use without key information and technical components. However, theft of TNW components and their means of delivery should be taken seriously when thinking about the security challenges involved in protecting TNWs.

#### *Threat of terrorists attempting to build radiological weapons*

The United States and Russia are currently engaged in a major programme designed to ensure the protection of fissile materials. Bilateral projects have also successfully converted many Russian nuclear weapons scientists into civilian professions. The beneficial effects of these programmes, particularly due to the recent events, should be expanded and strengthened. The process needed for the delivery of a small nuclear weapon could be beyond the capabilities of most terrorist groups. Terrorists might be tempted to acquire nuclear material with the objective of exploding a radiological weapon. By mixing radioactive material with conventional high explosives, a terrorist group might be able to spread deadly radiological contamination over a wide area and cause severe and lasting disruption. Tight control over nuclear-weapon-usable fissile materials, including export controls, is immediately needed. In order to ensure that this material does not end up in the wrong hands, measures such as installing radiation scanners at key facilities – ports and border crossings – as well as tightening physical security at nuclear labs, power plants or naval depots to prevent the theft of fissile materials, could significantly improve the situation.

## **2. Nuclear option against terrorists**

An article entitled “*Time to Use the Nuclear Option*” published in the Washington Times 14 September 2001, just days prior to the seminar, argued that tactical nuclear weapons should be used to eliminate Osama bin Laden and his supporters. Most participants at the meeting, however, ruled out the possibility that the United States would use nuclear weapons and thereby break the 55 years old nuclear non-use taboo as well as face the severe likely political consequences. However, there has been much debate in recent years as to whether using nuclear weapons would be a legitimate response to a BW attack.

## **3. Regional security considerations in South Asia**

The possibility of regional tension expanding in South Asia due to the American military campaign against terrorist groups based in Afghanistan raised concerns over the security of Pakistan’s nuclear materials, particularly in regard to stability of an unelected military government. The importance of custodial safeguards for nuclear weapons as well as materials cannot be stressed enough. Preventive measures could include: 1) the enhancement of nuclear materials protection and accounting methods to strengthen storage of these materials; and 2) the removal of fissile material to the United States following the past examples of the bilateral Russian-US programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Emphasizing the vital importance of strengthening the 1991 tactical nuclear weapons regime the participants in the seminar put forth a number of recommendations, a summary of which is presented below. In addition, the participants affirmed the desirability of including tactical nuclear weapons as part of any further reductions of offensive nuclear forces, currently considered under the new strategic framework discussed by the Russian Federation and United States of America.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Strengthening the 1991 regime on tactical nuclear weapons***

1. The United States of America and the Russian Federation could:
  - reaffirm the 1991 Declarations
  - exchange information on the implementation of the 1991 Declarations
  - adopt mutually agreed guidelines for the implementation of the 1991 Declarations
  - introduce transparency measures on stocks by category (deployed, long-term storage, slated for elimination) and distribution by region;
  - expand the Co-operative Threat Reduction (CTR) program to include the protection and dismantlement of TNWs
  - identify specific categories of weapons to which transparency measures could be applied, e.g. SLCM (sea-launched cruise missiles).
2. Increase the funding of the US Cooperative Threat Reduction Programme by encouraging the participation of other States;
3. Increase transparency with regards to stockpiles of TNWs in all nuclear weapon States and States possessing nuclear weapons.
4. Include tactical nuclear weapons in the planned unilateral reductions of offensive nuclear forces by the Russian Federation and the United States of America.
5. Decide on a binding obligation by NATO not to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territories of new member States
6. Commitment by all nuclear weapon states to withdraw and repatriate their tactical nuclear weapons to national territories
7. Adopt appropriate verification measures to monitor adequately the control of tactical nuclear weapons

### ***New Nuclear Weapons Development and Testing***

1. Reduce the military role attributed to TNWs, and withdraw any current plans to develop new nuclear weapons or resume testing
2. Respect and abide by the CTBT regardless of whether or not the treaty is actually in force

### ***TNWs and terrorism***

1. An understanding that in combating terrorism concerned states will not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons
2. Increase security in order to guarantee the safety of nuclear weapons, their components and delivery systems, as well as of nuclear materials and facilities
3. Further reduce stockpiles of tactical nuclear weapons in order to lower the risk emanating from the existing large numbers of TNWs
4. Increase the capacity to fully account for all tactical nuclear weapons and materials in relevant States.