

# THE UNITED NATIONS, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND HUMAN SURVIVAL:

Written by John Hallam  
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## THE UNITED NATIONS, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND HUMAN SURVIVAL: Politically unsound reflections on six years of lobbying the United Nations on Nuclear Disarmament and Accidental Nuclear War

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Every year since October 2006, the universe has somehow enabled me to raise the fare for a no-frills ticket to New York (and sometimes Geneva), and I have somehow managed to obtain the magic piece of blue plastic that takes one into the special queue at the UN security hut for 'pass holders', leapfrogging the slow-moving line of mere 'visitors', and allowing entrance into parts of the UN that visitors do not get to see, that allow one to buttonhole diplomats and lobby them.

From the moment you pass through security, you will be conscious that in every real sense, as well as in strict legal terms, you are no longer in New York and no longer on US soil. The UN is not merely extraterritorial, but is in every sense a different world.

One that has welcomed me every year since 2006.

When I arrived in October 2006 for First Committee, I came bearing a printout of a declaration on the operational status of nuclear weapon systems signed by 364 NGOs and Parliamentarians, endorsed by the European Parliament, and signed also by 44 Nobel prize-winners. The declaration was authored (with a very great deal of very expert help) by myself, while 32 of the 44 Nobels were signed on by Doug Mattern of the Association of World Citizens, who has now sadly passed away.

So what initially brought me and still brings me to the UN was an 'end of the world' issue that I had been pursuing since 1999, when I led a cyberspace-based global campaign to lower the operating status of nuclear weapons that led to a unanimous resolution in the European Parliament.

The guts of that issue is this:

The US and Russia continue to maintain some 2000 nuclear warheads (approx) in a status whereby which they can be launched in minutes, and in some cases in tens of seconds, on the basis of electronic satellite warning signals. Those of you who heard Colonel Valery Yarynich, formerly of the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces, last August speak of this issue will know exactly its existential importance.

Doug and my declaration with its Nobel signatures and Euro-parliament endorsement urged the UN to raise the profile of the issue by adopting a resolution on it that would gain broader support than an existing resolution that has been adopted since 1998, India's 'Reducing

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Nuclear Dangers' resolution. Reducing Nuclear Dangers, worthy as it is, gets support only from what has been derisively called the 'NAM1 Ghetto', a mere  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the planet that shows that it is really the non – NAM that is the 'Ghetto'.

In October 2006 when I first arrived in the UN, I teamed up with fellow-activist Steven Starr, who like Colonel Yarynich has already visited Sydney, and we held the first of what was to become a long series of workshops or 'side-panels' at First Committee and NPT (Non Proliferation Treaty) meetings, in dingy Conference Room A, in the first sub-basement of the UN General Assembly building.

It was not until the very next October, 2007, that with had the resolution we are after, - 'our' resolution- with an announcement by the government of NZ that they had decided to promote a resolution on the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems. In this they were followed immediately by Sweden, Switzerland, Chile, Nigeria and Malaysia.

Sitting at home in my humble Department of Housing flat in Lilyfield, I was stunned. My bumbling efforts had not only garnered (with ample assistance) 44 Nobels, but had resulted, or was about to result in, a resolution in the UN General Assembly, about (well, sort of) the end of the world. I panicked a bit. I wondered if I was having delusions of grandeur. These entirely nonproductive wonderings were cut short by a stream of emails from one very exalted disarmament lobbyist telling me which nuclear weapons states I needed to lobby right now and in what terms.

When in October 2007, Steve and I held our panel in Conference Room A, our advertising had been done for us by the Bush administration essentially lying to the First Committee about the status of its nuclear weapon systems, which it claimed were not on high alert. I gleefully circulated from a friend in Huntington, Long Island's computer, a scathing rebuttal by Dr Bruce Blair, formerly of Offut Air Force Base, Omaha. In Conference Room A I recited a terrifying list of incidents in which the world HAD come close to global thermonuclear war by accident, while Steve showed his animated graphics (available on [www.nucleardarkness.org](http://www.nucleardarkness.org)), of the aftermath of someone in Stratcom or Kosvinsky Mountain making a very bad decision amidst wailing sirens and flashing lights. In a room designed for 50 people and with the air-conditioning not working, 80 diplomats watched with sweat pouring off them in complete silence as the planet turned black in front of them. This performance, repeated a number of times, has had I am sure, a lasting effect on the deliberations of the UN.

'Operational Readiness of Nuclear weapon Systems' as it was called, was adopted in 2007 by 127 votes to three – the US, UK, and France. Most recently (2010) it was adopted by 157 votes to 3 in the General Assembly, with more than half of NATO voting for it, and support from some major and surprising players including not only Australia (since 2008), but conservative Canada, and weapons state China.

The resolution is poised to go once more this year (with a new improved text available on [www.reachingcriticalwill.org](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org)), with the Swiss optimistically predicting that there will be even better numbers this time. There has been a fully-funded UNIDIR(UN Institute for Disarmament Research)report by US

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nuclear weapons expert Hans Kristensen (whom I also got to tour Sydney—last year), which was given a well-attended preliminary release on 17 October and will be given a final release in May 2013 at the Geneva NPT prepcom.

So what is the impact of all of this UN activity on nuclear disarmament more broadly, and, as the title suggests, on prospects for human survival?

The General Assembly adopts something between a dozen and 20 resolutions on nuclear disarmament in addition to ones on space warfare, chemical and biological warfare, cyberspace, conventional arms, land mines and small arms and light weapons – which as majority world delegates like to point out, 'end the world' for tens of thousands of people every year.

Australia votes for maybe just under half of the nuclear-weapons-related resolutions, but is a major sponsor of some of the most important ones, including the 'United Action towards the total elimination of Nuclear Weapons', together with Japan, and the very well supported resolution on entry into force of the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty).

Perhaps the most important of the resolutions regularly adopted by the UN General Assembly and First Committee on nuclear weapons are:

- \* The 'United Action' resolution, now the most widely supported nuclear disarmament resolution there is, and co-sponsored by a very long list of governments including the US. This was adopted in 2011 by 169 yes votes, 1 no vote, and 11 abstentions.

- \* The 'NAM' resolution, in many ways surprisingly similar to United Action, but supported exclusively by the NAM group, which still meant in 2012 it was adopted by 117 yes votes to 45 noes and 18 abstentions. While there is much that is good in the current text of NAM, its language on the UN's CD (Conference on Disarmament) arguably binds it to 'current rules of procedure', which would make it harder to adopt proposals to unblock the CD. As a government can always ask for a separate vote on that paragraph or give an 'explanation of vote' (EoV) that is not in my view sufficient reason not to support an otherwise good text.

- \* Australia's CTBT resolution is also amongst the most widely supported, going through by 175yes-1no-3abstentions.

- \* The 'New Agenda' resolution, once the 'cutting edge' of nuclear disarmament efforts at the UN, still widely supported, at 169yes-6noes – 6abstentions

- \* The Malaysian resolution on follow up to the 1996 ICJ advisory opinion on the (il)legality of nuclear weapons, advocating a nuclear weapons convention. This resolution attracts largely predictable NAM support, but Switzerland, Sweden, New Zealand, Austria and Ireland all vote for it. It was last adopted 130yes-26no-23abstentions

- \* India's 'Reducing Nuclear Dangers' resolution, exclusively supported by NAM but deserving of much wider support, last adopted 117yes-39noes-13abstentions.

\* Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems, last adopted in 2010, 157yes-3noes- 22abstentions. Roughly a further 20 governments were marked as 'absent'. I have written to all of them this time urging a yes vote.

Overall however there is a bewildering number of resolutions (especially when we count the non-nuclear ones). From time to time there are proposals to 'prune' or 'rationalise' them.

A number of resolutions, apart from Operational Readiness and Reducing Nuclear Dangers, have included, over the years, reference to operational readiness, notably the NAM resolution and United Action.

Nuclear weapons as a potential threat to human survival has long been a part of rusted-on, ritualized diplomatic 'boilerplate' language on a number of resolutions, and as an introduction to many countries' statements to First Committee, certainly ever since the launching of the Rajiv Gandhi Peace Plan in 1988, if not earlier in the days of Kennedy.

However I would like to think that display after display of the planet turning black, to rows of stunned and silent diplomats has had its effect over the years. I have also, in a number of my panel presentations, collected the diplomatic boilerplate and recycled it, saying in effect, 'You've repeated this almost automatically, that nuclear weapons are a potential threat to human survival. This is more absolutely correct than you may know, and here's why.'

A major influence in all of this has been the re-calculation in 2006 by Toon and Robock, using the most up to date NASA climate models, of the calculations on nuclear winter – something that has fed directly into our panels. Reinforcing this has been the work of Dr Ira Helfand of PSR/IPPNW (Physicians for Social Responsibility/International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) on the global climatic impact, and the impact on global food supplies, of an India-Pakistan nuclear 'exchange', using approximately 0.3% of global nuclear megatons. It is surely indicative that, while Ira's very first appearance in the UN was at a panel organised by myself and Steve, in Vienna Prepcom 2012 he addressed a conference hall full of delegates, at the behest of the Swiss, on 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences' of nuclear weapons use.

The issue of 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences' has now started to get immense traction, led very much by the Swiss. 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences', which is becoming 'diplo-speak' for 'possible human extinction', was first included in the final declaration of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. At the 2012 NPT Prepcom in Vienna, the Swiss coordinated a statement on it that 16 governments signed up to. At the 2012 First Committee the Swiss presented a similar statement, this time signed by 35 governments including Austria, Indonesia, Brazil...and Swaziland (but shamefully not Australia). As the statement was read for the first time, people stopped talking into their mobiles and stopped fiddling with their i-pads and i-pods. There was 'complete silence' as the Swiss delegate read the statement.

As votes are once more taken on operational readiness we at the HSP will once more watch the diplomatic tea-leaves most carefully.

One must ask finally, 'What does all this accomplish?' Are votes on resolutions in the UN General Assembly anything more than a moving of deckchairs on the Titanic as the 'real' decisions are taken on the bridge and in the engine room and continue to put question marks over the question of short to medium term human survival?

There is much to be said for this but some clearing of the decks is indeed in order, and if the moving of deckchairs unblocks – or blocks – escape routes, then it is hardly inconsequential.

First of all it is as well to note that few people know at all that most governments in the world vote regularly for a set of propositions that if ever truly implemented would take the apocalypse OFF the human agenda.

That is, they vote for proposals that:

- \* recognise or reaffirm that nuclear weapons do indeed threaten human survival
- \* demand their abolition or complete elimination, and the making impossible of their re-introduction
- \* that set out various pathways to doing so, with a high degree of agreement and overlap amongst many proposals as to how to remove the possibility of an apocalypse from the human agenda.

The best-kept secret seems to be that the UN is very far from a disunited and chaotic body as it is all too often portrayed. What is striking on reading diplomatic statement after statement on nuclear disarmament is the degree to which those statements overlap, complement and repeat each other. It is the unity of approach, not the disunity, that is striking. The same cannot be said of national parliaments where confrontation is the order of the day.

Confrontation in the GA or First Committee is rare indeed and shocking when it does take place.(e.g., between the DPRK and RoK).

What is clear on reading the various statements year after year is that the governments of the world essentially agree on the need to rid the world of nuclear weapons, and largely agree on how to do that; but a tiny minority of governments – basically the P5, but usually not all of the P5, more often the P3 – are giving everyone else 'the finger', or at least making excuses for not doing as the rest of the world would like them to do.

When over 180 governments declare, for example, that nuclear weapons constitute a global threat, that there is a legal obligation to eliminate them and that a series of steps need to be taken as a matter of urgency to do so, then it takes a lot more than a few well-paid spinmeisters and media neglect to cover the mere expressed will of the planet, to pretend that it just never happened.

In emphasising the degree of unanimity within the UN over the degree of division, I am not for a moment denying that identifiable voting blocs exist, some quite formalised and organised. Of these the most clearly identifiable are of course, the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) bloc, who formally caucus during NPT meetings, and the 'NATO and other Western' allies' bloc, including Australia, Japan, RoK, and NZ (with the former 'eastern bloc' countries more dogmatically,

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aggressively, and counterproductively pro-NATO than NATO itself.) Nor am I saying that one bloc doesn't on occasion persistently and perversely refuse to vote for propositions put up by the other bloc – the NAM resolution, quite independently of its actual real content, gets no support at all from the non-NAM countries, and there is really no substantial reason why this should be so. (Even if some paras in resolutions ARE problematic, they could be dealt with either by an explanation of vote (EoV) or a separate vote on the problematic para).

The NAM text truly deserves non-NAM support, and such support would send messages that truly need to be sent, not least that the importance of nuclear abolition trumps the usual bloc voting.

The same applies to the Malaysian resolution on follow up to the 1996 ICJ advisory opinion, though as we saw that has attracted support from NZ, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria and Ireland. It also applies in spades to Reducing Nuclear Dangers and to Operational Readiness, though here the relationship is lopsided: all who vote for Reducing Nuclear Dangers also vote for Operational Readiness. I have myself expended considerable energy, thus far with little result, in trying to get India, NZ, and Switzerland to talk to each other and to support each other's resolutions. (I do not advocate a merger).

One problem in all of this is that India, clearly, has more to gain than do the Swiss. A further problem, often cited by some diplomats, is that the Operational Readiness resolution is written within the NPT framework and, of course, Reducing Nuclear Dangers is not. I believe this is not at all insuperable given goodwill. Finally, and more substantially, it is argued that India and Pakistan are being hypocritical as they put the subcontinent on the same hair-trigger basis as they criticise the US and Russia for doing. This could well be dealt with in an EoV.

The point that gets completely submerged in all this hairsplitting, however, is that, here, two completely different resolutions, spearheaded by governments that are hardly talking to each other, are saying substantially the SAME THING. And it is that SAME THING, namely that nuclear weapons need not be on high alert and that steps need to be taken to make an accidental apocalypse far less likely, that is truly of importance. The rest is the crackling of thorns under a pot.

Similarly, there is much similarity (I can already hear howls of protest from both sides) between the NAM resolution and United Action. I apologise in advance to both sides, but I've read the texts of both over and over again and the fact is that they share far more than they don't share. The differences are marginal not central.

Sure, there are at least two bits I can think of in NAM that I would prefer to be different. One, shared I think with United Action, is its unstinting support for nuclear POWER, which I emphatically do not share. The other is (as previously noted) language committing to 'current procedures' (i.e., unmodified consensus) within the CD, making unblocking of the CD much more difficult. 'Current procedures' in the CD are clearly not working.

For sure, I have never met a nuclear disarmament statement or resolution that I have not liked. It's a nuke disarmament resolution. What could possibly be not to like?

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When real and substantive differences do from time to time occur it tends to be, as previously stated, between the P5 or P3, and the entire rest of the UN. In addition, 'unofficial' nuclear weapons states, Israel, DPRK, and Pakistan (not to the same extent, India) also stand in a real and substantial sense outside what is otherwise, in real terms, a substantive consensus.

There is currently a furious debate within the Abolition movement as to whether and how much Abolition2000, the global umbrella organisation of over 2000 smaller organisations (including not only 'small' organisations such as PND, but 'small' organisations such as Mayors for Peace, whose combined citizenry represent about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the planet), - should continue to focus efforts on the UN-based NPT review process, which does indeed absorb a substantial portion of NGOs, total campaign effort. (In PND's case, essentially all of it.) Some seem to argue that the NPT effort has basically 'failed'.

I don't think this is the case at all. The opposite is, rather, true. NGO input at the UN level, both in First Committee and in the NPT process, has, I believe, certainly since 2006, utterly transformed the terms of the debate.

It has for example, certainly transformed the dialogue on 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences'; indeed it is why there IS a dialogue on 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences'. NGO input has been a large, indeed the largest, part of the creation of a consensus in which 95-99% of all GOVERNMENTS declare in effect that they do not want either to be vaporised or to freeze in the twilight after others have been vaporised, and that they think the issue is real enough to warrant action. I really think that, without NGO input, the impetus for resolutions such as Operational Readiness, Reducing Nuclear Dangers, New Agenda and even NAM and United Action would dry up.

The UN is of course, excoriated over and over again for its complete lack of enforcement power. It is certainly true as said previously, that if, even in only one year, the resolutions on nuclear weapons adopted year after year by First Committee were actually, somehow, enforced, - we just wouldn't be talking at all about nuclear weapons as a potential threat to human survival, because we would have disposed of the problem at least for the short to medium term. It is also true that the GA has, by itself, no enforcement mechanisms whatsoever. A unanimous resolution urging that nuclear weapons be abolished yesterday is just that: an expression (translated into diplomatic language) of the will of every government and the people they represent to go on living and not die of radiation, fallout or inferno or freeze and/or starve in the dark. As such, and as an expression of the will of the overwhelming majority of humans if asked, it surely cannot be set aside.

But that DOES leave a terrible disconnect between the 'bridge' at the UN and the engine-rooms of the US and Russian Congressional and Duma committees on strategic weapons and the various planning departments of the Russian General Staff and the Pentagon. United Action, Operational Readiness and Reducing Nuclear Dangers should be required reading for all staff in those areas. The reality is that for the most part, personnel in the Pentagon's 'Strategic Strike' section, and its Russian equivalent will not even know of the existence of UN votes on nuclear posture. The two almost never interact.

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(I once did witness an interaction between the 'Strategic Strike' folks and the rest of the UN, at the 2009 NPT Prepcom. They were to give a briefing. I have never seen a more unhappy-looking bunch of people, and they started their briefing by asking NGOs to leave. Nobody did.

They then refused to permit questions. I DID however manage to ask one very grumpy looking individual afterwards about 'decision-making time' and got an answer that was less than informative).

The will of the planet needs to be heard loud and clear by Capitol Hill and the Pentagon, the Kremlin and the General Staff. There is little to indicate that this is happening right now.

(I do try in a modest way via fax (yes, by fax!) and email to ensure that relevant individuals on Duma and Congressional Strategic Forces committees and strategic planners do get the texts and voting patterns of UN resolutions, specifically Operational Readiness. I wonder how many read them. The effort is, I believe, vital).

To return to our original question of how much emphasis to place on UN-oriented efforts. We of the NGO community would, I think, be making a colossal error if we either abandoned or substantially withdrew resources from UN-related disarmament activities. This is particularly so if we do not have a strategy already in place to put pressure on bodies such as the US Congress, the Duma and the military and strategic planning community. We need to be having much more dialogue with the Dr Strangeloves of the world, and we need to talk more to – dare I say it?-- Generals.

But to simply argue that we are somehow like the drunken chap who looked for his house-key in the light (and who anyway may have been less silly than portrayed, because it is easier to look in the light) is I think not correct. The UN is THE peak policymaking body, for all its faults, in the world. And it is overwhelmingly in favour of abolition on the grounds that nuclear weapons are a threat to human existence. We'd be silly to walk away from that.

[Unscholarly bibliographical note: I have relied largely on my own experience and memory in writing this, though it has been buttressed by reading

EVERY statement and every resolution that relates to nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament on the Reaching Critical Will website, both for the most recent (Oct 2012) GA First Committee, and (over the years) for each and every First Committee and NPT meeting since 2006.]

You

are referred to:

[www.reachingcriticalwill.org](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org) ]