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The Trillion Dollar Road to Armageddon

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In March of last year the Norwegian government convened a gathering of 129 nations in Oslo for a two-day Conference on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear War. This week there will be a follow up meeting in Mexico to further examine the scientific data now available documenting the devastating global impact of even a very limited use of these weapons.

The United States and the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council, who together possess 98% of the world's nuclear weapons, boycotted the Oslo meeting and have not yet indicated if they will attend the meeting in Mexico. In a joint statement issued before the Oslo meeting, the P5, as they are called, said that a conference that examined what will actually happen if nuclear weapons are used would somehow “distract” them from their efforts to reduce the nuclear danger.

The administration has expressed particular concern that these conferences will somehow endanger the 1968 Non Proliferation Treaty, which makes it illegal for states which do not possess nuclear weapons to build them. But Article VI of the NPT also requires the existing nuclear powers to engage in good faith negotiations to eliminate their own nuclear arsenals.

A recent statement by Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel sheds light on the real threat to the NPT. Speaking after a tour of nuclear weapons facilities in Albuquerque earlier this month, Hagel

called for the US to 'upgrade' its nuclear warheads and the submarines, bombers and missiles that deliver them.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated in late December these plans would cost \$355 billion over the next decade. The Center for Nonproliferation Studies predicts the new weapons will cost \$1 trillion over 30 years.

Meanwhile, the Russians are in the middle of a similar major upgrade of their nuclear forces.

So while asking the non-nuclear weapons states to respect the NPT and refrain from building nuclear weapons, the two main nuclear powers are ignoring their responsibilities under the treaty and expending vast sums of money they cannot afford to make sure they have thousands of nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future.

And this is the problem: the system of nuclear apartheid, where some nations possess nuclear weapons and others are forbidden to have them, is increasingly unacceptable to the non-nuclear weapons states. These nations do not want to build nuclear weapons of their own. They want the nuclear powers to stop holding them hostage and putting the safety of the whole world at risk with the weapons they already possess.

This concern has indeed been fueled by the growing understanding of the actual effects of nuclear weapons, particularly the recent reports that have shown that even a very limited, regional nuclear war would have catastrophic weather, contamination, crop loss, and famine consequences worldwide, likely killing billions of people. The weapons on a single US Trident submarine can produce this global catastrophe; we have 14 of them.

The US and Russia claim the world does not have to worry about their nuclear weapons — they will never be used. Around the world, it is an argument that persuades few. If there is no chance these weapons will ever be used, why would we spend hundreds of billions of dollars on them? Even if they are not used deliberately, there exists the very real threat of an accidental war. We know of at least five occasions in the last 35 years when either Moscow or Washington prepared to launch a nuclear war in the mistaken belief that it was itself under attack. And a terrorist cyber attack could lead to the unauthorized launch of these weapons.

We are at a fundamental decision point with respect to nuclear weapons. We can begin negotiations with the other nuclear powers to eliminate our nuclear arsenals and prevent the proliferation of these weapons across the planet. Or we can spend a trillion dollars to extend our nuclear arsenal and send a clear message to the rest of the world that they should build nuclear weapons, too.

The US should stop insisting that the non-nuclear nations trust us and do as we say and not do as we do. We need to lead by example and seek the security of a world without nuclear weapons. The US should attend the Mexico meeting and give leadership to the growing international movement to negotiate a treaty to eliminate these weapons once and for all.