

**Speech**

**Nuclear Risk in the Arctic and Further  
– a Peace Movement’s Perspective**

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**Abstract**

This speech gives a short overview of the existing risks of nuclear war and of the catastrophic humanitarian and climate consequences of even a regional nuclear war.

**Keywords**

Nuclear weapons, nuclear winter, ICAN, IPPNW

**About the author**

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## 1. Introduction

IPPNW (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) was founded during the height of the Cold War and has worked against nuclear weapons for over 40 years. ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) was founded in 2007. I have been working in both organisations from their respective beginning, so I have a long perspective on peace work.

IPPNW and ICAN have emphasized the catastrophic humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and also their devastating effects for the climate. Recent studies show that even a regional nuclear war, e. g. between India and Pakistan, with 50-100 nuclear detonations (0.8 % of the world's current nuclear arsenal) would cause firestorms raising enormous amounts of soot and debris in the stratosphere, fading the sunshine all over the northern hemisphere. Temperatures at the ground level would drop drastically for 10 years and agriculture and food production would diminish everywhere, causing nuclear famine. This would threaten 1-2 billion people with starvation. This nuclear winter would be especially harsh in the Nordic and Baltic countries. It is probable that it would take several years to succeed in cultivating anything here.

The change of focus in nuclear discourse from megatons and ballistic trajectories to humanitarian consequences is one of the reasons these organisations received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 and 2017, respectively. Knowing the consequences helps the actions to diminish the risk. Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev has said that the message of the physicians' movement (which was also very active in the Soviet Union) made him understand the urgency of nuclear disarmament. In the modern world one problem is that current politicians have not lived through the Cold War and the existential threat of nuclear war. Many of the leaders do not realise the total destruction that would follow a nuclear war.

After the Cold War the world's nuclear arsenals have gone down, but the "overkill" capacity is still manifold. In the 2000's many nuclear weapon states have begun to modernise their nuclear weaponry and begun to conceive deterrence as a persisting, permanent condition.

When nuclear weapons states had not been able to meet the obligations of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) which entered into force 1970, in promoting nuclear disarmament up to the end, many non-nuclear countries and NGOs began to advocate for a treaty to ban nuclear weapons. This Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted at the UN in 2017 and entered into force January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021.

None of the nuclear weapon states nor NATO countries have signed it. They claim they have to keep these weapons because of deterrence. They argue that according to the NPT they have a legal right to possess these doomsday weapons indefinitely. It is very unfortunate that NATO has taken such a hostile attitude against TPNW. Originally NATO's strategy was not based on nuclear weapons, only from 2010 it has defined itself as a nuclear alliance.

Deterrence has been the policy of nuclear weapon states for 70 years. It is based on the idea that no-one can use nuclear weapons as the consequences would be mutual destruction. Reagan and Gorbachev declared in 1985 that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. But deterrence is very fragile – nuclear war can begin by accident or by mistake. There have been several near-miss situations (false alarms for approaching missiles, defective chips in the airspace defence command centre, nuclear bombs dropped due to aircraft accident). We have been lucky so far, but as the secretary general of the UN António Guterres has said, luck is not a strategy.

Also, the decision to launch a nuclear attack is very centralised. In the US it is solely the President who can decide this, in Russia we do not know the actual procedure of decision making, but probably it is not the responsibility of the president alone. There is always a possibility for a leader to be off balance due to mental illness (psychosis, delirium), extreme stress or wrong and malign influence. No person in the world should have a right to exterminate billions of people and put an end to our civilisation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has proved that deterrence does not prevent wars, as its defenders proclaim. Actually, deterrence has enabled Russia to attack Ukraine. Knowing the reluctance of the US and NATO to join the war because of the threat of it escalating to a nuclear war, Putin is shamelessly using deterrence to keep the West out of Ukraine.

## **2. How to diminish the nuclear threat?**

In the Nordic and Baltic NATO and future NATO countries it seems that promoting TPNW is not a fruitful strategy just now. The resistance is very strong within NATO, although Norway has shown there is no legal hindrance for a NATO country to join TPNW. The discussions on TPNW will of course continue especially after the war, and when Finland and now Sweden probably soon will become full members of NATO.

Another possible goal could be promoting nuclear free zones. There are several of them in the world including Latin America, most of Africa, and Antarctic. The principle of nuclear free zones is that besides prohibiting nuclear weapons in their own areas, the nuclear weapon states would also recognise this and guarantee not to attack them with nuclear weapons.

Finland and Sweden are now landing under the “nuclear umbrella” of the US and NATO. In the peace movement and in ICAN we actually call it a nuclear shadow, because it does not give any protection against nuclear weapons and can even increase the tension. Current Nordic NATO countries and Lithuania do not allow nuclear weapons in their territory. It also seems that Finland and Sweden are not wishing to have nuclear weapons, although our governments are reluctant to make any preconditions for the membership. It would strengthen the security of Nordic countries and also the whole world if we could unequivocally declare Finland and Sweden as non-nuclear countries also within NATO. So far at least the Finnish nuclear security law prohibits nuclear explosives in Finnish territory. We need to keep it that way. Establishing at least an unofficial nuclear-free Scandinavia could help us to question the principals of deterrence and demand guarantees from nuclear weapon states never to use nuclear weapons against us.

Other security building measures could be declarations never to use nuclear weapons first. Only India and China have this no-first-strike policy. NATO should also declare this. Also, nuclear weapons should be taken off high alert (launching within 15 minutes).

And we have to continue our work on trust building and reconstructing the system of international agreements and treaties. We have a lot to do, but the existence of humankind depends on this.