Remarks on Nuclear Weapons and the Moral Compass

By

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I thank the Permanent Mission of the Philippines and the Global Security Institute for organizing this important discussion and for inviting me to speak.

Fourteen years ago, the United Nations hosted a remarkable event—the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, attended by over a thousand participants. That summit produced a joint statement, which began with these words: *Humanity stands at a critical juncture in history, one that calls for strong moral and spiritual leadership to help set a new direction for society.*

Included in that statement was a common commitment—“To join with the United Nations in the call for all nation states to work for the universal abolition of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction for the safety and security of life on this planet.”

Of course, that was certainly not the first time that nuclear weapons have been described as threatening humanity. We recall the Russell-Einstein Manifesto of 1955, which concluded with these famous words, “Remember your humanity, and forget the rest.”

Nor would this be the last time we would hear about the basic conflict between humanity and the existence of nuclear weapons. We are witnessing it today in the many warnings of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. Such concerns have given rise to a growing demand for an approach to disarmament that builds on duties and prohibitions found in international humanitarian law.

I find it enormously reassuring that despite the many differences that persist among the world religious and spiritual leaders, they remain today united in agreeing that nuclear weapons still pose a significant threat to humanity that requires a collective response.

Global nuclear disarmament is being viewed throughout the world as a moral and a legal necessity. It is rooted both in a recognition of our responsibilities as members of the same human family and in legal obligations found in treaties and customary international law.

In addition to this convergence between law and morality, we are also seeing a growing recognition among States and civil society that nuclear disarmament is also a practical necessity. With all of its safeguards and controls, disarmament offers greater security than any alternative, including deterrence doctrines, non-proliferation, endless increases in military spending, sanctions, export controls, and other policy instruments.

In short, disarmament is the right thing to do, and it works. With disarmament, we are not simply fleeing something, we are seeking something: a safer world for humanity without nuclear weapons.

The clarity of our common goal is our greatest asset in the disarmament community. Our shared objective is much more ambitious than merely reducing the risk of use of these weapons, halting their spread, preventing terrorists from acquiring them, or reducing their number. These are all worthy goals, but they are not sufficient to eliminate the risk that such weapons will be used, either wilfully or by accident.

So let us follow the course our moral compass dictates. Let us not rest until our journey is complete. And let us remain united in the pursuit of this just cause.

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