



Toshiyuki Mimaki, the co-chair of Nihon Hidankyo, speaks at an event held in November at United Nations headquarters in New York on the sidelines of the second meeting of States parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Jiji) [The Japan Times](#)
26th September marks the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.
Credit: International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) Darren Ornitz

Playing Nuclear Games: Tickling the Tail of the Promethean Nuclear Fire Dragon ***Nobel Peace Prize 2024 to Nihon Hidankyo, Voice of the Atomic Bombing Survivors***

By Tariq Rauf*

VIENNA, 8 October 2024 (Update): In recent years, the rhetoric, strategy and practice of nuclear deterrence has grown riskier, more urgent, more dangerous, less stable, and increasingly in the hands of deficient leaders and policymakers.

Today, 8th October, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize for 2024](#) to [Nihon Hidankyo](#). This Japanese grassroots movement of atomic bomb survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also known as Hibakusha, is deservedly “receiving the Peace Prize for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again”.

Hopefully, the leaders, policymakers and publics in the nine nuclear-armed States, as well as more than 30 allied States in defence arrangements underpinned by nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, can mend their ways and develop defence policies based on principles of [common security](#).

Playing Nuclear Games

The ten States that have manufactured and test detonated nuclear weapons since 1945, each have received and/or provided assistance to other States – no existing nuclear weapon development and acquisition programme is truly indigenous or independent.

Furthermore, all ten nuclear-armed States have in place policies to use their nuclear weapons in circumstances assessed by them as threatening their vital security interests, sovereignty and territorial integrity; and in this context, all of them at one time or another have made implicit or explicit threats to use nuclear weapons.

On 26th September this year, at the commencement of the United Nations General Assembly’s annual high-level commemoration of the [International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons](#), Secretary-General António Guterres warned that, “*We are heading in the wrong direction entirely. Not since the worst days of the cold war has the spectre of nuclear weapons cast such a*

dark shadow". He noted that nuclear-armed States "*must stop gambling with humanity's future*" and must honour their commitments and obligations for nuclear disarmament.

The [President of the General Assembly](#), Philémon Yang (Cameroon), also warned that, "*This is a time when nuclear blackmail has emerged, and some are recklessly threatening to unleash a nuclear catastrophe. This simply cannot continue. We must step back from the nuclear precipice, and we must act now*".

In this regard, let's take a brief detour back into the early history of the nuclear age. Following the Trinity nuclear test detonation of 16th July 1945, nuclear scientist Leó Szilárd observed that, "*Almost without exception, all the creative physicists had misgivings about the use of the bomb*" and further that "*Truman did not understand at all what was involved regarding nuclear weapons*".

Last year, the movie *Oppenheimer* had been the rage based on a noteworthy biography of Robert Oppenheimer entitled *American Prometheus* written by historians Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin. Though the movie spared its viewers the horrors of the atomic bombing of Japan, it did reflect the warnings of the early nuclear weapon scientists about the long-term or permanent dangers of a nuclear arms race and associated risks of further nuclear weapons use.

On the other hand, the film overlooked other historical works including *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and its Legacies* also by Martin Sherwin, that disputes and negates the US government's narrative about the necessity of using nuclear weapons twice over civilian targets in Japan and suggests that the decisions were driven mainly by geostrategic and prestige considerations – criteria still in operation today to justify continuing retention of nuclear weapons.

Leó Szilárd's observation that I have cited above that President Truman did not understand at all what was involved regarding nuclear weapons, unfortunately still rings true nearly 80 years on when it comes to the leaders of today's nuclear-weapon possessor States as well as of most of their diplomats and those of 30-plus countries in military defence and security arrangements underpinned by nuclear weapons.

Now, why do I say this? In addition to nuclear doctrines based on nuclear weapons use, the UN nuclear disarmament system is in disarray.

The [Conference on Disarmament](#) in Geneva, the single multilateral arms control negotiating forum, has been stymied since 1996, unable to agree on a sustained programme of work on any of its "decatalogue" of agenda items.

The [Disarmament Commission](#) as the specialized, deliberative subsidiary body of the General Assembly that allows for in-depth deliberations on specific disarmament issues, inter alia "*Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons*", also has been deadlocked.

The [First Committee](#) of the General Assembly deals with disarmament, global challenges and threats to peace that affect the international community and seeks out solutions to the challenges in the international security regime. Every year it adopts more than 60 resolutions on various aspects of disarmament, but with no practical results in recent years.

The 2015 and 2022 nuclear [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) review conferences failed to agree on any measures to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons and their elimination. As did the 2023 and 2024 preparatory sessions for the 2026 NPT review conference.

The [UN Summit of the Future](#), held on 22-23 September this year, agreed on a [Pact for the Future](#) that regrettably was a big disappointment as it lacked any concrete actions, even though it paid lip service to the call that the “*The time for the total elimination of nuclear weapons is now*”. The document failed to reaffirm commitments to existing global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation treaties, or to call for new ones to be negotiated.

Notably the late UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had referred to this state of affairs as “[mutually assured paralysis](#)”, and that the “*disarmament machinery is rusting*”.

It is unfortunate that the above-referenced developments and the current nuclear rhetoric demonstrates that knowledge of nuclear history is waning thin and diplomats, academics and the mainstream media pundits are caught up with the emotions, pressures and even confusion of challenging technological advances in weapons, an ongoing territorial war in the heart of Europe, a genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, along with tensions in Northeast Asia and South Asia.

In effect, those in control of nuclear weapons today, along with the echo chambers in allied States in defence arrangements underpinned by nuclear deterrence, are playing games tickling the tail of the Promethean nuclear fire dragon.

Tickling the Tail of the Promethean Nuclear Fire Dragon

All nuclear-armed States today have in place policies and doctrines to use their nuclear weapons. In order to constrain the further proliferation of nuclear-armed States, the five NPT recognized “nuclear-weapon States” each have advanced negative security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon States parties to the NPT and to nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties, on the non-use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

China is the only nuclear-weapon State to assert that it would not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapon State. The other four nuclear-weapon States – France, Russia, UK and US – each have attached conditions to their negative security assurances to the effect that such an assurance would not be honoured were it to be attacked by a non-nuclear-weapon State in collaboration or with the assistance of another nuclear-weapon State.

The nuclear weapons employment policy of the United States clearly posits that “using nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability”. For its part, Russian military doctrine envisions the threat of nuclear escalation or even first use of nuclear weapons to “*de-escalate*” a conflict on terms favourable to Russia. China’s evolving nuclear doctrine envisions a “*strong military dream*” based on military-civil-fusion to achieve by 2049 full spectrum power projection. In South Asia, both India and Pakistan have nuclear doctrines positing use of nuclear weapons including pre-emptive nuclear strikes.

In the current heated and volatile atmosphere in central Europe in the context of the Ukraine war, it is reported that Russia is re-asserting the conditions it has traditionally laid down in its negative

security assurances to States parties to the NPT and to nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZ), which essentially are similar to that of the US, to the effect that: Russia will not attack or threaten to attack a non-nuclear-weapon State party to the NPT or NWFZ treaty with nuclear weapons, unless that non-nuclear-weapon State attacks Russia in collaboration with another nuclear-weapon State.

Now since we're in a proxy war involving France, UK and US (all three are nuclear-weapon States) that are considering material assistance to Ukraine to attack military sites inside the territorial borders of Russia; it is not surprising that Russia has retaliated by warning Ukraine and its NATO backers that long range fires against Russia targeting its strategic military bases could trigger a nuclear response by Russia.

Strategic nuclear bases are those housing strategic nuclear delivery systems (long- and medium-range bombers, road and rail mobile ballistic missiles), command and control centres, early warning radars, naval bases for submarines, etc.

It is never a good idea for a non-nuclear-weapon State to threaten to target or to target strategic military sites in a nuclear-weapon State and it would be foolhardy to set such a precedent or to carry out military strikes that could provoke a nuclear response.

Were Ukraine to strike strategic military sites inside Russia proper, that would be the first time that a non-nuclear-weapon State would strike the continental homeland of a nuclear-armed State; though one might add that Iran's recent missile strikes against nuclear-armed Israel fall into the same category. Should the US/NATO allow long range fires against strategic military sites in Russia from Ukraine, that would further compound the already unacceptably high risk of a central strategic war involving four nuclear-weapon States and thus would be highly irresponsible and indefensible.

Furthermore, in the current charged situation for NATO to conduct its annual nuclear exercise "[Steadfast Noon](#)" on starting on Monday (14 October 2024) for two weeks, could be risky and lead to miscalculations. Several dual-capable aircraft, certified to carry US nuclear and conventional weapons, are slated to take part in training flights over western Europe simulating nuclear attack on an adversary. According to [NATO](#), no "live weapons" will be involved.

Departing NATO Secretary-General [Jens Stoltenberg](#) made comments in Washington to the effect that long range fires from Ukraine into Russian territory is the only one way to hit military targets behind the Russian lines, on Russian territory. And that NATO should not be deterred by Russia's "*nuclear threats and rhetoric*"; this in a way is questioning the credibility of Russian nuclear doctrine which is tantamount to "*tickling the tail of the nuclear dragon*" and could result in a Promethean nuclear fire of a central strategic war. The new NATO Secretary-General [Mark Rutte](#) also has claimed that "*targeting Russian fighter jets and missiles before they can be used against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure can help save lives*".

A just and equitable peace arrangement must be sought urgently under UN auspices to end the Ukraine war with the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territory; and all sides must strive to avoid any further escalatory moves that could trigger a central strategic war.

Seek Peace, Not War!

It is highly reprehensible that these days the voices of war are prevalent over the voices seeking peace. The UN disarmament machinery has failed as has the Summit of the Future to curb nuclear risks. The architecture of nuclear disarmament and arms control is steadily crumbling with our eyes wide shut! Unless we can mend our ways, it might be too late to avert a Promethean nuclear fire that consumes us all. We urgently must rethink how we manage nuclear risks; security based on nuclear deterrence is inherently flawed and risky and cannot continue on a long term basis. A new international security system must be envisaged on the basic design principle that the effects of system failure cannot result to fundamentally disrupt or end civilization. We urgently need a new international security paradigm that can prevent an existential global nuclear catastrophe and keep the Promethean nuclear fire dragon firmly bottled up.

Nobel Peace Prize 2024

In recognition of continuing existential risks nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence policies, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has recognized the efforts of [Nihon Hidankyo](#) which has “provided thousands of witness accounts, issued resolutions and public appeals, and sent annual delegations to the United Nations and a variety of peace conferences to remind the world of the pressing need for nuclear disarmament”.

The [citation for the prize](#) noted that, “One day, the Hibakusha will no longer be among us as witnesses to history. But with a strong culture of remembrance and continued commitment, new generations in Japan are carrying forward the experience and the message of the witnesses. They are inspiring and educating people around the world. In this way they are helping to maintain the nuclear taboo – a precondition of a peaceful future for humanity”.

Notably Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who hails from Hiroshima, has long championed the cause of nuclear disarmament as a Member of the Diet, Foreign Minister and then as Prime Minister. He established a [Commission of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament](#), in which [I was honoured to serve](#). In its [Kyoto Appeal](#), the Commission recommended inter alia that:

- The fundamental commitment remains of the unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament, to which all States parties are committed under NPT Article VI, and which constitutes one of the pillars of the NPT regime, as elaborated by consensus in 1995, 2000, and 2010 in the respective NPT conference final documents;
- Despite the deep differences on the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW), all States should engage with each other to advance nuclear disarmament.

The Commission urged that all States possessing nuclear weapons must:

- Implement measures to ensure the safety and security of their nuclear weapons, weapon-usable nuclear materials, and related infrastructure, to the extent possible given their respective international legally-binding nuclear non-proliferation obligations;
- Agree on and implement measures to increase transparency, and predictability and confidence in the non-use of nuclear weapons, and also to reinvigorate nuclear arms control to advance universal nuclear disarmament.

In light of the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize going to [Nihon Hidankyo](#), the voice of the hibakusha, I very much hope that Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who succeeded Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, can heed the appeals of the hibakusha and of the Japanese people, and of the more than 159 UN Member States, to redouble efforts to achieve a world without nuclear weapons within a specified time limit. The nuclear weapons landscape of today requires nothing less!

Personal comments by Tariq Rauf, former Head of Verification and Security Policy at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and a former Member of the [Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament \(EPG\)](#). An earlier version of this opinion was published on 6 October, by [Global Issues: Social, Political, Economic and Environmental Issues That Affect Us All](#).