

Introduction to the Work of the LWVUS Arms Control Task Force

By Ellen Z. Berg and Ralph Kuiper

On December 5, 2009, the bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, one of the cornerstone treaties intended to reduce and control the use of nuclear weapons, will expire. The Treaty entered into force in 1994 after being negotiated for much of the 1980s. The options for the signatories – the United States and Russia – are to allow the Treaty to expire, to extend it for five years so negotiations can continue or to adopt a new agreement this year. Preliminary negotiations have already begun, with new reduction targets set by Presidents Obama and Medvedev this past summer.

The world order has changed considerably since the Treaty was negotiated. In this changed world, there are more nuclear nations, and acts of terrorism have raised fears that nuclear bombs and other weapons of mass destruction will fall into the hands of non-state actors. Concerns about weapons proliferation, mishandling of fissile materials and the wide distribution of conventional arms have raised concerns about global security.

In response, the Obama administration has adopted the view put forward by the bipartisan quartet of George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn, and is committed to pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons. First steps include submitting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification this winter, as a precursor to playing a strong leadership role in the Non-Proliferation Treaty discussions in May of 2010.

With this backdrop the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) decided it was appropriate to form a task force to review its 1983 Position on Arms Control for "relevance, usefulness, and practical application." Despite all that has happened in the last 26 years, the Task Force finds the principles and language of the Position to be broadly applicable today. However, it anticipates suggesting some revisions once its deliberations are complete.

The LWVUS Arms Control Task Force is comprised of six at-large members: Ellen Z. Berg (Seattle, WA), Ralph Kuiper (Los Altos, CA), Ann Lakhdhir (Westport, CT), Lois Requist (Benicia, CA), W. Michael Slattery (Maribel, WI) and Donald J. Turner (Norcross, GA). The Task Force is advised by three LWVUS Board Members: Stephanie Johnson (chair, Arkansas), Judy Duffy (Minnesota), and Elisabeth MacNamara (Georgia). The Task Force has collaborated and discussed issues through a series of teleconferences and emails.

The Task Force identified and reviewed a number of issues and has written information papers that can inform the members and the Board to help in arriving at potential updates to the Position. The articles will be posted on the LWVUS website to inform and engage the members on arms control. The following is an initial list of articles that may be augmented or updated over the next few months:

1. The Arms Control Backstory and the LWVUS Position,
2. Geopolitical Factors Relevant to the Position,
3. Summary of the Relevant Treaties and the Need for Urgency,
4. Disarmament and the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons,
5. Weapons Proliferation to States and Non-State Actors,
6. Missile Defense Systems,
7. The Emerging Issue of Conventional Weapons.
8. Chemical and Biological Weapons

Presently, deliberations of the Task Force have identified areas of concern for relevance, usefulness and practical application that are explored in more depth in the articles. These areas of concern include:

1. What is the appropriate U.S. leadership role in multilateral agreements, diplomacy and verification?
2. How are international policy statements, agreements and negotiations involving two or more countries, which are being constructed, address constraints or compliance issues?
3. What is the situation regarding states, which hold or are developing nuclear weapons outside of international law? Such states include India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea and Iran.
4. What is the situation of non-state actors or terrorist organizations regarding the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?
5. What is the status of international collaboration between stakeholders, intelligence agencies, embassies, UN organizations and others seeking to stem the proliferation of weapons to non-state actors?
6. What is the status of detection and verification technology designed to monitor the development and testing of weapons of mass destruction?
7. What is the status of accountability measures for nuclear weapons and fissile materials; for biological and chemical weapons?
8. What is the status of missile defense systems in U.S. defenses?
9. What are the economic and social conditions concerning the proliferation of conventional weapons and the resulting violence?

Ultimately, it is felt that the time is ripe for the United States and the world to be free of nuclear weapons and move forward with safeguards against their proliferation. Also, it is hoped that the information developed by the Task Force can help individual members be better informed citizens on this important subject and be well prepared to contribute to the public discourse that is certain to become more intense over the coming months.

League members Ellen Z. Berg (Seattle, WA) and Ralph Kuiper (Los Altos, CA) are members of the LWWUS Arms Control Task Force.

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