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The Ukraine crisis that erupted in February last year continues with no prospect for cessation. The intensified hostilities have inflicted great suffering in population centers and destroyed infrastructure facilities, compelling large numbers of civilians, including many children and women, to live in a state of constant peril. More than 7.9 million people have been forced to find refuge in countries throughout Europe, and some 5.9 million have been internally displaced.

The history of the twentieth century, which witnessed the horrors caused by two global conflicts, should have brought home the lesson that nothing is more cruel or miserable than war.

During World War II, when I was in my teens, I experienced the firebombing of Tokyo. To this day, I remember with great vividness getting separated from family members as we fled desperately through a sea of flames, and not learning that they were safe until the following day. Also indelible is the image of my mother, her back convulsing with sobs after she was informed that my eldest brother—who had been drafted and borne anguished witness to the barbarous acts committed by Japan—had been killed in battle.

How many people have lost their lives or livelihoods in the ongoing crisis, how many have found their own and their family's ways of life suddenly and irrevocably altered?

For the first time in forty years, the United Nations Security Council called on the UN General Assembly to convene an emergency special session under a “uniting for peace” resolution. Subsequently, Secretary-General António Guterres has engaged repeatedly with the national leaders of Russia, Ukraine and other countries in an effort at mediation.

And yet the crisis continues. It has not only heightened tensions across Europe but also seriously impacted many other countries in the form of constrained food supplies, spiking energy prices and disrupted financial markets. These developments have increased the desperation of great numbers of people worldwide already afflicted by extreme weather events caused by climate change and the suffering and death resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is crucial that we find a breakthrough in order to prevent any further worsening of the conditions facing people worldwide, to say nothing of the Ukrainian people who are compelled to live with inadequate and uncertain supplies of electricity amidst a deepening winter and intensifying military conflict.

I therefore call for the urgent holding of a meeting, under UN auspices, among the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine and other key countries in order to reach agreement on a cessation of hostilities. I also urge that earnest discussions be undertaken toward a summit that would bring together the heads of all concerned states in order to find a path to the restoration of peace.

This year marks eighty-five years since the adoption by the League of Nations General Assembly of a resolution on the protection of civilians from aerial bombardment. It is also the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which expressed the shared vow to bring about a new era in which human dignity would never again be trampled and abused.

Recalling the commitment to protect life and dignity that undergirds International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, I urge all parties to bring about the earliest possible end to the present conflict.

Together with calling for the earliest possible resolution to the Ukraine crisis, I wish to stress the crucial importance of implementing measures to prevent the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, both in the current crisis and all future conflicts.

As the conflict has dragged on and nuclear rhetoric has ratcheted up, the risk that these weapons might actually be used stands today at its highest level since the end of the Cold War. Even if no party seeks nuclear war, the reality is that, with nuclear arsenals in a continuing state of high alert, there is a considerably heightened risk of unintentional nuclear weapon use as a result of data error, unforeseen accident or confusion provoked by a cyberattack.

October last year marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. It was also the month in which both Russia and NATO conducted a series of exercises for their nuclear command teams. In the face of these heightened tensions, Secretary-General Guterres warned that nuclear weapons “offer no security—just carnage and chaos.”^[1] Awareness of this reality must be the shared basis for life in the twenty-first century.

As I have long asserted, if we consider nuclear weapons solely from the perspective of national security, we risk overlooking critically important issues. In my forty annual peace proposals issued since 1983, I have argued that the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons must be the pivotal focus of any discourse or deliberation. I have also stressed the need to face squarely the irrationality of nuclear weapons with their capacity to destroy and render illegible all evidence of our individual lives and our shared undertakings as societies and civilizations.

A further point I would like to emphasize is what might be called the negative gravitational pull inherent in nuclear weapons. By this I mean the way in which escalating tensions around possible nuclear weapons use creates a sense of urgency and crisis that holds people in its grip as a kind of gravitational force, stripping them of their capacity to halt a further intensification of the conflict.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) wrote to US President John F. Kennedy (1917–63): “A moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot . . .”^[2] For his part, Kennedy is recorded as saying that the world will remain impossible to manage so long as there are nuclear weapons. These statements suggest the degree to which the leaders of these nuclear-armed states experienced the conditions of the time as something beyond their control.

Should the point be reached where the launch of nuclear-armed missiles is considered, there would be neither the time nor the institutional capacity to engage the views of the citizens of the parties to the conflict—much less those of the world’s peoples—on how to avert the catastrophic horrors about to be unleashed.

Nuclear-weapon dependent deterrence policy is how a state attempts to exert control and assert autonomy. But once the precipice is reached and the abyss yawns below, both the people of that state and of the world end up constrained, deprived of all freedom of action.

This is the reality of nuclear weapons that has remained unchanged since the start of the Cold War, and it is a reality that both the nuclear-weapon and nuclear-dependent states need to face in all its harshness.

In September 1957, when my mentor, second president of the Soka Gakkai Josei Toda (1900–58), made his call for the outlawing of nuclear weapons, the nuclear arms race was rapidly accelerating: there had been successful test launches of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, which meant that every place on Earth was now a potential target of nuclear attack.

Even as he noted the significance of the growing movement calling for an end to the testing of nuclear weapons, Toda was convinced that a fundamental resolution to the problem required extirpating the ways of thinking that would justify their use. When he voiced his determination to “expose and rip out the claws that lie hidden in the very depths of such weapons,” ^[3] he was expressing his outrage at the logic that would entertain the possibility of subjecting the world’s people to such catastrophic horrors.

The focus of his declaration was a call for thoroughgoing self-restraint on the part of those in positions of political authority, who hold the life or death of vast numbers of people in their hands. Another objective was to counter the sense of popular resignation in the face of nuclear weapons, the feeling that one’s actions cannot possibly change the world. In this way, he sought to open a path for ordinary citizens to be the protagonists in the effort to outlaw nuclear weapons.

Toda described this declaration as the foremost instruction he was leaving to his disciples, which I understood as setting down a line that must not be crossed, an indispensable marker for humanity’s future.

To make this a reality, in my meetings with political and thought leaders from different countries, I have continued to stress the absolute necessity of resolving the nuclear issue. At the same time, with the aim of bringing the era of nuclear weapons to an end, the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) has mounted a series of exhibitions and engaged in awareness-raising educational efforts in countries around the world.

In 2007, the fiftieth anniversary of Toda’s declaration, the SGI launched the People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition and, while collaborating with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) which was initiated around the same time, has worked for the realization of a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons.

The desire and determination of civil society, represented by the victims of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that the tragedy of nuclear weapons use never be experienced by the people of any country was crystalized in 2017 when the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted, entering into force in 2021. This, for us, represented progress toward the realization of the injunction bequeathed by Josei Toda.

The TPNW comprehensively bans all aspects of nuclear weapons, not limited to their use or threat of use but including their development and possession. While states possessing nuclear weapons may find it difficult to embrace the treaty, at the least there should be a shared and common recognition of the importance of preventing the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons use.

Along with reducing tensions with the goal of resolving the Ukraine crisis, I feel it is of paramount importance that the nuclear-weapon states initiate action to reduce nuclear risks as a means of ensuring that situations do not arise—either now or in the future—in which the possibility of nuclear weapons use looms. It was with this in mind that in July last year I issued a statement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in which I urged the five nuclear-weapon states to make prompt and unambiguous pledges that they would never be the first to launch a nuclear strike—the principle of “No First Use.”

Regrettably, the August NPT Review Conference was unable to reach consensus on a final document. But this in no way means that the nuclear disarmament obligations set out in Article VI of the treaty no longer pertain. As the various drafts of the final document indicate, there was widespread support for nuclear risk reduction measures such as the adoption of No First Use policies and extending negative security assurances, by which nuclear-weapon states pledge never to use nuclear weapons against states that don’t possess them.

Building on these deliberations, it is absolutely necessary to sustain the state of nuclear non-use, which despite everything has been maintained for the past seventy-seven years, and to advance the process of nuclear disarmament toward the goal of abolition.

There is already a basis from which to start: that is, the joint statement issued last January by the leaders of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China in which they affirm that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”^[4] During the NPT Review Conference, many governments called for the five nuclear-weapon states to abide by their January statement and maintain the stance of self-restraint. The representatives

of these five states also made reference to the joint statement in speaking of their responsibilities as nuclear-weapon states.

To use the example of a circle to describe the nuclear-weapon states' responsibility to maintain self-restraint with regard to nuclear weapons use, the commitment expressed in the joint statement to prevent nuclear war would be an arc comprising half the circle. This alone, however, is not enough to fully eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons use. I believe the key to resolving this challenge is for states to commit to No First Use.

During the NPT Review Conference, the SGI worked with other parties and NGOs to hold a side event at the UN focused on the urgency of adopting this principle, and I am certain that if pledges of No First Use can be linked to the January joint statement this will form the arc that completes the circle, containing the nuclear threat that has long hung over the world, in this way opening the path to finally making progress on nuclear disarmament.

Last November, a workshop to promote this kind of paradigm shift was held in Nepal by the Toda Peace Institute, which I founded. Participants agreed on the need for Pakistan to join China and India in declaring commitment to No First Use, thereby fully establishing the principle within the South Asian region. They also shared views on the importance of galvanizing international debate on No First Use so as to enable all nuclear-armed states to take steps in this direction.

This brings to mind the views of Dr. Joseph Rotblat (1908–2005) who for many years served as president of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. In the dialogue we published together, he spoke of agreement on No First Use, saying it would be the most important step toward total abolition of nuclear weapons and calling for a treaty to that end.

Prof. Rotblat was also deeply troubled by the dangers inherent in nuclear-weapon dependent deterrence policies that are rooted in a climate of mutual fear. The basic structures of nuclear deterrence have not changed in the years since our dialogue in 2005, and the current crisis has brought into ever sharper relief the vital necessity for humankind to move beyond such policies.

The pledge of No First Use is a measure that nuclear-weapon states can take even while maintaining for the present their current nuclear arsenals; nor does it mean that the threat of the some 13,000 nuclear warheads existing in the world today would quickly dissipate. However, what I would like to stress is that should this policy take root among nuclear-

armed states, it will create an opening for removing the climate of mutual fear. This, in turn, can enable the world to change course—away from nuclear buildup premised on deterrence and toward nuclear disarmament to avert catastrophe.

Looking back, the global state of affairs during the Cold War era was characterized by a series of seemingly insoluble crises that rattled the world, spreading shockwaves of insecurity and dread. And yet humankind managed to find exit strategies and pull through.

One example of this is the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) held between the United States and the Soviet Union. Intention to hold these was announced on the day of the 1968 signing ceremony for the NPT, which had been negotiated in response to the bitter lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The SALT negotiations were the first steps taken by the US and the USSR to put the brakes on the nuclear arms race based on their nuclear disarmament obligations under Article VI of the NPT.

For those involved in these talks, to impose constraints on the nuclear policies that had been developed as the exclusive prerogative of the state could not have been easy. Nonetheless, this was a decision indispensable to the survival not only of the citizens of their respective nations, but of all humankind. For me, the naming of these negotiations—SALT—brings this complex context to mind.

Having experienced first-hand the terror of teetering on the brink of nuclear war, the people of that time brought forth historic powers of imagination and creativity. Now is the time for all countries and peoples to come together to once again unleash those creative powers and bring into being a new chapter in human history.

The spirit and sense of purpose that prevailed at the time of the birth of the NPT is resonant with and complementary to the ideals that motivated the drafting and adoption of the TPNW. I strongly call for all parties to explore and expand ways to link the efforts made on the basis of these two treaties, drawing forth their synergistic effects toward a world free from nuclear weapons.

[The Soka Gakkai is a global community-based Buddhist organization that promotes peace, culture and education. Daisaku Ikeda (1928–) is president of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), an international association of the Soka Gakkai and an NGO in consultative status with UN ECOSOC. For over 40 years, Ikeda has authored proposals and statements offering concrete approaches to resolving the complex issues facing humanity.]

Notes

- [1] United Nations, “Secretary-General’s Remarks for the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons,” accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-09-26/secretary-generals-remarks-for-the-international-day-for-the-total-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons>.
- [2] Office of the Historian, “Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” accessed January 11, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v06/d65>.
- [3] Josei Toda, “Declaration Calling for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons,” accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.joseitoda.org/vision/declaration/>.
- [4] The United States Government, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>.