

Is a nuclear weapon-free world a distant

By Shyam Saran

'The goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is like the top of a very tall mountain'

GEORGE Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn have little in their distinguished careers that would point to a strong advocacy of nuclear disarmament.

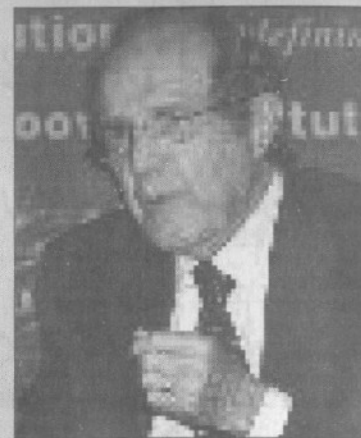
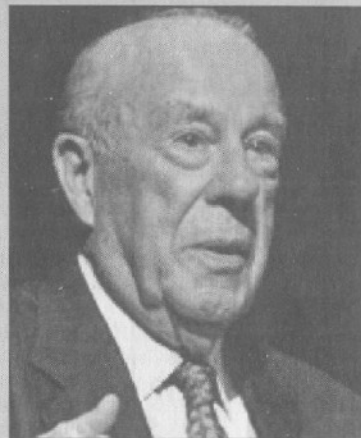
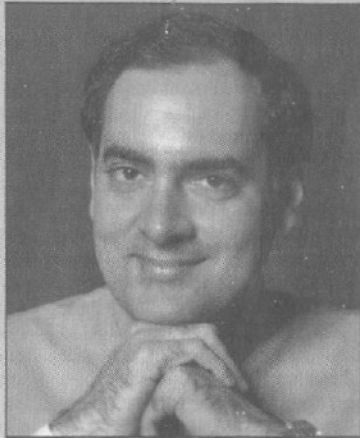
On the contrary, their preoccupation as public servants was to maintain US nuclear deterrence against its Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union. They dismissed the goal of nuclear disarmament as fantasy.

And yet today, these same veterans of the Cold War are arguing forcefully for putting nuclear disarmament back on the inter-national agenda.

In two important articles they wrote in the Wall Street Journal last year and in January this year, they call for a global effort to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, prevent their spread into potentially dangerous hands by strengthening non-proliferation and technology denial regimes and eventually end their threat to the world through their total elimination.

However, to them, a world free of nuclear weapons is a distant destination. "The goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is like the top of a very tall mountain", they said.

The acknowledgement by four leading Cold War personalities that we must, once again, put a nuclear weapon-free world on the international agenda is welcome. The authors have referred approvingly to Rajiv Gandhi's Action Plan for Nuclear Disarmament whose 20th anniversary we will be celebrating in June this year.



The initiative taken by Shultz, Kissinger, Perry and Nunn is being widely debated. Our effort should be to orient it towards a comprehensive programme for nuclear disarmament based on a new global consensus

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India's position on nuclear disarmament has been remarkably consistent. Even in May 1998, when India declared itself to be a nuclear weapon state, Prime Minister AB Vajpayee reaffirmed India's conviction that a world without nuclear weapons would enhance India's security and the security of the world at large.

Laudable as it is, the initiative of Shultz & Co does not go far enough in responding to the compelling nature and the urgency of the challenge the world confronts today. Rather than consigning the goal of nuclear disarmament to "the top of a very tall mountain", the need of the hour is to

bring it down into plain sight.

What is different in the nuclear landscape today? The world does not need more states with nuclear weapons. But the danger of proliferation to additional states pales in comparison with the new and much greater risks posed by the clandestine acquisition by terrorists, particularly of jihadi persuasion, of nuclear weapons and fissile material.

Proliferation to additional states, it may be argued, could perhaps be dealt with through imposition of sanctions, technology-denial and through nuclear deterrence.

They will not work when dealing

with non-state actors and terrorist groups. The authors fail to distinguish between these two different kinds of threats. A different approach is required to deal with this enhanced threat.

Making nuclear disarmament a distant objective will fail to mobilise the kind of broad and effective international cooperation required to deal with the new order of nuclear threat the world faces.

There is the risk that the renewed focus on nuclear disarmament, without an assurance of an early and time-bound elimination of nuclear weapons, may well become a further pretext for the imposition of even more

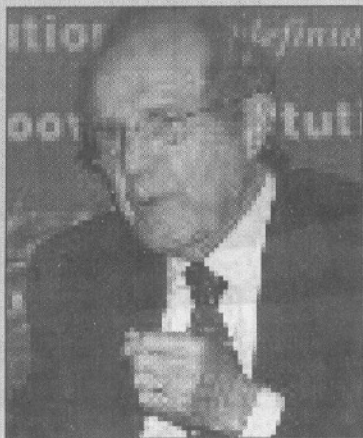
restrictive and discriminatory technology denial regimes.

These will inevitably target mainly developing nations. The latter's ability to turn to nuclear energy to enhance their energy security may also be adversely affected.

To forestall this, India should join like-minded countries to shape international discourse towards a global consensus based on the following key elements.

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First, the threat of nuclear terrorism
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taking the lead.

This will enable the adoption of
effective measures, on a global scale, to
ensure strict control over fissile material
and incorporate universally applicable
verification procedures. The new
consensus should permit the sharing of
information and cooperative
enforcement without which our efforts
will have limited success.

Second, the threat from so-called
"rogue states" with nuclear capability
and that from non-state actors cannot
be dealt with as a single category.
Nuclear terrorism threatens all states
alike and they should be mobilised to
confront it collectively.

Third, we need to acknowledge that
a clandestine market, of the A Q Khan
variety, is what could enable terrorist
groups to acquire fissile material or even
nuclear explosives. Driving this
clandestine market is the permanent
incentive for additional states, NPT
members or others, to break into the
self-created exclusive club of nuclear
weapon states.

The NPT and technology denial
regimes may retard proliferation. They
are unlikely to prevent it. Only nuclear
disarmament will remove this incentive
and enable credible efforts to eliminate
the clandestine market.

Would nuclear disarmament dispel
the dangers we face? As long as there is
nuclear know-how and there is fissile
material, risks will exist.

However, the elimination of nuclear
weapons, accompanied by strict,
universally applicable controls and
verification measures, similar to what
we have successfully incorporated in the
Chemical Weapons Convention, would
reduce risks significantly.

An effective international
intelligence and monitoring mechanism,
able to draw upon broad-based
international cooperation, will diminish
them further.

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Kissinger, Perry and Nunn is being
widely debated. Our effort should be to
orient it towards a comprehensive
programme for nuclear disarmament
based on a new global consensus.
Rajiv Gandhi's vision of a world
without nuclear weapons is beginning
to look remarkably prescient.

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Indian foreign secretary*