The Nuclear Threat in the 21st Century

Public meeting on the Nuclear Threat, Lord Mayor of Coventry's Committee on Peace and Reconciliation

Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry

5th March 2022

Warwick Road United Reformed Church, Coventry

The last time I spoke publicly on the subject of nuclear weapons I felt myself having to justify giving so much attention to a subject which many regarded as dormant or irrelevant — a non-issue. At least I don't have to do that this morning: the nuclear threat is staring us right in the face; President Putin of Russia has, in the context of his invasion of Ukraine, made an escalation in the terms of his nuclear readiness, perhaps the greatest by any major nuclear power since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Up until just over a week ago, far too many of us — experts included — took the value of nuclear weapons for granted. We assumed that, deployed as a credible deterrent, with missiles on high alert perpetually pointed at each other, they would guarantee peace because the fear of mutual destruction would be too great. We aspired to living under the doctrine of 'strategic stability '— a finely tuned nuclear standoff in which no side has a particular strategic advantage and where we are constantly working to counter any potential risks or escalations. We even aspired to a world of 'responsible 'nuclear weapons states led by rational and cool-headed leaders.

Much of this has been turned on its head since Putin launched into Ukraine, accompanied by the threat that any country that 'tries to stand in our way ' would be met with consequences 'such as you have never seen in your entire history'. Whether or not, therefore, we think of what is happening in Ukraine as a 'nuclear crisis', there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that nuclear weapons and their associated doctrines have an extremely firm grip on the dynamics of this conflict. Scholars of deterrence theory are bound to be asking themselves: does this moment in history represent the failure of deterrence or its success?

From the comfort of the 'West', some might say that deterrence has worked, insofar as Putin's aggressive signalling is holding us back from a confrontation with Russia in support of Ukraine, just as much as it could be holding Putin back from expanding his conflict into the NATO Baltic states. But there is no point whatsoever in taking any solace in this theoretical 'success', when the very *failure* of deterrence to *stop* Putin from acting with total brutality and impunity against the people of Ukraine is a reality that is playing out before our very eyes.

In fact, nuclear weapons are precisely what allow an aggressive actor like Putin to act with impunity against a smaller and more vulnerable nation. If you think, therefore, that nuclear deterrence is working in the context of this crisis, what you mean to say is that deterrence is only succeeding to uphold peace for some — us in the West — at the expense of peace for others — the people of Ukraine and indeed those of Russia. That is no peace at all. And sooner or later, deterrence between nuclear powers themselves will fail, and I hardly need to spell out the consequences that would have for all of us.

I long for a world without nuclear weapons, and I am emboldened in my longing by two broad conclusions about nuclear weapons and associated deterrence doctrines. The first, as I have already touched upon, is that nuclear deterrence simply does not work the way we'd like it to — and on this I'd like to draw out three observations. The first is that in a world full of power imbalances, a world of Ukraines — and Taiwans — living in the shadow of powerful, nuclear-armed neighbours, nuclear weapons ultimately lower the threshold for devastating conventional warfare in these fragile contexts. Secondly, where nuclear deterrence, arguably, is helping to keep all-out war between great powers like NATO and Russia at bay, we can say with confidence that this will not last. I'll quote Ward Wilson, Executive Director of the disarmament organisation RealistRevolt, on this point:

> Nuclear deterrence seems to have been a restraining influence on war for over seventy years. One can make a case that this poorly understood process is generally effective. That is the good news. The bad news is that we know with certainty that nuclear deterrence is bound to fail one day.[1]

[1] W. Wilson, 'Reconsidering nuclear deterrence,' *European Leadership Network* (https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/reconsidering-nuclear-deterrence/).

This is because we are flawed and fallible. One day, an error of judgement, a miscalculation, and indeed our emotions, will get the better of us. Nuclear deterrence is built upon extremely shaky foundations, a minefield of psychological processes which we scarcely understand. And the war we are facing at the minute has vastly increased the chances of a catastrophic miscalculation or inadvertent escalation, such as through the risk of Russian bombs falling on Poland or Hungary.

My third observation is that the link between the existence of nuclear weapons and their deployment solely as a *deterrent* is at risk of breaking. While so-called 'responsible 'nuclear powers do their best to uphold deterrence, others are actively working to dismantle deterrence altogether. In other words, there are those who would seek use nuclear weapons *tactically* in a war. Russian nuclear doctrine, it pains me to say, leaves plenty of room for this kind of 'limited' or 'battlefield' nuclear weapons use, and a desperate Putin, determined to secure victory, might be tempted to pursue this, as has been speculated. It is worth noting, however, that the US under President Trump pursued similar objectives. We should be alert to these, and other, technological and tactical developments in the nuclear field — especially with the growing potential of Artificial Intelligence. As a city which bore the devastating effects of a new style of aerial bombardment — firebombing — in November 1940, we in Coventry know this all too well. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves in a new, volatile arms race.

The second broad conclusion, which I have long held, is that the possession of nuclear weapons and specifically their use as a deterrent is morally unjust. I speak, of course, as a Christian, and my starting point, as for many other Christians, is that it is immoral to *threaten* what it is immoral to *do*. In other words, there is no point making an artificial distinction between possessing nuclear weapons because you'd like to *use* them 'for real', and possessing them for use as a deterrent. Simply being *prepared* to use them, and being prepared to inflict an outrageous degree of suffering, is bad enough. No human individual should ever be able to *lay claim* to the power to essentially unmake humanity, let alone follow through on the threat. This makes a mockery of our dignity as humans, treating us as dispensable, and makes a mockery of God, the giver of life.

My experience in Coventry has informed and enriched my determination on this moral point. Coventry, in the aftermath of its destruction in the Second World War, rejected revenge. The then Provost of the ruined Cathedral, Dick Howard, chose reconciliation instead. It's for this reason that nuclear deterrence, which is built upon a rigid determination to retaliate — to say, if you attack us, we'll attack you back — is so repulsive to many of us in Coventry. This is why we lamented — and continue to lament — the bombing of Dresden: not just because of the suffering inflicted upon that city, but also because we would never have wanted this to have been carried out in Coventry's name, as some speculate it might have been.

This longing for reconciliation is, furthermore, not a vacuous, lofty, even a purely ideological, aspiration. It is firmly rooted in experience, in suffering, in making sense of the human condition. We endeavour, as Coventrians and many of us as Christians, to understand suffering for what it is, to reflect upon our shared experiences of suffering and, indeed, our shared capacity to inflict suffering upon each other. And this leads us to interpret the tragedies and challenges of the past, present and future in humanitarian terms. It's no surprise that people often talk about Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the same sentence. To do so is to reflect upon our indiscriminate *potential* as humans to do awful deeds to each other, but especially, in these instances, to target innocent civilians indiscriminately in the context of war. This is the tragedy of war — and it is *all the more tragic* when, as historians tell us, such action has been taken as a means to peace.

This framing of war in humanitarian terms is important. It is also instinctive. In the context of the present war in Ukraine, we've come to find that attending to the unfolding humanitarian crisis, by helping refugees and sending aid, is our immediate response — and I'm proud of Coventry in its own instinctive response of compassionate action. Indeed, we find that, terrified by the implications of confronting the situation militarily, it is the *only* way many of us can help. We do this for Ukrainians as we should aspire to do for any population in a state of despair — Syrians, Afghans; indeed, Russians.

I say all this because nuclear scientists have concluded that if nuclear weapons were to be used, the destruction — the blast, the fires, the environmental

degradation, the radiation — would be so great that no charity, no NGO, no state, would be in any position to offer humanitarian assistance. There would be no infrastructure left to even begin mounting a humanitarian response — no roads for the ambulances, no communications networks to make the necessary phone calls. Those of us who are lucky enough to survive such a scenario would be left powerless.

That's why, in past ten years, campaigners for the abolition of nuclear weapons have been drawing special attention to their humanitarian threat. In 2013, 127 states and 70 NGOs at a conference in Oslo pioneered what became known as the Humanitarian Initiative. This was aimed at enabling states to develop a greater understanding of the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of a nuclear detonation, the vulnerability of nuclear systems to cyber-attacks and to human error, and potential access to nuclear weapons by non-state actors.

The result was to highlight nuclear weapons as a global system problem, a common human problem, the effects of which have been — and will be - suffered well beyond national boundaries and intended targets - suffered by *people,* not states as such. We learned that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are much graver and more complex than previously understood.

A product of the Humanitarian Initiative is the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which channels both the insights of the Humanitarian Initiative and the frustration at slow progress on disarmament into a legal mechanism to bring about the abolition of nuclear weapons. This groundbreaking treaty, which commands the support of 122 countries — none of which, it should be said, possesses nuclear weapons — stigmatises the very possession of such weapons. These are states which, understandably, feel vulnerable in the shadow of nuclear weapons powers which are modernising — even expanding — their arsenals.

But the greatest potential tragedy is that these states which are calling for nuclear abolition might one day get so fed up, and feel so insecure in a volatile world, that they will consider pursuing a bomb of their own. Indeed, predictably, people have been speculating whether Ukraine would have been better off holding to the nuclear weapons it used to possess. Other countries in the shadow of nuclear powers will undoubtedly be making similar calculations.

We must therefore act before it is too late — otherwise nuclear proliferation, once it starts, could spiral out of control.

This is why we must pursue the total elimination of nuclear weapons. One nuclear weapon is too many. As long as one nuclear weapon exists, proliferation is a risk — indeed, it is to be expected. Ensuring 'non-proliferation' is not good enough — disarmament must be actively pursued until we reach zero. The TPNW seeks this goal with utter clarity. In the present environment, a world without nuclear weapons might seem like the most distant of possibilities, not least because it would involve Russia itself having to give up its stockpiles. But in the brave new world which we will have to forge as soon as the dust from this conflict has settled, it may be our only hope in preventing an even darker future.

As Coventrians, we know what is takes to rebuild after the dust has settled. We are sensitive to the realities of war and suffering. The ruins of our cathedral testify to this reality. But the view from the ruins into the new cathedral, which celebrates its Diamond Jubilee this year, is one which transforms fear into hope, death into life. It is a robust and creative expression of the faith, hope and love which binds us together in the light of God's reconciling power. It is a reminder to all of us that peace does not merely exist, it must be *made* — Christ said 'blessed are the peace*makers.'* We have often heard it said that 'peace is more than the absence of war.' Therefore, as we work towards, and pray for, an absence of war on the European continent, let us commit to actively building peace in the aftermath, and to decisively tackle the nuclear weapons and doctrines which would stand in our way, once and for all.