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Beyond first steps: Phasing out nuclear weapons and energy

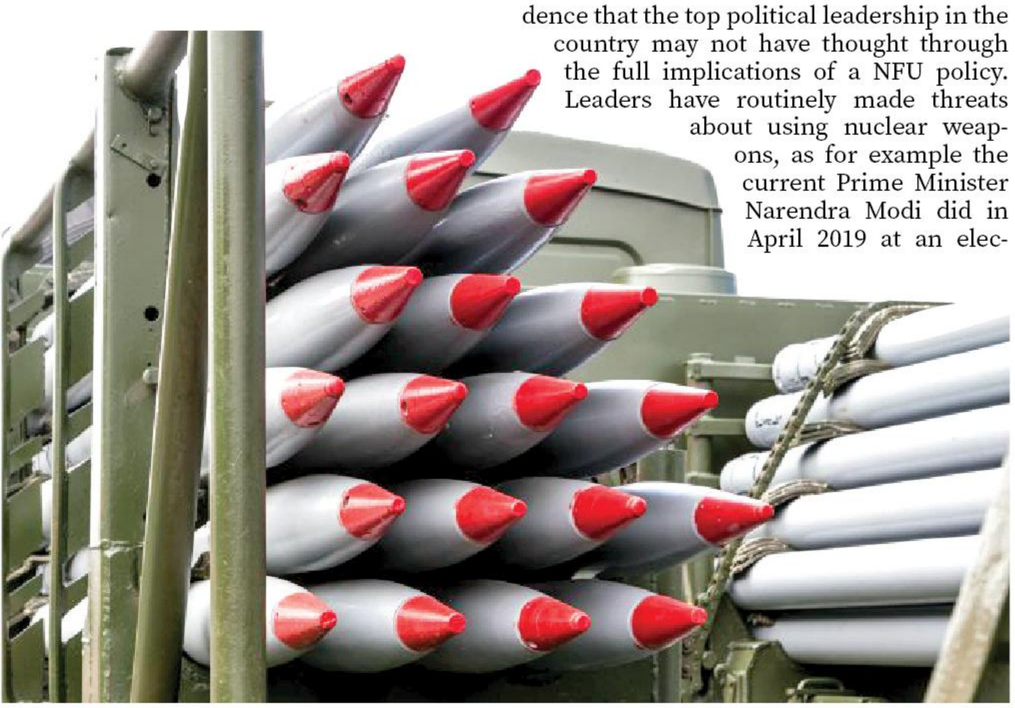
BY M. V. RAMANA

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for "all military activities in the immediate vicinity of the [Zaporizhzhia Nuclear] plant [in Ukraine] to cease immediately and not to target its facilities or surroundings" because "any potential damage to Zaporizhzhia or any other nuclear facilities in Ukraine, or anywhere else, could lead to catastrophic consequences not only for the immediate vicinity but for the region and beyond".

That is indeed an urgent and important first step to ensure that the dangers of the ongoing war on Ukraine are not compounded by that of widespread radioactive contamination.

In his "Message from Hiroshima", the Secretary-General has also called on "countries with nuclear weapons" to "commit to the 'no first use' of those weapons". That would be another useful first step, especially given the many threats to use nuclear weapons that have been made by these nuclear weapon states.

If countries possessing nuclear weapons do make a formal commitment to not use nuclear weapons first, that would be very welcome. However, such a commitment should be followed through operationally too, with changes in deployment patterns of nuclear delivery vehicles and a clear understanding that political leaders cannot make even veiled threats of nuclear weapons use (i.e., statements like "all options are on the table"), especially during times of military crises and war.



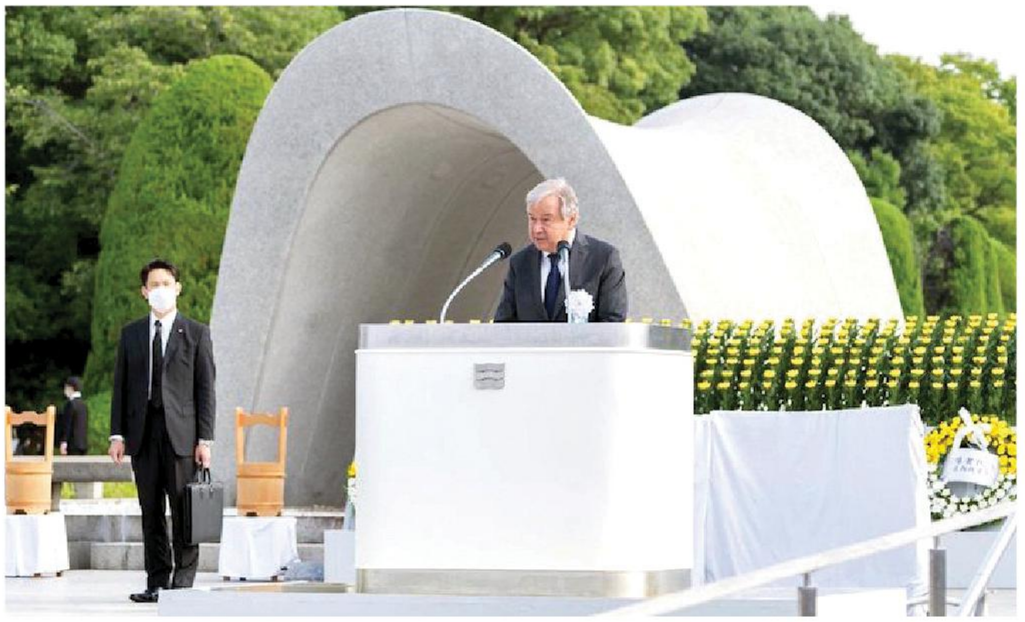
Good illustration

A good illustration of how the utility of a NFU commitment can be limited at best is the case of India. Indian officials have long claimed that the country's nuclear weapons are governed by a No First Use policy.

But as analysts Achin Vanaik and the late Praful Bidwai perceptively recognised in their 1999 book South Asia on a short fuse: Nuclear politics and the future of global disarmament: "The Indian No First Use proposal and pledge is part of its ongoing efforts at constructing itself as a 'moderate' and 'responsible' power after it has shamelessly behaved in the most immoderate and irresponsible manner by going openly nuclear!

The pledge is also a cover to enable India to go ahead and put a nuclear weapons system in place". Indian diplomats have routinely utilised this claim to score diplomatic brownie points over Pakistan in international venues.

What is worse is that there is some evidence that the top political leadership in the country may not have thought through the full implications of a NFU policy. Leaders have routinely made threats about using nuclear weapons, as for example the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi did in April 2019 at an election rally when he rhetorically asked whether India's nuclear weapons are being kept for Diwali?



UN Chief Guterres calling from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial on August 6 not to "forget the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki".

Indian festival

Diwali is a traditional Indian festival involving bursting of firecrackers. Likewise, in February 2000, then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's stated: "If they [i.e. Pakistan] think we will wait for them to drop a bomb and face destruction, they are mistaken".

In parallel, India has been developing Agni missiles that could be transported and launched from inside a tube (or canister), with the possibility of having nuclear warheads mated to the missile.

In 2013, the head of India's Defence Research and Development Organisation explained that such missiles will reduce the reaction time drastically…just a few minutes from 'stop-to-launch.'" This can give India the technical capacity to launch a first strike, should there be a decision to do so.

The bottom line is that making a rhetorical commitment to no first use is insufficient. To be fair, the Secretary-General followed up the suggestion about the NFU commitment with the clear statement that "there is only one solution to the nuclear threat: not to have nuclear weapons at all" and warning against a "new arms race" "picking up speed, with governments spending hundreds of billions of dollars to upgrade their stockpiles of nuclear arms". Such actions could well undermine any NFU commitment.

Unfortunately, this realisation about the need for supplementary actions did not extend to the other recommendation about the danger posed by nuclear plants like Zaporizhzhia.

During his visit to Hiroshima, the Secretary-General called for "the better use of nuclear energy and in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals". This misses a simple point: more use of nuclear energy will inevitably mean more dangers.

Nuclear reactors are inherently hazardous and capable of severe accidents.

Such accidents can be catastrophic—and simulations show that the result of an attack on Ukrainian nuclear facilities could be worse than the Chernobyl disaster.

Accidents resulting in large-scale radioactive contamination could also be triggered by natural disasters, as was the case in Fukushima barely a decade back, or from errors made by operators, as was made obvious the Chernobyl accident in Ukraine itself nearly four decades ago. But those are by no means the only scenarios in which nuclear power plants that can undergo severe accidents and cause great damage to public health and the environment.

There is also a long track record of close calls at nuclear power plants and other facilities. This history suggests that what the Secretary General said about nuclear weapons—"We have been extraordinarily lucky so far"—holds for nuclear reactor accidents too.

Just because there have only been a few catastrophic nuclear accidents, one cannot assume that the number will always be low or that any country with nuclear facilities is safe. And given the transboundary nature of environmental contamination following nuclear accidents, even countries with no nuclear facilities are at some risk.

Promoting nuclear energy will also undercut efforts for nuclear disarmament. The history of nearly eight decades of experience with this technology has made it clear that the links between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons are deep.

Nuclear power plants

In countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, advocates for nuclear energy publicly make the case for government subsidies for nuclear power plants precisely on the basis that these investments will help maintain the military applications of nuclear technology. It is time to abandon the dream of a nuclear-powered future unless we want to give up on the hope for abolishing the threat of nuclear war.

First steps are useful. Provided one is not undermining those first steps with other actions, such as modernising nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles, or encouraging the expansion of nuclear power and the construction of more reactors. Nuclear energy, like nuclear weapons, should be phased out.

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