

A “no without any yes” to the spirit, logic and practice of nuclear deterrence!

On 22 January 2021, the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons became applicable international law. It prohibits not only the production, testing, possession and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, but also the threat to use them. Thus nuclear weapons, like biological weapons since 1971 and chemical weapons since 1997, are now also subject to prohibition under international law and to the requirement of their gradual destruction. With regard to biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction, this path has already been successfully taken.

The prohibition under international law does not directly abolish nuclear weapons. It does, however, call into question the principle of nuclear deterrence, i.e. the central legitimation for possessing such weapons as a threat, for deterrence and for the prevention of war. It is therefore not enough to welcome the ban in principle. Unless this principle is abandoned, we cannot expect any genuine progress in nuclear disarmament.

As early as 1982, against the background of the planned nuclear armament and rearmament of intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe, the member churches of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR began an inner-church and ecumenical theological dialogue on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. At their synod in Görlitz in 1987, they declared themselves in favour of the “renunciation of the spirit, logic and practice of deterrence” through weapons of mass destruction as a binding confession of their churches and justified this on the basis of theology and peace ethics. In the final document of the Ecumenical Assembly for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation 1988–89 in Dresden, Magdeburg and Dresden, other Christian churches in the GDR supported this renunciation and set out concrete steps for overcoming the system of deterrence through a system of common security, as proposed in the 1982 report of the Olof Palme Commission.

The Olof Palme report marked the beginning of new thinking in security policy, which led to successful negotiations at the end of the 20th century on the reduction of nuclear weapons, reduction of mutual threats by reducing military confrontation, and confidence-building measures on mutual transparency. This also prepared the way for the restoration of German unity.

Today, the results and agreements of this phase of détente are greatly endangered by new political and military constellations, the development of new weapons systems, and new fears of threats, whether genuine or perceived. A confrontation such as that between the USA and North Korea demonstrates that the possession of nuclear weapons and the concept of nuclear deterrence do not necessarily lead to restraint, but may end in an escalation that plunges the world into chaos.

The situation in Europe is also characterized by increasing tensions between NATO and Russia. Instead of counteracting this development through an intelligent policy of common security, for example by strengthening the mechanisms and institutions of the OSCE and adapting them to today’s situation or by returning to cooperation in the NATO–Russia Council, we are witnessing the withdrawal from existing arms control treaties and a call for massive military rearmament. This includes the explicit adherence to the principle of nuclear deterrence and Germany’s nuclear participation, something described as essential by the German government.

Given these developments, it should be recalled that on 22 August 1990, in the run-up to German unity, the authorized representatives of the democratically elected governments of both German states met in Geneva before the representatives of 147 states party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and made a solemn declaration for the future united Germany on the renunciation of the

production and possession of, as well as the control over, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, without reservation. This declaration was an essential precondition for the establishment of German unity. It was made binding in Article 3.1 of the Two-plus-Four Treaty. With the signing of the treaty on 12 September 1990 and its subsequent ratification by Germany and the victorious Allied powers of the anti-Hitler coalition, this declaration of renunciation became valid international law.

US nuclear weapons are still on German soil. NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy provides for the use of these nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict by German fighter planes and pilots within the framework of nuclear sharing. Day after day, German pilots are being prepared for this. In doing so, the Federal Republic of Germany is continuously violating international law. The justification that Germany, as a member of NATO, is obliged to undertake technical nuclear sharing out of solidarity with the alliance and that it is unable to have a special status is untenable. There are a number of NATO countries that neither store nuclear weapons on their territory nor are technically involved in nuclear sharing. Only five NATO states are partners in technical nuclear sharing (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey). Spain, Iceland, Denmark, Lithuania and Norway have even banned the storage of nuclear weapons on their territory. It was the main NATO powers that explicitly insisted on a special status for Germany with regard to nuclear weapons in the negotiations on the Two-plus-Four Treaty.

In view of the entry into force of the "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," it is not enough to articulate our agreement in a noncommittal way and to appeal to governments. It is our responsibility as Christians praying for peace and trusting in the reconciling power of the gospel of God's love to oppose the spirit, logic and practice of deterrence and the dissemination of enemy images and prejudice against other states and peoples.

We need to ask ourselves: how long are we going to insist on threatening the lives of people in other peoples and states with nuclear weapons in the interests of our own security? Do we have any idea what it means when German soldiers practise using nuclear weapons, as happened in a manoeuvre in autumn 2020, in the region of Leningrad, Pskov and Smolensk, where 80 years ago the German Wehrmacht committed unbelievable crimes against the population, which are far from being forgotten there?

We call on the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) to no longer ignore the fact that in the 1980s the churches in the GDR, in the face of a comparable threat, declared a "no without any yes" to the policy and practice of deterrence and spoke out against all threats of genocide through nuclear weapons.

We want to raise once again in our churches and congregations, as well as for the public, what this doctrine of deterrence entails and leads to, to what extent it cannot deliver on what it promises – and that there are alternatives to it.

We want to continue the Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation that began in Vancouver in 1983, and to deepen the ecumenical dialogue on ways out of the current dangers. Against the adherence to the system of nuclear deterrence, we want to campaign for a system of common security.

The ban on nuclear weapons under international law that came into force on 22 January 2021, inspires hope. It can become the beginning of nuclear disarmament if the doctrine of nuclear deterrence can be exposed as an instrument that is ill-suited to the prevention of war and that we can overcome politically.

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