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Confronting the Challenges of Nuclear Weapons and Capitalism  
Edited Transcript of a Keynote Speech by Zia Mian  
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As we all know—both the people in this room and the people who run the world—we are in a moment of profound crisis in so many ways. We face a political, economic and ecological challenge of unprecedented proportion.

There are a very small number of countries—and a small number of people who make real decisions that shape the policies of those countries—that are trying to shape and to find solutions to this crisis in particular ways. These people have a recognition that the old order of the world—political, economic, and ecological—has come unraveled, and that it is now creating so many problems that the existing structures as they are can not sustain the status quo. So, what do they do, and what do we do?

The old order is in crisis, and we need to do something. This is where the divergence begins, because on all the issues that matter, the people that run the countries that run the world are trying to find ways to preserve the status quo because the status quo is the system that maintains their positions of wealth, power and privilege in the world. The last thing they are willing to contemplate is the kind of solution and response to this crisis that will actually take away or fundamentally alter the present balance of power in the world. They see the status quo slipping away and they are not letting go easily.

Turning to the specifics of how this expresses itself in the issues of nuclear weapons, capitalism and climate change, I think we all see that the notion that the election of President Obama marked a fundamental shift and that the change that he promised was going to be real, has now been shown to be without foundation. As much as we may have wished otherwise, the key thing to understand about Obama is not Obama but the aspiration for change that poured itself in the direction of Obama. People wanted change. What we got was Obama.

In this regard, let me say something that captures this for me. For the last year, we have heard endless mention—and for the next month at the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – the Review Conference of NPT states, which meets once every five years, was held in New York from 3-28 May 2010] we will hear continuous mention—of Prague and the speech that Obama made there a year ago in April, in which he said that the United States had a “moral responsibility” to work towards creating the conditions for eliminating nuclear weapons. When you look to see what has actually happened since then, however, you find that it ends there.

Obama is not the first American president to promise this by any means. If you look back at the speeches that past presidents have made, you will see that so many of them said the same thing, one way or the other. Many of you here will remember that Reagan and Gorbachev at Reykjavik [in October 1986] talked about, and said that they had reached agreement in principle on, the need to abolish nuclear weapons.

But many fewer people will remember that in [September] 1961, a very young, very dynamic, very charismatic American president who carried the hopes of an entire generation came to the United Nations and made a radical speech. His name was John F. Kennedy, and he said that “every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles,” which is “hanging by the slenderest of threads” and which is “capable of being cut at any moment by accident, miscalculation or madness.” “The weapons of war,” he said, “must be abolished before they abolish us.”

He went even further. He said that “disarmament negotiations” should begin “promptly” and “continue without interruption until an entire program for general and complete disarmament had not only been agreed upon, but had actually been achieved.”

This program, he said, should involve a “steady reduction in force, both nuclear and conventional, until it has abolished all armies and all weapons with the exception of those needed for internal order and for a United Nations peace force.” This was the vision in 1961, fifty years ago.

It’s in that context that you have to look at Barack Obama and Prague. Obama said that we will work towards creating the conditions for eliminating nuclear weapons but will keep nuclear weapons until they are eliminated. [He said “Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.”]

The Obama administration’s vision of what the abolition of nuclear weapons means is available in the Nuclear Posture Review that they released only a few weeks ago [in April 2010]. If you read it, I urge you to also read the Nuclear Posture Review released by the Bush administration in 2002, which has already been forgotten. Between the two, you will find amazing continuity.

The Bush administration, much loathed, much chastised (rightfully by many and for good reasons), said that U.S. nuclear weapons were “unsuited to most of the contingencies for which the United States prepares.” In other words, the existing nuclear arsenal of the United States is unsuited for the things we need to do in the world.

The Obama Nuclear Posture Review says “the nuclear arsenal today is poorly suited to address the challenges the U.S. now faces.” We have gone from “unsuited” to “poorly suited.” That is the gap between George Bush’s Nuclear Posture Review and Barack Obama’s Nuclear Posture Review.

The Bush Posture Review said that we now have a new nuclear triad, which goes beyond the old triad [of land and submarine- based nuclear armed missiles and nuclear-armed bombers] and includes both nuclear weapons and conventional weapons. It said that we will develop a conventional weapons system that will have global reach, that we will build missile defenses, and that we will have a modernization of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. These will be the three pillars of the American nuclear defense going forward.

You will find exactly the same pillars in the Obama Nuclear Posture: the commitment to nuclear weapons, to building what they call “Prompt Global Strike” which is a system of conventional armed ballistic missiles that can reach anywhere in the world in 30 minutes, the commitment to missile defenses, and a massive commitment to the modernization of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

When you look to see in detail what the Obama administration actually lays down, you find that the old order continues in fundamental ways.

What for me is the most telling about the vision they have of abolition is that they say in the Nuclear Posture Review (on page 48) that in a world where nuclear weapons have been eliminated, it will be necessary to both keep a strong nuclear infrastructure and to maintain human capability in the United States so that if someone cheats, we can remake nuclear weapons. In other words, even in a world without nuclear weapons, they want to keep nuclear weapons laboratories and nuclear weapons scientists, so that in an emergency they can remake nuclear weapons. That's not quite the vision that we have when we talk about the abolition of nuclear weapons

As I mentioned, the Obama administration is increasing spending on U.S. nuclear weapons, the budget of which is over fifty billion dollars a year. [In 2008, the total nuclear weapon spending was estimated to be at least \$52 billion.] The Obama administration has increased this number substantially and intends to keep increasing it. [The Obama Administration has announced it will spend, over the next decade, well over \$100 billion on nuclear weapon delivery systems to sustain existing capabilities and modernize some strategic systems and to invest \$80 billion to sustain and modernize the nuclear weapons complex.]

As part of that program, they're intending to build at Los Alamos, where the first nuclear weapon was made, a new factory for creating plutonium pits, which are the cores of nuclear weapons. People who follow this issue very closely (such as my friend Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, who has tried to fight this new plutonium pit factory) estimates that the factory will cost several billion dollars and will be capable of making more than one hundred nuclear weapons pits per year. This is what the Obama administration has said that it will fund.

However, this military expenditure—fifty billion plus dollars a year on nuclear weapons and rising—is less than ten percent of the total U.S. military budget. Therefore, when we talk about “No Nuclear Weapons: Fund Human Needs,” [the banner for this conference] it should not be just about nuclear weapons. It should be about the other four hundred ninety billion dollars that is the military budget. [The base military budget for 2010 was \$533 billion dollars, and there was another \$130 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.]

We all know this. Now we have to break the perception that we created that getting rid of nuclear weapons will somehow fundamentally change the dynamic that is at play in the world. Nuclear weapons are only the tip of the spear. The rest of the spear is the conventional military force and the threat and use of violence in the world by nation-states as the fundamental instrument of their defense and foreign policy. If we don't talk about it in those terms, they can abolish nuclear weapons and nothing will change.

Regarding the larger crisis of capitalism, I offer two observations. The first is that there is a global crisis of capitalism. Everybody knows it, and it shows how fast things have changed.

Ten years ago, we were told that we were in a period of unprecedented prosperity and economic growth, that globalization was making everybody better off, and that people were coming out of poverty in very large numbers very quickly. Instead, what we've seen is that the crisis has actually fed off the very structures of globalization and inequality that existed and worsened them in dramatic ways.

Before the crisis, there were twenty-five U.S. hedge fund managers, who each made over two-hundred forty million dollars a year. That's twenty-five people who earned a total of six billion dollars. The economic stimulus and recovery packages that governments are putting in place are an attempt to restore the previous dynamic economic system that existed, the same dynamic economic system that produced hedge fund managers who make this much money. [According to the *New York Times*, in 2009, the top 25 managers earned \$25.3 billion including

fees and capital gains, for most working people average earnings fell, and about 15 million people are out of work.]

We have to ask the question: if you're trying to address the crisis of capitalism, are you simply trying to restore the status quo, or are you actually going to talk about fundamental issues of equity and redistribution and the global pattern of production distribution and exchange? Nobody's going to do this unless we do it.

Last year, the president of the [United Nations] General Assembly asked a group of experts, lead by the economist Joseph Stiglitz, to do a study and write a report about what to do about the global economy and the global economic crisis. They wrote a really interesting report about the need to restructure the global economy and, more importantly, the structures that manage the global economy, the "who decides?" part. [The report was submitted to the United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, held in New York from 24 to 30 June 2009.]

What they said was that as a consequence of the present economic crisis, thirty thousand to fifty thousand additional children in Africa will die from malnutrition each year—as long as this crisis continues—and that an additional sixty-four million people will be driven into absolute poverty, which they define as living on less than one dollar and twenty-five cents per day. An additional sixty-four million people will be pushed into this poverty because of the crisis.

The Food and Agriculture Organization reported that the crisis will contribute to the number of hungry and undernourished people worldwide, which will rise to over 1 billion. That's what this crisis is doing.

They [the Group of Experts] suggested that to deal with this, we need to change who decides, so that instead of the present system of large global corporations making decisions that no one has any democratic control over, or a handful of key governments dominating the global economy—it used to be the G6, then it became the G7, then it became the G8, now it's the G20—they said that what we need is a G192, which would be all the members of the general assembly.

What they proposed—and I think this is a very important proposal with great implications—is that there should be an elected representative forum in the General Assembly, at the level of the General Assembly and the Security Council, to manage global economic policy coordination. This would provide leadership in economic, social and ecological issues.

We need a global, representative, more democratic system to manage the global economy because without it, all we will do is perpetuate the system of small global political elite in some countries and an economic elite spread across the world in these multinational corporations deciding the future of everybody, and that has to change. So we need to get behind that kind of system—democratizing economic policy—as much as we get behind the need to abolish nuclear weapons and take action on climate change.

I think you get the message, which is very straightforward. We talk about nuclear weapons—and will be talking about almost nothing but nuclear weapons for the next month at the NPT—but we have to stop talking just about nuclear weapons.

It's not about deterrence, or about fulfilling Article IV of the NPT (although this may be heresy to some people in this room). It's about the use of force, power and violence in the world, about who decides.

If you're going to the NPT, go and remind them of what Kennedy said. Say "you promised to abolish armies, so let's see you do that. Then you can tell us you've done something worthwhile."

With capitalism, it's about profit-making and profit-taking, about who makes it and who takes it.

The onus on us as activists who talk about social justice, equity and the need for peace and sustainability is to keep the discussion at the level of structure and fundamentals, not at the level of epiphenomenal things, such as how many nuclear weapons we will reduce to, how soon we will do it, and whether we will do it through Article VI or through a nuclear convention. It's about the nation-state, armies, war, equity, poverty, wealth, profit and nature.