

‘Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons’
Speech by Mani Shankar Aiyar
New Delhi, 9 June 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have requested Air Marshall Kak to take the outrageous step of circulating here as my speech on this occasion a speech that I had prepared a year and half ago! Further, I must confess that I didn't read my speech on that occasion and I don't propose reading my speech on this occasion too. But I have had it circulated so that in some articulate manner you might have before you in writing the confused thoughts that I propose to place before you as the aperitif you are going to have before lunch.

As Air Commodore Jasjit Singh has just mentioned, I did have the privilege of being fairly closely associated with the initiative that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took in 1988, not the substance of it (for that was largely the exercise of the professionals in our Foreign Office working with professionals in the Prime Minister's Office and elsewhere in the Government of India.) as much as being involved in the presentation of the initiative when the Prime Minister spoke in the United Nations, on this day 20 years ago. Since Rajiv Gandhi was primarily a pilot and only then a Prime Minister, he had, for the rest of us, the somewhat disturbing habit of putting his clock when we took off at the time that was going to prevail at the destination. And he didn't seem to need to catch up on the sleep that he was forgoing as he traveled across continents. With the consequence that when we arrived in New York at about 8 pm New York time on the 8th of June, I was summoned at what was for me some unearthly hour in the middle of the night to be told that it was now getting to dawn, so I better wake up and come to his suite for us to put the last dots of the i's and the last crossing of the t's on his speech.

And I sat with him as we went into the final phase of preparing a speech that, according to my somewhat inaccurate count, had gone through as many as 17 drafts before it reached the stage where he actually spoke it. Even then I found later that we had made a terrible mistake because in the opening paragraph of that speech, he had referred to how the unleashing of nuclear weapons could lead to the death of 4000 million people. And I think it was Subhash Chakraborty of the *Times of India* who sharply corrected us a week or two later saying that the number was not 4000 million but 5000 million and he couldn't understand what sort of staff the Prime Minister had that they could do 17 drafts of the speech and not know how many human beings were going to be killed in an all-out nuclear war!

As dawn came up and the speech was ending, Prime Minister Rajiv Gadhi asked me what I was going to do. I said I would like to do the same thing I always did when I came to New York - which was to help myself to a dollar breakfast with the sunny side up. He looked wistful because while he might be the Prime Minister of a billion people, the one thing that he was not allowed to do was step out of the hotel, cross the street and help himself to a dollar breakfast. Truly a bird caught in a gilded cage!

On another occasion when I had privately spoken to him, he had said, “You know, Mani, we both have nuclear bombs, India and Pakistan.” I was appalled that we had this and had kept it from the general public. He went on to say that the Canadians had given it to us, which astonished me even more. And then he explained that since the Canadians had given us BARC (the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre) on the outskirts of Bombay, and the Pakistanis CANDU on the outskirts of Karachi, all that the two countries required was one Kamikaze pilot each to fly into either of these research establishments and blow it up; and that would have exactly the same consequence as exploding a nuclear weapon. The death and total destruction that would be caused in these two premier cities, these two premier commercial capitals of the two countries, would be the equivalent of starting a nuclear war. And on another occasion, he said to me very, very wistfully, “But if the Pakistanis get it, Mani, even I will not be able to stop our country from getting it.”

In probably the least quoted passage of his 1988 speech, he had hinted at what might happen. He said:

“Diabolical technologies generate their own pressure for early use, thus increasing the risk of the outbreak of war. Most of these technologies are at the command of the military blocs. This immensely increases their capacity for interference, intervention and coercive diplomacy. Those who do not belong to the military blocs would much rather stay out of the race. We do not want to accumulate arms; we do not want to augment our capacity to kill. But the system, like a whirlpool, sucks us into its vortex. We are compelled to divert resources from development to defence to respond to the arsenals which are constructed as a side-show to great power rivalries. As the nature and sophistication of threats to our security increase, we are forced to incur huge expenditure on raising the threshold of our defences.”

Then he said what turned out to be prophetic for the next decade. He said:

“There is another danger that is even worse. Left to ourselves, we would not want to touch nuclear weapons. But when tactical considerations, in the passing play of great powers rivalries, are allowed to take precedence over the imperatives of nuclear non-proliferation, with what leeway are we left?”

And that leeway got decreased when Kuldip Nayar interviewed A.Q. Khan and it came out in the open that Pakistan did, or at least claimed to possess, the possibility of having a nuclear weapon.

When (wrong-headedly, in my view) India crossed the threshold in 1998 and exploded a nuclear weapon, it didn't take much longer than two or three weeks for Pakistan to respond in kind. We found ourselves over the threshold. Did that act of India becoming a Nuclear Weapon State, and its determination since then through three different changes of government to continue being a Nuclear Weapon State, reduce our legitimacy in asking for nuclear disarmament as a precursor to global disarmament? I think that is where, in essence, we have lost our shine. But have we lost our right to argue the case?

To answer that self-posed question, I go back to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which close to forty years ago saw the world as divided between two groups of countries:

those who were Nuclear Weapon States and those who were not. We argued that, in fact this was not true, that there were other gradations which needed to be taken into account. This other definition was simply brushed aside until in 1974, Indira Gandhi and her team (which includes several members of this audience) showed the world that we were capable of making the Bomb.

So, while there were States which had the weapons, and there were those who did not have the weapons, there was also the third category of those who could have had the weapons but voluntarily, unilaterally decided not to cross the threshold. So, in fact, you had NWS: the Nuclear Weapon States; the NNWS, the Non-Nuclear Weapon States; and a third category of the TNWS, the Threshold Nuclear Power Weapon States. The credibility of this third category, the Threshold Nuclear Weapon States, had been proved by 1974, and yet was not regarded as a critical element in the evolution of the world towards a world without nuclear weapons.

When Rajiv Gandhi arrived with his Action Plan in New York in 1988, it was the 38th anniversary, as it is today the 58th anniversary, of Neils Bohr, one of the parents of the atomic weapon, going to the United Nations to plead for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and the ending of the science and technology which had been responsible for this. On that date, Rajiv Gandhi placed a deal on the table: those of us who are Threshold Nuclear Weapons States, he indicated, would not cross the threshold provided the Nuclear Weapon States moved down the vertical proliferation ladder to arrive at the threshold themselves. And if there were any signs that there would be (to use Bill Clinton's later phrase) a move toward capping, reducing and eventually eliminating the nuclear weapons of the Nuclear Weapon States, then, in exchange, the TNWS would undertake not to cross the threshold.

Alas, in the ten years that passed between 1988 and 1998, there was no significant move towards reducing the vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons. So, when India the TNWS became an NWS, there was not the moral outrage inside India that might have taken place otherwise. It was felt, and still continues to be believed by a vast majority of our countrymen, that it is legitimate for India to have nuclear weapons and be a Nuclear Weapon State.

But with two important provisos. One is that we are a Nuclear Weapon State which, at the moment of becoming an NWS, declared that we were not in the nuclear arms race. That is an unique position, for we have crossed the threshold but we still remain on the other side of the threshold; we do not accept the doctrines of the more well-established and long-established nuclear weapon powers that possessing nuclear weapons means constantly improving the quality of the nuclear weapon stockpile, either by increasing the numbers of these weapons or increasing their sophistication. So, that makes us unusual. As a TNWS, we had first said that we can make nuclear weapons but are voluntarily restraining ourselves from doing so, a position we maintained for close on 35 years. For it was back in 1964 that the first indications came, just after China had established itself as an NWS, that we too could become an NWS if we wished to, but we were deliberately deciding not to make ourselves an NWS. So, it took from 1964 to 1998 to weaken our

resolve to remain on this side of the threshold. But when we crossed the threshold and went to the other side, it was with a completely unilateral declaration that had not been imposed on us from outside or negotiated with anyone else, that we would stick to a credible, minimum nuclear deterrent and not get on to an escalator. I agree with one of the questioners to the panel that there is a weakness in that we have not defined what is credible and what is minimal, but, nevertheless, at the level of the theology of nuclear weapons, we are unusual in saying that we are a Nuclear Weapon State but that we wish to remain at the threshold and not get on to the escalator.

Secondly, that we have unambiguously declared that there would be no first use of nuclear weapons by us. Now, to some extent, China has joined us in saying that and, to some extent, as Prof Rajgopalan rather sadly reminded us, there have been indications of our stepping back from a pure position on that. But, by and large, I would say that owing to these two statements, which we as a Nuclear Weapons State have made - that we will not get on to the nuclear weapons escalator and that, secondly, we remain committed to no first use of nuclear weapons - we can still describe ourselves as a TNWS, albeit on the other side of the threshold, not ready to become an NWS like everybody else and therefore entitled to ask the NWS to pull themselves back, for if they do not pull themselves back and return to the threshold, there is every danger that, as India and Pakistan have demonstrated to the world and which Israel is trying to cover up but nobody believes any more, TNWS can become NWS. As of today, there are perhaps twenty countries in the world that could cross the threshold.

Therefore, a nuclear non-proliferation doctrine that does not link itself to a nuclear disarmament doctrine would prove a very, very empty shroud to cover up this planet when everything here is destroyed.

It is not by moral exhortation or the exercise of political pressure but only through equity and justice that we will be able to get a world in which we, our children and our grandchildren are not threatened with complete and total obliteration. I say this in the year 2008. I ask you to cast your mind back to a century ago, one century ago exactly next year, that in the year 1909, an economist called Norman Angell gained great fame when he said that it would be impossible to see war on the European Continent between the industrialized countries because they were all interdependent. Angell's proposition gained very, very wide acceptance, as did the economic rationale he provided for why war would never break out: because it was so self-evident that such a war would be mutually destructive of the economies of all the combatants, whether they were victors or whether they were defeated; that just pure good sense indicated that they would never do it. And yet, five years later, they were embroiled in a war which began in 1914 and ended only in 1945 - with a brief break of 20 years - after killing millions upon millions upon millions of people. In Round Two alone, 58 million people were killed.

There was another related incident that took place on the 28th of June 1900. It was the wedding between the heir-apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne and a Countess who was not quite a peer; therefore, it had to be a morganatic marriage between Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sofia. At the time the wedding bells pealed, no one

thought, no one could possibly believe and certainly none could have prophesied that those wedding bells were really a death knell tolling for millions upon millions of people. For it was to celebrate his fourteenth wedding anniversary that Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was extremely upset that he could attend no official function in Vienna with his much-beloved wife, was able, in his capacity as the Commander-in-Chief of the newly-formed Bosnian army, to go to Sarajevo. When he arrived at the parade, there was an attempt to kill him. He was so upset at his wedding anniversary being spoilt that he ordered the chauffeur to drive the car out of Sarajevo. The man took a wrong turning and then backed up. As the car backed up, one of the assassins, who had been asked to leave the plot because he was not felt capable of committing the assassination, found himself within shooting distance and shot both Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. And no one foresaw, not even on the 28th of June 1914 as these two bodies felt inside that car, that this was the shot that would resound through world history for the next thirty-one years and not be ended until 1945.

So, the complacency in the argument that that there will never be any use of nuclear weapons because we have not really used any nuclear weapons from 1945 till today (that is fifty-three years, or about half the time the Balance of Power prevailed in Europe as a consequence of the Congress of Vienna) is as misplaced as the Whig theory of unimpeded historical progress which held that because we are all moving to a more rational world, we are all moving towards a more prosperous world, we are all moving towards a world where we are taking civilization to the more uncivilized parts of the world, since everybody is better off and since, as Norman Angell had pointed out, if we did go to war with each other it would be destructive of everything for both victor and defeated, that nothing would happen. And yet did happen. The 53 years that have passed since 1945 constitute only half the period that passed between 1815, the Congress of Vienna and the inauguration of the theory of the Balance of Power, and what happened in 1914.

The difference being that the War that broke out in August 1914, and has since led to perhaps a hundred million deaths or more, is as nothing compared to what will happen if we have an outbreak of nuclear war. That is why all theories of warfare that have been built around the use of conventional weapons are inapplicable to warfare that is based upon nuclear weapons. This is why it becomes imperative that whether we are a Nuclear Weapon State or a Non-Nuclear Weapon State, that we at least try and push the world in the direction of trying to end the existence of nuclear weapons. Tragically, the well-established Nuclear Weapon States, the States which are Nuclear Weapon States because they have been declared Nuclear Weapon States in terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, are demonstrating no interest whatsoever in ridding the world of nuclear weapons; they are only interested in stopping the NNWS from becoming NWS. And it's a losing game as first demonstrated in 1998 when India crossed the threshold and Pakistan followed suit within a couple of weeks. There were lots of noises but eventually the de facto situation has been accepted and I do not think the day is very far away when it will also be legitimized.

India and Pakistan have their excuse that they were not members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and, therefore, broke no international treaty obligations in becoming NWS, whereas everybody else, starting with Iran, are members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and, therefore, they would be violating a solemn pledge they have made before the international community if they were to go nuclear. Well, that is exactly the story of Mussolini invading Abyssinia. It was a violation of the League of Nations Covenant, but all that happened was that Italy continued to be in Abyssinia. And were an NPT power to break its international obligation and become a Nuclear Weapon State, however much one might object, the fact is that it would be a Nuclear Weapons State - and with all the dangers that this involves. The progressive de-legitimization of a non-proliferation regime, unattached to a disarmament regime, would stand starkly revealed.

Therefore, while it might suit the short-term interests of the Nuclear Weapon States to keep a monopoly on their weapons, in the long run the very reasons that make an NWS an NWS, would also appeal to an NNWS to cross the threshold and become an NWS. It is the lack of ability to become an NWS that is the biggest constraint on a vast majority of the NNWS following the example of the NWS. The TNWS are showing that if you acquire that scientific and technological and industrial capability, then it is possible to cross the threshold. So long as there is reliance on non-proliferation without a commensurate emphasis on nuclear disarmament as such, there is very little hope of the non-proliferation regime actually ensuring the security of the world. This is not to argue in favour of NNWS becoming NWS. It is simply to point to the inevitability of your dropping a glass of water and then the water flowing across the floor.

Nobody could stop us - because we had the ability. Nobody is going to stop X, Y or Z once they acquire that ability. Perhaps, three-quarters or more of the Member-States of the UN system cannot manufacture a nuclear weapon - and they know it. That is really the heart of a non-proliferation regime that is not connected to disarmament. When you look at the wording of the original Non-Proliferation Treaty, there is a commitment, albeit in the Preamble, on the part of the Nuclear Weapon States that the capping, reversal and eventual elimination of vertical proliferation is a parallel commitment to that undertaken by the NNWS to not go in for horizontal proliferation. Insistently, India drew attention to this for all the years before it itself became an NWS. The logic of what we had said between 1947 and 1974, when we were clearly an NNWS, and the position we then maintained between 1974 and 1998 when we were a TNWS, and that we are continuing to say as an NWS, alone among the other NWS, from 1998 till today, is that it is only if we move into vertical non-proliferation that it would be possible to sustain horizontally a world of non-proliferation. If you don't have a capping, reversal and elimination of vertical proliferation, total reliance, as we have had for the last forty-one years on preventing horizontal non-proliferation, is not going to be sustainable. It was not sustainable in the long run in 1967; and in 2008 it is not sustainable in the medium run, possibly not even in the short run. Therefore, the goal of keeping the world safe can only be achieved if we have a world without nuclear weapons.

There has been a process of legitimization of the possession of nuclear weapons even in our country because nuclear weapons are taken as the currency of power, the currency of

status. Apart from the three de facto but not de jure Nuclear Weapon States (India, Pakistan and Israel), all the other five NWS are Permanent Members of the Security Council. You can't become a Member of the Security Council unless you have a Bomb and you don't become a Member in good standing in the Security Council unless you have a Bomb! Everyone who has a Bomb is in the Security Council, and everybody who does not have a Bomb is told that you cannot become a Permanent Member of the Security Council. What kind of signal does that give to those who aspire to become a Member of the Security Council on a permanent basis? There we are: if you don't have a gold credit card, you can't go into a five-star hotel!

Now, this is the danger that I hope India can take the lead in getting people to focus on. We have been pleading for nuclear disarmament – non-discriminatory, universal and time-bound - as also in identifying the stages for securing disarmament, first as an NNWS, then as a TNWS and now as an NWS. It is our right to do so because we continue, even after having crossed the threshold, to remain at the threshold. In recent times, after the explosion of the nuclear weapon, when I was in Opposition, more than once, I did ask of the NDA government at that time what was the status of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan now that we had become a Nuclear Weapon State. More than once I was assured on the floor of the House that we continue to remain committed to the Action Plan. Although no action was taken by NDA government to further promote it, the fact is that they took no action either to eliminate it from our history or our records. It remained on the agenda.

In the meanwhile, outside of Government, after the Action Plan has been presented in 1988, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation invited Senator Douglas Roche and others to update it. Five years later, in 1993, we adopted an updated version of the Action Plan, which took into account the fact that the Berlin Wall had come down; the Cold War had ended; and that there had been a complete change of regime and nomenclature in Moscow; that the Soviet Union has become the Russian Federation; and that large parts of the Soviet Union had acquired independence and become the Commonwealth of Independent States. Also, that there had been some progress with regard to nuclear disarmament in terms of the agreements that had been reached between Moscow and Washington on reducing the total quantity of nuclear weapons in the world; that there had been further discussions on CTBT; and that there had been talk about fissile materials control. All these were taken into account in 1993, but it was found that the essentials of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan remained even though the world has undergone a revolutionary change between 1988 and 1993.

Then, in 1998, after the explosion of the Bomb, at a meeting in Pachmari, the Congress Party reaffirmed that the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan remained the “sheet-anchor” of the Party's external nuclear weapons policy. Accordingly, it was also recognized that yet another five years had passed since the initiative taken in 1993 to update the Action Plan and so a small group, which I was asked to head, further updated the Action Plan to the realities of 1998-99 and in the process also took the step of converting the points made in the Action Plan into a draft Convention. We were much aided in this exercise by other initiatives being taken elsewhere in the civil society segment of the international

community, to provide a legal basis on which negotiations might be conducted to move towards a world without nuclear weapons.

These documents were taken by Mrs Sonia Gandhi and submitted to Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN at the time, in an effort to make it part of the record. Then, in 2006, the Government of India circulated a Working Paper in the UN General Assembly which brings us right up to today with respect to all the changes that have taken place in the world in the last 20 years since 1988, while still discovering that the essentials of that Action Plan continue to remain valid. So, the perceptions that were placed before the international community in 1988 have stood not merely the test of time but the test of revolutionary time. The world of 1988 simply does not exist today but the threat of nuclear weapons continues to exist and the approach towards resolving them, if not the details thereof, continue to be the same in 2008 as they were in 1988.

Our Government has been confirming, particularly through the Prime Minister on the floor of the House more than once in the last four years we have been in office, that we remain committed to the essentials of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan. And this morning, the Prime Minister, in what I think has been his most elaborate personal statement on this issue, has resoundingly reaffirmed the essence of the Plan. Therefore, we are extremely well-positioned to accept the suggestion made by my friend, Jonathan Granoff, whom I describe as Richard the Lion Heart of this Crusade against the Nuclear Weapons, and Senator Douglas Roche, who has been an old friend and fellow-crusader, to ask the Government of India to recognize that within the framework of the United Nations and within the framework of CD, Geneva, there are serious problems in convening an inter-State meeting to deal with this issue. The way we could do it is to call a Convention. The invitation must go out to every State but, of course, the acceptance or rejection of the invitation remains the sovereign right of the party invited. This Preparatory Convention of all the States that are interested would consider the principles and quintessential elements of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan of 20 years ago and bring these into the format of a draft Treaty. At the Preparatory Convention we can see to what extent we can secure as large a body of international consensus as we can on a document that actually constitutes a negotiated instrument and then move with that, if we can, to another level where everybody, and not just those who come to this Convention, become party to it.

If we do so, then and then alone can our children, our grand-children and generations to come congratulate our generation for having overcome the single most terrible threat to human security and national security, whether for non-State actors or State actors, that has ever, ever existed. Let us please not become complacent, as the whole world became between 1815 and 1914, that nothing could happen again that could disturb the status quo. We will be failing ourselves and our successors if we do not recognise the dangers as omnipresent.

Thank you all very much.