In nuclear weapon policy circles these days, people often say that nuclear weapons are useless.

The flippancy of this statement should not undermine its truth. Many people in civil society have always questioned not just the moral justifications for the existence of nuclear weapons but also the political, economic, environmental, and social ramifications and the resulting supposed “usefulness” of possessing such weapons. Sixty-five years after the creation of the bomb, many policy, military, and political elites have joined civil society experts in saying that nuclear weapons are no longer useful.

However, their interpretation of what it is useful is proving to be quite different from what the general public’s interpretation of useful might be.

These new champions of getting rid of “useless” nuclear weapons are led by the likes of George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn—US “Cold Warriors”. They’re called the “four horsemen” in policy circles, if that gives you any indication of their reputations!

These four horsemen have recently argued that nuclear deterrence is no longer a legitimate justification for the existence of nuclear weapons. In the absence of a bipolar world order, they say, nuclear deterrence “is becoming increasingly hazardous and increasingly effective” in countering threats.
Indeed, nuclear weapons are antithetical to mitigating the converging crises facing the world today—such as terrorism, climate change, food, water, and energy shortages, and increasing global economic disparity. The development, deployment, and proliferation of nuclear weapons increases global tensions, disparities, and environmental degradation and squanders the resources that could otherwise be used to confront and solve these crises.

In fact, the only thing that nuclear weapons seem to deter is disarmament—what the UN Secretary-General has called the “contagious doctrine of deterrence” has been used as a rationale by all the governments that possess nuclear weapons to acquire these weapons originally and to maintain them now.

Yet, nuclear weapons are still useful in some form to someone, or there would not be such resistance to their elimination. And the resistance remains great, *even from those* who have argued against the utility of nuclear deterrence and in favour of a nuclear weapon free world.

Furthermore, many of the political and defence intellectual elite in nuclear-armed countries and their allies still continue to valorize nuclear deterrence as a fundamental element of their security. Those in the United States point to “extended deterrence” as a primary justification for retaining their nuclear weapons. They argue that US nuclear weapons in Europe and the US nuclear umbrella (which covers Australia, South Korea, Japan, and others) prevents these other states from “going nuclear”. Military strategists and politicians tied to nuclear weapon laboratories in nuclear-armed states continue to emphasize the importance of maintaining an “effective nuclear deterrent” until nuclear weapons are eliminated. And in fact, the same four horsemen who described the decreasing effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in 2007 remain politically,
administratively, and financially invested in the long-term maintenance of the US nuclear weapons complex.

Nuclear deterrence, despite its supposed waning utility, has been turned from an abstract concept into a material object that requires continued investment in the nuclear weapons complexes to survive.

The work of Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn, while ostensibly aiming toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, in reality reflects a pragmatic strategy to maintain US military and economic dominance well into the 21st century, resulting in the formation of a new intellectual paradigm perhaps best described as “anti-nuclear imperialism”.

Its proponents issue varying degrees of verbal support for nuclear disarmament, but in terms that describe disarmament entirely by what it means for the rest of the world, such as strengthening non-proliferation measures, achieving new arms control treaties and new stringent fissile material controls, and securing stronger commitments from those states that do not possess nuclear weapons to refrain from doing so.

This new paradigm has been adopted by policymakers in the United Kingdom and France and by eminent statespeople in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom, who have contributed endorsing op-eds in their countries. In the United States, President Obama has held public meetings with the four horsemen, and they have clearly influenced his administration’s nuclear posture review, arms control negotiations, and preparations for the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

Despite what Obama says in public, the US seems prepared to maintain its nuclear arsenal for the indefinite future.
General Kevin Chilton, Commander of Strategic Command, has predicted the United States will still need nuclear weapons 40 years into the future. And according to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the forthcoming nuclear posture review, which is a Congressionally-mandated review of US nuclear strategy that is currently underway, is likely to recommend development of new warhead designs as part of a broader effort to maintain and modernize the nation’s “nuclear deterrent”.

Whatever the Obama administration’s true intentions are, not only will investing in a modernized nuclear weapons infrastructure be viewed as hypocritical by other nations, it will also provide future presidents, whatever their foreign policies may be, the means to design and manufacture new nuclear weapons if they want to.

**A state’s interest in acquiring and retaining nuclear weapons is dispersed institutionally and socially throughout the country.** All nuclear-armed states possess these weapons because powerful interests in their governments, militaries, and related corporations and academic institutions benefit from investment in the weapons’ production and maintenance.

This institutional inertia that maintains the nuclear-armed state and militates against concrete steps toward disarmament is itself encapsulated in a specific geopolitical and domestic order best understood as imperialism. States with imperial ambitions utilize nuclear weapons, as one means among many, to coerce other states on virtually every matter of international relations. Seen from this angle, nuclear arsenals are not “stockpiles” hidden away in silos and subs awaiting a dreaded day of possible use, but instead are one of many tools used by imperial states to maintain global inequalities between states and within states.
**Nuclear weapons are a tool of empire.** As the hegemonic nuclear-imperial state, the United States provides the clearest illustration of the strategic value of these weapons within the current global political economy. While the other nuclear-armed states have similar interests and constituencies, “US nuclear weapons exist within the broader context of the country’s unrivaled military supremacy—its military budget, foreign military bases, and history of military interventions. US nuclear weapons are uniquely entrenched in the apparatus and theology of the United States’ hegemonic world order.”

Other nuclear-armed states fit into this order. Their policies both take direction from the United States and help provide cover for US policy. Thus, they stand together, confirming each other’s need for a strong “nuclear deterrent” and demanding stricter measures to stem further proliferation.

Despite this, the international community looks to the US government to “take the lead” in nuclear disarmament. Yet a careful analysis “reveals that the direction the United States is leading—which other nuclear-armed states either implicitly or explicitly support—is not toward disarmament at all, but toward the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons in order to preserve the present global order”.

All of the five NPT nuclear weapon states are engaged in or have plans for modernizing, upgrading, and/or extending the lives of their nuclear weapon systems and related infrastructure. At the same time, the governments of many of these same states have pledged their commitment to eventually eliminating nuclear weapons. It would seem reasonable that one of the first steps toward disarmament is ceasing to invest in and plan for nuclear weapons for the indefinite future.

There is thus a clash between the rhetoric of some of these governments and their commitments in reality. This clash undermines concrete disarmament. New thinking is
needed to prevent the powerful industrial and corporate interests from undermining progress toward nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Governments must find a way to work around the institutions that prevent them from fulfilling their legal obligation to eliminate nuclear weapons and prevent their spread.

At the same time, a new discourse is necessary to de-valorize nuclear weapons. The integration of nuclear weapons into the economies and elite political structures of the countries that possess them serves to maintain and enhance the weapons’ perceived value. The perception of power and access that nuclear weapons currently afford to some governments and their political and military establishments is a major obstacle to disarmament. Along with their overwhelming destructive capability, nuclear weapons have “come to be considered the platinum credit card of state power, influence, and nationalistic pride.”

There are many ways to deconstruct nuclear weapons as symbols of power and tools of empire and the anti-nuclear imperialism paradigm. One such tool is gender analysis, which can show that the enshrinement of nuclear weapons as an emblem of power is not a natural fact, but a social construction.

Conceptions of gender attribute cultural stereotypes to the meaning of man and woman, masculine and feminine. In most cultures, masculinity is viewed as strong, rational, and active, while femininity is considered weak, irrational, and passive. Conceptions of gender thus provide a way of structuring relations of power, whether its in families, societies, or international relations. Men tend to be the ones with the political, economic, religious, and cultural power because of the association of masculinity with capability. The preparedness to use military action and to wield weapons is also usually associated with masculinity. In turn, possessing and threatening to use weapons of mass destruction is seen as a reaffirmation of masculinity and strength.
This has several effects on issues related to nuclear proliferation and disarmament. Scholars of both feminist theory and nuclear weapons have eloquently described the deeply gendered political context in which nuclear weapons are developed, deployed, and discussed as well as the gendered dimensions of the weapons themselves. They have outlined how armament and disarmament policies and practices are influenced by ideas about masculinity and how the practical and symbolic dimensions of nuclear weapons are gendered. They argue, for example, that political actors “incorporate sexual metaphors in their representations of nuclear weapons as a way to mobilize gendered associations and symbols in creating assent, excitement, support for, and identification with the weapons and their own political regime.”

Gender constructions also affect proliferation. The dominant arms control and non-proliferation discourse characterizes the possession of nuclear weapons by the established nuclear weapon states as legitimate while problematizing the nuclear weapons that “spread” to “other” states. This distinction between the Self, that has a right to possess nuclear weapons, and the Other, which is too unpredictable to possess them, is patronizing. This type of distinction between legitimate and illegitimate nuclear weapons possessors does nothing to prevent proliferation and only makes it more difficult to reduce the perceived value of nuclear weapons as a source of power.

When governments act as though their power and security can only be guaranteed by a nuclear arsenal, they create a context in which nuclear weapons become the ultimate necessity for, and symbol of, state security. And when nuclear-armed states then work hard to ensure that other countries don’t obtain nuclear weapons, they create a context in which they are perceived as keeping other countries down, subordinating and emasculating them. Hence, regardless of their military utility, nuclear weapons are turned into the ultimate arbiter of political/masculine power.
Highlighting the ways in which the possession and proliferation of nuclear weapons are underwritten and supported by an image of hegemonic masculinity enable us to see just how dangerous and illusory an image of security that produces. For this reason, it is important that governments and NGOs alike consider gender issues and use the tools of gender analysis to reform traditional values expressed in negotiations and discussions on nuclear weapons.

Along with untangling the symbolic purposes of nuclear weapons, and hopefully diminishing their perceived value, it is necessary to explore a different framework for security that does not include nuclear weapons.

However, what does security without nuclear weapons mean?

One interpretation has been the build up and “improvement” of conventional forces. However, increased conventional forces is not the desired outcome of a nuclear disarmament process. It would only give other countries all the more reason to seek to acquire nuclear weapons to counter the overwhelming conventional superiority of the states that have replaced nuclear weapons with advanced conventional ones.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has argued that effective nuclear disarmament will require the elimination and control of other weapons, noting that “the world is over-armed and peace is under-funded.” And a former head of the United Nations Development Programme has argued for the need for a fundamental transformation in the concept of security, which he described as “the security of people, not just of territory; the security of individuals, not just of nations; security through development, not through arms; security of all the people everywhere—in their homes, in their jobs, in their streets, in their communities and in their environment.” This new interpretation, he
explained, requires us to regard human security as “universal, global and indivisible.” In other words, it applies equally to all people everywhere.

That kind of security cannot be brought about through nuclear weapons and military might. It can only be ensured through the equitable distribution of adequate food, shelter, clean water and air, health care, education, and even the arts. And, somewhat paradoxically, if funding was shifted from armaments to fulfilling those basic human needs, some of the root causes of violence—namely poverty and injustice—would at the same time be addressed, thus reducing the “need” or excuse for military action or other expressions of violence.

However, the emerging political, economic, and military world order is focused on delivering mass consumption items to urban middle classes, luxuries to wealthy elites, and weapons to enforce this inequitable status quo. This order generates huge disparities of wealth both within and among nations. It prevents a healthy, dignified life for the billions of people who are left out of this global economy. It is a source of conflict, which in turns fuels the demand for increasingly high-tech militarism as a solution to all problems.

**In charting a course for a different future, the international community will need to develop a nuclear weapons convention** or some sort of ban on the production, possession, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons. We have a treaty to prohibit nuclear proliferation, we have one to prohibit nuclear testing, but there is no comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons.

The governments of Malaysia and Costa Rica put forward a proposal to begin deliberations on a nuclear weapons convention in 2000. They followed this up in 2005 by exploring some of the elements that would be required to achieve and maintain a
nuclear weapon free regime through such a convention. Then in 2007, Costa Rica and Malaysia submitted a model nuclear weapons convention to a Non-Proliferation Treaty meeting, as a framework for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons.

In 2008, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon included a nuclear weapons convention as the first point of his five point proposal for nuclear disarmament. Now, in the lead up to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, many civil society groups have been encouraging their governments to initiate a series of preparatory conferences to examine the political, legal, technical, and institutional requirements for a nuclear weapons convention.

Of course, a nuclear weapons convention and the elimination of nuclear weapons must be grounded in a broader global transition toward political, economic, and social justice and equity in which the majority of the world’s people are empowered to live a healthy, dignified, and productive life. In a world starkly between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, any strategy to eliminate nuclear weapons must be accompanied by strategies “for global economic equity and a more ecologically sustainable way of life” in order to create the conditions in which nuclear disarmament can occur. Otherwise, the economic and political power structures that maintain and seek nuclear weapons will be able to continue blocking real progress on disarmament.

The reduction of the role and perceived value of nuclear weapons and enhancement of frameworks for human security and collective security, along with the phase-out of nuclear power and the expansion of renewable resources of energy, would all go a long way to creating a more economically, politically, and ecologically just world order conducive to nuclear disarmament.