



NUCLEAR WEAPONS TREATY AT A CROSSROADS

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The Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is a lynchpin of international peace and security. Yet it is often taken for granted and its parties remain divided over its key requirements. In April, the United Nations will host a critical “review conference” to assess the treaty and its future. We, past Presidents of two previous review conferences, wish to voice our strong support for a successful outcome at that event, which is needed to bring us all closer to a world without nuclear weapons.

Up to 1985, NPT Review Conferences were considered successful when they managed to adopt a factual final document. Renewed hope for progress after the end of the Cold War provided incentive for increased interest in the Treaty, despite the continued lack of enthusiasm for nuclear disarmament on the part of nuclear-weapon States. Nevertheless, treaty membership grew steadily.

The Review and Extension Conference in 1995 broke new ground by adopting a strengthened review process and agreeing on principles and objectives with benchmarks to measure the fulfillment of treaty commitments. Together with the adoption of a resolution on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), those agreements allowed the NPT to be extended indefinitely. By the end of the decade, only four States were not Parties, and the 2000 review conference was able to adopt thirteen “practical steps for the systematic and progressive efforts” to advance nuclear disarmament.

A great shadow, however, soon obscured these accomplishments. Some nuclear-weapon States disavowed the “13 steps,” which deepened the mistrust among the Parties lacking such weapons. Other important differences, together with concerns over the lack of compliance with both disarmament and non-proliferation commitments, and a deteriorated international political climate, doomed the 2005 Review Conference.

Treaty supporters, however, were able to overcome many of these grievances and a new spirit of cooperation enabled the 2010 Conference to adopt a Final Document that included an Action Plan with 64 specific actions, including 22 on nuclear disarmament. In this context, it reaffirmed the unequivocal undertaking of the nuclear weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament. The Conference also reaffirmed the need to pursue a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East and endorsed five practical steps in that direction, including the convening of a conference in 2012 on the establishment of such a zone.

This sets the stage for the forthcoming 2015 Review Conference, which will examine the implementation of the 2010 Action Plan. Once again, prospects do not seem encouraging. With a few months to go before this event, lack of or insufficient progress on all issues, particularly nuclear disarmament and lack of decisive progress on the implementation of the 2010 recommendations on the Middle East, as well deterioration in the international situation (US-Russia, Iran, Syria and the Middle East), are among the causes for the widespread skepticism. Moreover, the main negotiating forum for multilateral disarmament, the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, has been deadlocked for almost twenty years.

NPT Parties are concerned with the growing risks to the integrity and credibility of the Treaty. Many point to the basic imbalance between the treaty's disarmament and non-proliferation commitments. In terms of halting the global spread of nuclear weapons, the treaty and its verification system were quite successful. Yet the NPT did not result in any effective instruments to verify and promote compliance with other commitments undertaken by its Parties, especially nuclear disarmament.

Some also argue that the usefulness of the review process is exhausted and advocate the creation of permanent mechanisms to oversee treaty implementation and ensure accountability. Others consider it necessary to build on the 2010 Action Plan and to agree on timelines for implementing existing commitments. A large majority of Parties, supported by civil society organizations, are emphasizing the consequences of any nuclear detonation and some call for a ban on the use of nuclear weapons. Most nuclear-weapon States, however, have shunned such efforts. A failure to achieve significant, constructive outcome will only generate new pressures to seek solutions outside the NPT.

Urgent measures. We view the following measures as urgently needed to revitalize multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts: a) ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty by the remaining eight States needed for its entry into force; b) decisive progress on a Middle East WMD-free zone; c) diminished reliance on nuclear deterrence doctrines; d) establishment of a legal link between ongoing reductions of nuclear arsenals and NPT disarmament commitments; e) satisfactory resolution of the doubts over the Iranian nuclear program; f) credible negative security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon States; g) improved national and international control over nuclear materials; and h) serious engagement of all nuclear-weapon States in the multilateral debate on the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons.

Further Action: The status quo cannot be maintained for much longer without increasing the risk of a collapse of the whole edifice of legal and political agreements achieved since the inception of the NPT. Nuclear and non-nuclear States alike have a stake in the faithful implementation of all NPT obligations and political commitments.

The 2015 NPT Review Conference can negotiate and adopt political agreements to foster this objective. A fourth General Assembly Special Session on Disarmament can recommend ways and means to promote and reinforce it. Verifiable, legally binding and irreversible commitments on nuclear disarmament are required in order to achieve a universal, non-discriminatory regime that can underpin a world free of nuclear weapons.

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