



NPT 2015: FAILURE CAN MEAN OPPORTUNITY

Sergio DUARTE

Ambassador, President of the 2005 NPT Review Conference
Former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
Pugwash Council Member

During the run-up to the 2015 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), many observers highlighted the similarities in the unfavorable political and security circumstances surrounding that Conference and the one that took place in 2005. The failure of both Review Conferences to agree on a Final Document can be ascribed to such factors, especially the perennial disagreement on the question of the Middle East.

It is interesting to recall, incidentally, the dramatic last few hours of the NPT Review and Extension Conference in 1995, when frantic efforts with a stopped clock yielded last-minute concessions on a Middle East WMD Conference in exchange for the indefinite extension of the Treaty. Similarly, a hard-fought agreement on an ingenious formula for the convening of such a Conference was largely responsible for the success of the Review Conference in 2010. Developments during the past few years showed that too much hope had been invested and too little political will in fact existed.

Besides the inevitable disappointment at the lack of agreement on a Final Document in 2015, it is worthwhile to reflect on the growing lack of confidence in the NPT to guide the community of nations to meaningful action aimed at eliminating nuclear weapons. Although quite successful in containing proliferation, the Treaty is increasingly seen as an instrument conceived and utilized to justify and legitimize the continuing possession, by a handful of powerful States, of the most awesome means of destruction ever devised. Since its entry into force a number of multilateral treaties have imposed increasing obligations and restrictions on non-nuclear weapon States in the name of non-proliferation; none of these instruments ever went beyond pious mentions to nuclear disarmament as a distant, ultimate goal. Just like previous attempts at setting forth specific commitments by consensus, the 21 actions toward nuclear disarmament agreed in 2010 have largely been ignored. Nuclear-weapon States seem intent to block any possibility of decisive multilateral action in this regard. They assiduously avoid the word “disarmament” and instead advocate the need to create some unspecified “conditions” that would make it possible, while insisting on redundant and innocuous measures at the Conference on Disarmament.

The 2015 NPT Review Conference will be best remembered for the adherence by 107 States – and counting – to the “Humanitarian Pledge” initiated by Austria. This welcome development points to the possibility of moving forward even without the agreement or the early participation of the nuclear armed States and some of their allies. Concern for the catastrophic and unmanageable consequences of

any use of nuclear weapons, highlighted in 2010, resulted in three successful international conferences that galvanized the majority of non-nuclear weapon Parties of the NPT into looking for alternatives to the current impasses. One of such alternatives is a Convention banning the use of nuclear weapons.

At this stage it is not possible to predict the outcome of ongoing efforts to open a multilateral process aimed at negotiating such a Convention. Interest in this matter, however, has grown steadily over the past decade or so. As early as 2008 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon added his voice to those in support of a nuclear weapons Convention. A majority of United Nations Member States look favorably to a substantive discussion at the forthcoming Session of the First Committee of the General Assembly that could take forward existing initiatives. Despite the fierce opposition of the possessors of nuclear weapons and many of those that still depend on them for what they regard as security the time has come for the community of nations to avail itself of this unprecedented opportunity to rid the world of the last remaining category of weapons of mass destruction – the most indiscriminate and harmful of all.

24 May 2015