

We're not out of the woods yet: Recent developments in nuclear non-proliferation.

This is a brief summary of a presentation delivered to the Shropshire (Church Stretton) Branch of United Nations Association in Church Stretton Methodist Hall on 26th November 2009.

The nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) stands at the centre of the global regime to combat the spread of nuclear weapons. The NPT has successfully prevented the spread of nuclear weapons across the globe, with only four states acquiring a nuclear capability since it entered into force in 1970. The treaty makes a distinction between the nuclear weapons states, those states that had already successfully tested nuclear weapons when it was negotiated – the USA, the UK, France, Russia and China – and the non-nuclear weapons states.

But this distinction was never designed to remain in perpetuity, for at the heart of the NPT is a grand bargain. The non-nuclear weapons states agreed not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, and in return the nuclear weapons states agreed to negotiate away their nuclear weapons 'in good faith'. In addition, all signatory states were guaranteed the rights to enjoy the peaceful benefits of nuclear technologies, i.e. nuclear power.

The NPT has faced a number of challenges in recent years. North Korea has left the Treaty and has tested a nuclear weapon. Iran looks certain to be trying to develop the capacity to build a nuclear bomb of some sort, and three states that have developed nuclear weapons, Israel, India and Pakistan, remain outside the NPT. But one of the biggest problems facing the Treaty has been the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament by the nuclear weapons states. Under the presidency of George W. Bush the US not only backtracked on previous NPT commitments, but would scarcely even acknowledge that these commitments existed. This resulted in a crisis in the NPT, and after a disastrous review conference in 2005 it looked like the NPT's days might be numbered.

President Obama has gone some way to repairing the damage done. His Prague speech gave a clear indication that he was committed to rejuvenating the disarmament agenda. His decision to abandon the US missile defence radars and interceptors in Central Europe has smoothed the way for the US and Russia to conclude a successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty which expires this December. This will allow for further reductions in each of their nuclear arsenals. President Obama has also given his backing to the comprehensive test-ban treaty, a treaty banning all nuclear tests that the US signed in 1996 but has yet to ratify. Although Obama's support is very welcome, ratification is carried out by the senate, and will have to be approved by a two thirds majority. There is no guarantee that he will get the 67 senators he needs.

Nevertheless, American leadership is excellent news, and it may well be enough to paper over the cracks in the NPT and prevent next year's review conference from following the example of 2005. But in the long run, if the nuclear weapons states want their declared commitment to nuclear disarmament to be taken seriously, they will have to make some more convincing moves in that direction. For a start, there will have to be some serious reductions in the numbers of warheads they possess, and here the onus of responsibility remains with the US and Russia. All the nuclear weapons states need to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in their national security strategies and back this up with changes in their nuclear posture. More generally, the nuclear weapon states, and those states that rely on extended deterrence, need to start to look at how they will provide for their security in a world without nuclear weapons.

Nuclear disarmament is essential for the long term future of the NPT, and the NPT is essential for international stability. There has been some progress, but we are not out of the woods yet.

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