

TEMPLATE FOR LOWERING NUCLEAR WEAPONS RISK JUST NEEDS TO BE APPLIED

By Sean Howard

On July 1, 1968, the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was opened for signature at the United Nations in New York. Initially proposed by a neutral country, Ireland, the measure aimed to arrest and reverse the Cold War arms race by means of what is now, with good reason, termed the ‘grand bargain’ of the atomic age: those states without nuclear weapons agreed never to acquire them; those states with such weapons (the US, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China) agreed to get rid of them; all states retained the right to use nuclear technology for medicine, energy and other peaceful purposes.

Sixty-two states immediately joined the accord. Forty years later, 190 states are members, and only four stand outside: Israel, India and Pakistan, all of whom possess significant nuclear stockpiles, and North Korea, which left the NPT in 2003 and, three years later, exploded a plutonium warhead. There are, thus, less than ten states with the Bomb, far below the twenty-plus feared by President Kennedy when negotiations on the Treaty began. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon noted on July 1, however, despite this “significant” success, in recent years the NPT regime has “suffered” equally “serious setbacks” and now “faces multiple challenges to its credibility.” Four main dangers, in fact, are combining to threaten its stability and even survival.

The disarmament pillar of the Treaty has been gravely weakened by the failure of the nuclear-armed states, despite the golden opportunity of the end of the Cold War, to move seriously to reduce and abolish their arsenals. As the Treaty’s 40th birthday passed, over 25,000 nuclear weapons remained in service, many of them US and Russian ‘strategic’ warheads, capable of killing hundreds of millions of people in minutes, deployed 24/7 on hair-trigger alert.

Confidence in the non-proliferation pillar, so strong for so long, was shaken first by Iraq’s pre-1991 clandestine weapons programme, subsequently by small-scale (Libyan) and grand-scale (North Korean) subterfuge, and presently by doubts surrounding Iran’s past activities and its real motives in enriching uranium – as it is legally entitled to – to produce electricity.

The case of Iran highlights the cracks in the Treaty’s third pillar, support for atomic energy. This commitment, however well-intentioned, has created a large category of ‘virtual’ weapon states, able quickly to divert the uranium and plutonium produced in their power plants to military use. Over thirty nations stand on this ‘threshold,’ though that number is expected to rise sharply, perhaps even doubling, in the next twenty years. In the Middle East alone, a dozen states now have plans to build reactors, ostensibly due to concerns over climate change, but clearly also in response to the US invasion of Iraq, concern over Iranian ambitions,

and Israel's refusal to even acknowledge its formidable arsenal. Indeed, the failure to induce either Israel, India or Pakistan to enter the NPT fold – or to prevent North Korea from leaving it – constitutes the treaty's fourth major weakness, the lack of 'universality' so obviously required for comprehensive disarmament.

How these flaws amplify each other is clear to see – and hard to stop. The disarmament vacuum is filled by proliferation; proliferation reduces the incentive to disarm; 'peaceful' nuclear programmes sow the seeds for more proliferation, in turn increasing pressures to build more reactors; the existence of two 'nuclear clubs,' one in and one outside the NPT, provides an excuse to each camp not to disarm 'yet,' and a pretext for others to keep the Bomb within reach 'just in case.'

How can this Gordian knot be cut? In his anniversary message, Ban Ki-moon stressed that "support for the goals of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation remains overwhelming." Not only, he noted, do "nearly two thirds of the world's states" belong "to nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties," but there had also been a "welcome and promising...recent revival of interest in a nuclear-weapon-free world."

The most striking sign of this revival is a campaign launched in January 2007 by four highly unlikely American 'peaceniks': Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford; George Shultz, Secretary of State under President Reagan; William Perry, Secretary of Defence under President Clinton; and Sam Nunn, the former Democratic Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, these erstwhile champions of 'deterrence' asked: "Will new nuclear nations and the world be as fortunate...as we were during the Cold War?" If, indeed, we stand "on the precipice of a new and dangerous nuclear era," then living with the Bomb – simply hoping to stay lucky – is no longer a viable American option. What is needed, instead, is determined pursuit of "a world free of nuclear weapons," a "vision" met and propelled by "action."

The good news for America, and the world, is that pursuing this 'new' goal will not require a radical overhaul of the international nuclear arms control system. What we need is what we've had for forty years: a simple, legal mechanism for delivering disarmament in return for non-proliferation.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We need to get moving.

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