The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty 1968-2018

Fifty Years of Failure

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Waiting for nuclear disarmament through the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is like Waiting for Godot but without the laughs. How can a treaty in existence for nearly fifty years be judged as anything other than an abject failure when one of its specific objectives, the elimination of nuclear weapons, is even further away than at the time of its signing in 1968?

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) annual review makes this depressingly clear. All the nuclear weapons powers, led by the United States and Russia, are modernising systems that will be operational into the 2040s and beyond. The NPT is being used, not to promote nuclear disarmament, but to legitimise nuclear re-armament. If the nuclear bandwagon is to be derailed then the international community has to set a radical new course. The NPT should be scrapped and replaced by a Comprehensive Disarmament Treaty (CDT) that rekindles the UN Charter's inspirational call for a world free from the scourge of war.

Cold-war politics, dating back to the 1960s, lie at the heart of the NPT's failure. Both the United States and the USSR feared that their nuclear dominance was being eroded as countries outside their respective alliance frameworks, notably France and China, developed hydrogen bombs. (The UK Polaris submarine fleet, while nominally independent, required US ballistic missiles and was treated by the United States as part of NATO forces.) Restricting the spread of nuclear weapons was, therefore, seen as mutually advantageous. The question was how to ensure support from countries that were being asked to forgo the nuclear option while an elite group maintained a nuclear monopoly.

Partly this was addressed by emphasising the role of civil nuclear power and the technical assistance on offer to signatories under Article IV of the treaty. But many countries, while supporting the principle of non-proliferation, had serious reservations unless comprehensive nuclear disarmament was a specific goal. Rather than see the treaty fail, the USA and the USSR agreed, at the later stages of the negotiations, to the inclusion of Article VI calling for a '….cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.' But there was no timescale as to how this would be achieved.

Instead, the United States and the USSR settled into a series of protracted negotiations such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and II) throughout the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting the 'realist' perspective on gradual and incremental progress in the context of broader superpower relations. The pattern was only broken at the end of the Cold War when substantial reductions were made to the number of strategic weapons and whole classes of intermediate-range and short-range weapons were eliminated.

Rather than see this as a signpost to rapid and comprehensive nuclear disarmament, the United States and Russia maintained a substantial nuclear armoury. At the conclusion of the 'New' Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) negotiations in 2011 both countries agreed to limit deployment of nuclear warheads to 1,550 each by 2018, while their combined stockpile remains at over 8,000 warheads, 95% of the world's total. The NPT, once again, became part of the institutional framework for protracted negotiations, with the elimination of nuclear weapons relegated to a long-term goal.

Apart from its failure to promote nuclear disarmament, the treaty has also been used by the United States as a coercive tool in US global power projection. The most obvious examples are Iran, and to a lesser extent, North Korea. Since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, Iran has been viewed as direct threat to US interests in the Persian Gulf, compounded by the recent development of a nuclear research programme and the technical capacity to produce nuclear weapons. Severe economic sanctions have been imposed on the country, with recent threats to carry out air strikes on its nuclear facilities and even suggestions of full-scale invasion and occupation.

Any reference to the regional security dimensions and, specifically, to Israel's existing nuclear arms, estimated at over two hundred warheads, is simply ignored. The United States is more than happy to play along with Israel's policy of neither confirming nor denying the existence of a nuclear weapons force since it remains the closest US ally in the Middle East. Similarly, India and Pakistan, rather than being condemned or threatened with military action for their development of nuclear weapons, continued to receive US military assistance because they were seen as front-line states in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism.

For some signatory countries and NGOs advocating nuclear disarmament, this lack of progress is unacceptable and they have campaigned vigorously to keep the objective of comprehensive nuclear disarmament on the political agenda. The NPT review conferences that are required under the treaty and held every five years, have been a focal point for these activities. (Other initiatives include international conferences such as those on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons.)

But the ritual of the NPT reviews is now set in stone, with the NGOs leading the criticism of the major powers, supported by political leaders from non-aligned countries. Yet, although there is absolutely no prospect of serious progress at the next review conference in 2015, they will continue to participate, providing a veneer of credibility to a bankrupt process.

The question is how much longer will the international community prop up a failed Treaty, or take a decisive step and call for its abolition and replacement? If we wanted a return to first principles and to the ambitions of the UN Charter for an end to war, then the framework put forward by the United States and USSR in the 1961 McCoy-Zorin agreement is a reasonable starting place. Named after the two diplomats responsible for the negotiations, it ranks as the best example of those occasional outbreaks of relative sanity that emerged during the Cold War. The agreement set out an agenda for comprehensive disarmament with specified time limits for, amongst others, the elimination of all stockpiles of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction; the dismantling of military bases; the cessation of arms production; and the disbanding of armed forces.

The nearest that the international community ever came to achieving any of these goal was Gorbachev's proposal in his speech to the UN Assembly in 1988, calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons in a phased programme to be concluded by the year 2000. Given the political will, this would have been an entirely achievable objective and one that could have led to further progress towards comprehensive disarmament. Instead, the United States used the collapse of the Soviet Union and the uncertainty surrounding the future of Russia to effectively close down any radical nuclear disarmament option through the NPT which, in turn, remains completely divorced from any integrated approach to international disarmament.

Using the McCoy-Zorin template, the peace movement, working with sympathetic leaders from non-aligned states, could put forward a Comprehensive Disarmament Treaty that laid out a clear timetable for the abolition of nuclear weapons by 2025, along with other achievable goals, such as the closure of all foreign military bases and an end to arms exports. These would act as confidence building measures for the next phase of disarmament leading to the disbanding of armed forces and the dismantling of arms manufacturing.

At a time when the militarist drum beat is growing ever stronger, with talk of a new Cold War between the West and Russia, such a framework will be dismissed as hopelessly unrealistic. But the world is in real danger of being sucked into another era of serious military confrontation where the terrifying prospect of nuclear war still remains. Waiting for Godot is not an option.