

A World without Nuclear Weapons?

The New Charms of an Old Vision

Roland Hiemann / Oliver Thränert

A debate is underway in the United States, which has clearly met with international resonance. It resorts to an old vision: the abolition of nuclear weapons. Its initiators are anything but political outsiders: they are experienced politicians and experts, hardened by crisis. Among their number are Henry Kissinger and George P. Shultz. Their considerations are spurred by the deep crisis in which the nuclear non-proliferation regime finds itself. Should current expectations prove accurate and the 2010 review conference end in failure like its 2005 predecessor, this could trigger the collapse of the whole regime. Within a few years, one could then imagine an increasing number of states as well as non-state actors gaining access to nuclear weapons. Against this background, advocates of complete nuclear disarmament call for a radical approach. But how realistic are their proposals? And what does the debate entail for German and European policy?

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) rests upon three pillars: the commitment by non-nuclear-weapons states to desist from producing or acquiring these weapons; the pledge of nuclear disarmament made by the USA, Russia France, Britain and China—states which legitimately possess nuclear weapons under the NPT; the guarantee undertaken by all NPT-signatories to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

More and more, the complex construction of the Treaty is threatening to become unbalanced. For one thing, states like North Korea, Iran and Libya have launched illegal nuclear weapons programmes. For another, the efforts at disarmament made by states legitimately in possession of nuclear

weapons leave much to be desired; around 27,000 nuclear warheads are still in existence—most in American and Russian hands. Moreover, states with nuclear weapons perceive their nuclear deterrents as vital to guarantee their national security. Status and prestige are also attached to nuclear weapons. Therefore, the nuclear have-nots feel themselves to be unfairly treated. They put the following question with ever greater regularity: why should they go without weapons that others see as indispensable—particularly when their abstinence was supposed to be matched by the complete nuclear disarmament by precisely those others?

The pragmatic core of the utopia

The goal of the renewed campaign for disarmament is to rehabilitate the fundamental questioning of nuclear weapons. Far from being status symbols, they should be treated as a problem.

The demand for a world free of nuclear weapons is hardly new. In the mid-1980s, US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev joined their voices to call for the elimination of these “irrational” and “inhuman” weapons. At their 1986 summit meeting in Reykjavík, the two statesmen were on the brink of agreeing to the complete elimination of ballistic nuclear missiles; yet, the agreement foundered due to an argument surrounding the missile defence programme forced through by the US. Following the summit, important—but admittedly only partial—successes were nevertheless achieved in nuclear disarmament. Foremost amongst these was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty dealing with the removal of Soviet and American medium-range nuclear weapons. The two statesmen’s vision thus delivered some practical success.

Even today, the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons can serve to put proposals for concrete measures on the table. These include:

- ▶ the speedy reduction of existing stocks of nuclear weapons;
- ▶ the extension of warning times and alert status, so as to avoid the accidental use of nuclear weapons;
- ▶ the elimination of short-range nuclear missiles;
- ▶ the implementation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT);
- ▶ the inception of negotiations concerning a ban on the production of fissile materials for nuclear purposes (Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, FMCT)

As sensible as these many steps may be, one thing must be borne in mind: the strengthening of the nuclear non-proliferation regime cannot be seen as the sole responsibility of the nuclear-weapons

states. States like Iran are striving to gain nuclear weapons not because Washington and Moscow have made insufficient effort to disarm but because of various national interests and regional security conditions. Teheran, and other potential proliferators should not be permitted to draw attention from their illegal atomic efforts by pointing to other states’ insufficient efforts at nuclear disarmament.

More stability without nuclear weapons?

Those who aspire to more than gradual progress in nuclear disarmament must ask themselves the question under what concrete political conditions the complete elimination of nuclear weapons can possibly occur.

Three questions are of key importance here. Firstly: is the elimination of nuclear weapons a pre-condition for a peaceful world order, or must (above all regional) conflicts be solved before a world free of those weapons can be achieved? Secondly: how can states be prevented from secretly engaging in nuclear rearmament (especially since the discovery of their programmes could trigger arms races and make the use of nuclear weapons more likely than today)? Thirdly: what should be done with those states that cheat?

The tension between political order and nuclear disarmament is clearly reflected in the Middle East. There, the creation of a zone free of nuclear weapons has long been the subject of fruitless dispute. Iran and the Arab states demand the removal of Israel’s nuclear potential as a precondition for a peaceful regional order; Israel sees this relationship in the reverse order, with regional peace as a precondition for giving up its nuclear assurance.

A similar situation is found in other regions. So long as India and Pakistan fail to put aside their political conflicts, neither side will be likely to give up its nuclear weapons. The situation is further complicated by the fact that India treats China

as a rival, and China in turn sees its nuclear weapons as an assurance against threats from Russia and the USA. Despite political rapprochement, US-Russian relations betray considerable conflict potential, meaning that neither side will give up all its nuclear weapons. None of these actors has sufficient confidence that the others will maintain their nuclear abstinence permanently.

Consequently, the problem of verifying a total ban on atomic weapons is apparent. So long as this problem goes unsolved, the contribution of a total nuclear ban to stability is highly questionable.

Contraventions of the NPT have been numerous. Evidence shows that several states have pulled the wool over the eyes of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the NPT's watchdog. The IAEA has learned lessons from this, and has formulated an additional protocol to the classic safeguards declaration. The modern verification rules contained in the protocol foresee expanded obligations for the signatory states; inspectors are also to enjoy greater rights of access.

Yet, not even half of the NPT-members have tied themselves to the modern verification provisions. The states that have resisted this move are relying upon two arguments: firstly, that the states with nuclear weapons should first disarm before new inspection mechanisms are agreed to; secondly, that the new verification rules would interfere too deeply in the signatories' national sovereignty.

Given these reservations, one can easily imagine the difficulties that would arise in conceiving a verification regime for a treaty on the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. This regime would necessarily encroach much further upon national sovereignty than the modern IAEA verification rules do. It is a scenario which is unacceptable—not only, but perhaps most intensely—for the many dictators of this world.

These problems would be decisively reduced should the nuclear fuel cycle be successfully placed under the control of

the international community. No country would have *national* uranium enrichment or reprocessing capabilities. This would massively constrict the scope for secret rearmament. This option has already been intensively discussed. Many newly industrialised countries and developing countries are, however, opposed to seeing the unconstrained right to civil nuclear energy as laid down by the NPT annulled.

The question put at the beginning of the 1960s by Fred Iklé remains open: "After detection—What?". Today, the UN Security Council finds it exceedingly difficult to deal with states convicted of a deviation from the Treaty, whether this be Iran or North Korea. The different interests of the permanent members of the Council stand in the way of a common strategy. How, then, is a state supposed to be held to account when it is the only country in possession of nuclear weapons?

Ronald Reagan—one of the few US Presidents for whom the complete elimination of nuclear weapons was a real priority—sought to deal with these finicky problems in an unorthodox manner. Protection against those who broke the Treaty in a world otherwise free of nuclear weapons was to be guaranteed by a comprehensive missile defence system. This notion may initially appear strange; yet, it marks an attempt to solve a political problem with technical means.

This might today be seen as a possible solution—one that certainly merits discussion. A multi-national missile defence system, not reserved merely to NATO states but instead including Russia and other countries, would namely offer protection against the use of nuclear weaponry that had been clandestinely produced, or at least insofar as this was mounted on ballistic or cruise missiles. A missile defence system would render nuclear disarmament a possibility that states could actually vote for, and thus a more likely development should a sufficient verification system for total nuclear disarmament not be found.

German and European perspectives

Nuclear disarmament has been a core facet of German foreign and security policy for a long time. The Federal Government declared as a goal the complete elimination of all weapons of mass destruction in both its coalition agreement and its 2006 White Paper. Germany has won praise in particular for its persistent engagement for diplomatic solutions in the dispute surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme. Berlin therefore has every reason to engage in the upcoming debate on complete nuclear disarmament in a formative and active fashion.

At the same time though, the subject of complete nuclear disarmament is problematic from the German perspective for at least two reasons: firstly, it does not lend itself to treatment as a European project. Secondly, Germany still has a stake in Nato's "nuclear-sharing" arrangements.

Those European states with nuclear weapons, Britain and France, have noticeably reduced their nuclear stock in recent years. Yet, the nuclear option continues to represent a symbol of international power in particular for the French. In March 2007, Britain too confirmed the long-term importance of Trident nuclear weapons for the country's security, when it decided to modernise this submarine-supported weaponry.

Nevertheless, many EU member states are established advocates of nuclear disarmament. Germany is the largest of the EU member states without nuclear weapons. It should continue to seek to shift the balance of opinion within the EU in favour of nuclear disarmament.

Within the framework of Nato's nuclear-sharing arrangements, around 20 American nuclear bombs are still stored in Germany. German Tornados regularly train for their launch. Like Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Turkey, Germany holds true to this practice principally in order to maintain the pact. If nuclear disarmament were indeed to advance, the dissolution of the nuclear-sharing arrangements would have

to be discussed at some stage by the Atlantic Alliance. This event is still some little time off. The ambivalence between the goal of total nuclear disarmament and the maintenance of nuclear sharing will remain for the time being.

A world without nuclear weapons remains a mere vision. However, keeping it in mind would be a pre-condition for making steps towards nuclear disarmament. Even in Germany, broaching a serious debate on this vision would, apart from anything else, make a considerable contribution to the stabilisation of a non-proliferation regime that has become unbalanced.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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