

From vision to reality – can we overcome the barriers to nuclear disarmament?

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On 5 April 2009 US President Obama set forth a vision for a nuclear-weapons-free world stating “*clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.*” Obama noted that “*as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it.*”

With the leader of the most powerful country in the world demonstrating such commitment to nuclear disarmament, one would expect that achieving such a vision, at least within a moderate time-frame, would now be possible. Unfortunately President Obama has to overcome political obstacles which are very powerful – so much so that he has publicly expressed doubt as to whether the goal is achievable even in his lifetime.

The degree of opposition within the United States is evident in the positions being taken by US Republican senators, some of whom will have to support any nuclear disarmament treaty that the US negotiates, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (signed, but not yet ratified by the US), the START replacement treaty (currently being negotiated between the US and Russia) and a fissile materials treaty (which is about to be negotiated in the multilateral Conference on Disarmament). To date, no republican senator has confirmed support for the CTBT, and the Republican Senate caucus has indicated that they will only support the START replacement treaty if the President commits to a nuclear-weapons modernization program.

The obstacles to progress are not just in the United States. The [International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament](#), has outlined a number of reasons that policy-makers and others within the nuclear-armed countries (and their allies) maintain current nuclear policies, including beliefs including that:

- “Nuclear weapons have deterred, and will continue to deter, war between the major powers”
- “Nuclear weapons will deter any large scale conventional attacks”
- “Nuclear weapons will deter any chemical or biological weapons attack”
- “Nuclear weapons will deter terrorist attacks”
- “Extended nuclear deterrence is necessary to reassure allies”
- “Any major move toward disarmament is inherently destabilizing”
- “Nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented so there is no point trying to eliminate them”
- “Nuclear weapons cost less than conventional forces”

The Commission also notes that nuclear-armed countries maintain their nuclear-weapons policies, while fervently trying to deny others the same, because “Nuclear weapons confer unequalled status and prestige”.

The Commission argues that some of these beliefs are no longer valid while the validity of others will diminish as nuclear disarmament steps are progressively achieved alongside the further enhancement of non-nuclear security. According to the Commission, the current grip these beliefs have on security doctrines will make progress slow – and prevent the rejection of nuclear deterrence and the abolition of nuclear weapons for at least two decades.

This could be depressing, unless one remembers previous significant changes in history, such as the fall of communism, the ending of apartheid, the granting of the vote to women, the ending of slavery or the banning of landmines. The key lessons from these events are that;

- a) political change does not rely solely on those with power privilege voluntarily giving it up – but is also influenced by those without such privilege using new forms of power to effect change, and
- b) once political change is initiated it can proceed towards radically new situations much faster than expected.

Thus, as we approach the 2010 NPT Review Conference, we should set our sights higher than what the nuclear-weapon States and their allies appear ready to accept. There are some cracks in the ranks of nuclear deterrence advocates that could open further than we imagine and result in an agreement in 2010 that goes much further than the 13 somewhat vague steps agreed in 2000. More importantly we should not let the consensus-based, lowest-common-denominator of the NPT process prevent those governments and civil-society forces already genuinely committed to nuclear disarmament from taking steps to further de-legitimise nuclear weapons and build the framework for a nuclear-weapons-free world.

114 States are now part of regional Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones within which the possession, stationing and threat of use of nuclear weapons is prohibited. The establishment of additional NWFZs in North-East Asia, the Arctic and Central Europe should be encouraged, as well as steps towards a NWFZ in the Middle East.

Some countries have gone further and adopted laws comprehensively prohibiting and criminalizing nuclear weapons. This should be further encouraged.

Most importantly, a group of like-minded States should convene a preparatory conference for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, and use that conference to explore the mechanisms required to establish a nuclear-weapons-free world, start practical work on those steps that don't initially require universal support, and collaborate on building the political momentum for actual negotiations on a NWC. This like-minded group could emerge from those countries already coalescing around the UN Secretary-Generals five point plan for disarmament – a key focus of which is on a nuclear weapons convention – or possibly the States Parties to NWFZs which will meet in April prior to the NPT Review Conference.

An announcement at the NPT Review Conference of such a NWC Prep Com would excite the world's press, and provide a rallying point for civil society to challenge all governments to join the process and to commence real work to end nuclear deterrence, prohibit nuclear weapons and achieve a nuclear-weapons-free world.

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