

Spineless NPT Conference Papers Over Cracks and Ends with a Whimper

Written by

Monday, 30 May 2005 06:32 - Last Updated Monday, 30 May 2005 06:32

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Rebecca Johnson
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May 27, 2005

Delegates from 153 countries at the 2005 NPT Review Conference failed to build on past agreements and adopt any kind of decisions or recommendations for furthering progress in the vital security issues of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. From start to finish, this conference did little more than go through the motions, and was one of the most shameful exhibitions of cynical time-wasting seen outside the Geneva Conference on Disarmament.

Instead of utilising their four weeks and resources to tackle the vital challenges and debate practical ideas for implementing the treaty's commitments more effectively, the government delegations tangled themselves in procedure, lost a lot of time, and then, they gave up the pretence. On the final day they agreed to a procedural document that numbered the participants and meetings and indicated how they would cover the financial costs; they made a few more speeches and went home.

The failure of the conference to adopt consensus agreements was due to politics, especially the entrenched positions and proliferation-promoting policies of a tiny number of influential states, including the United States and Iran, as they pursued their narrowly defined self interests and sought to keep open their different nuclear options. At the expense of the security interests of the vast majority, a few others facilitated or coasted behind. They are no doubt delighted at this lowest common denominator outcome because it temporarily protected them from international criticism and action to encourage them to live up to their legal and political obligations.

Even so, it should still have been possible to use the conference to give a strong message about the importance of preventing the use, acquisition and spread of nuclear weapons and the nuclear materials used to make nuclear weapons. In failing to address these issues seriously or send any kind of principled message along those lines, the governments have betrayed the hopes, aspirations and security interests of their citizens from around the world, who have made clear again and again that they desire to live free of the threat of nuclear weapons.

Among the speeches today only a few stood out: Canada, for saying many of the things that - at the very least - should have been expected from the President; Sierra Leone for acknowledging the "voice of the people", the actual and "potential victims of nuclear weapons" and the contributions from civil society; Malaysia and perhaps South Africa, though not as

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strong as in the past; Cuba, the most recent party to the NPT and impatiently determined in its calls for nuclear disarmament; Iran, and of course the government of the United States, for continuing to point the finger at others while refusing to take responsibility for this proliferation mess themselves.

Since this administration's officials are quick to accuse critics of being anti-American, here is the pithy analysis of the indisputably patriotic American Daryl Kimball of the Washington-based Arms Control Association: "The arrogant and clumsy U.S. strategy (which was the brainchild of former Under Secretary of State John Bolton) has most certainly reinforced the view of the majority of countries that the United States and the other nuclear-weapon states do not intend to live up to their NPT-related nuclear disarmament commitments. This not only scuttled the chance that this conference might have supported useful U.S. proposals on strengthening the nonproliferation elements of the treaty, but it will in the long-run erode the willingness of other states to fulfil their own treaty obligations, much less take strong action to condemn the transgressions of North Korea and Iran."

The so-called 'final document' the conference delegates managed to adopt did little more than list the participants and officials of the conference and how many meetings they held. As for the important issues they had all identified before and during the conference - such as entry into force of the CTBT, nuclear disarmament, the nuclear fuel cycle and strengthening safeguards and the institutional powers of states parties - the governments lacked the political will and backbone even to have an honest debate about these issues, let alone adopt measures that would strengthen the world's capacity to deal with them. While for most of the conference it was clear that no-one had a positive strategy, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this impotent impasse was the desired outcome of at least some game plans.

In view of the failure of the 2005 Review Conference, the agreements obtained in the review conferences of 1995 and 2000 still stand as the legal and political benchmarks for measuring progress and promoting compliance until the NPT can be fully implemented in all its nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation aspects. Lack of agreement to build substantively on these commitments and undertakings may be disappointing, but the problems of the 2005 conference neither invalidate nor undermine the relevant obligations and undertakings previously agreed to. If anything, the lack of consensus in 2005 for further disarmament steps underscores the fact that the principles, measures and steps adopted by consensus in past review conferences have not yet been implemented, and more work must be done to ensure that they are.

The lack of leadership and positive progress at the 2005 Review Conference merely underscores the need for the rest of us to find other ways to ensure that our security needs and interests are taken seriously and fulfilled. During this month in the United States there has been the interesting news that a growing number of US mayors and local councils and authorities are choosing to implement the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol in their jurisdiction, despite the short-sighted obduracy of the Bush administration, because the evidence in front of their own eyes shows that climate change and global warming are a real problem and that denials and fluffy words won't make the consequences of climate change disappear.

The same is true of nuclear weapons: a real problem requiring long-term solutions. The

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Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki led a movement to the 2005 Review Conference that needs to be built on and given the right kind of coherent strategy that will enable us to get rid of nuclear weapons and threats for ever. The world's mayors and governors, together with parliamentarians, elected representatives at all levels, and civil society must not only make up for the deficiencies of timid or corrupt governments, they must create a strategic partnership between government and civil society. Preventing the use, testing, development and spread of nuclear weapons ranks with climate change as the major security challenges of our time. We'd better prove ourselves to be up to it!