

The Nuclear Fiasco in New York

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by Michael Wallace

Ho hum. Another UN conference in New York in May, ?full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?. Another set of international agreements dumped in the trashcan by US bellowing rhetoric and hissy ? fit intransigence, predictably provoking in turn the worst behaviour by most other national delegations. At times, the deliberations made one think of pre-schoolers badly in need of a ?time out?, or perhaps the male ? ape threat displays from a Jane Goodall video. Not a chance of getting attention from media preoccupied with such earth ? shattering events as the Michael Jackson trial.

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But before you change the channel, remember what the 2005 Nuclear Review Conference was supposed to be about: strengthening and enforcing the only ratified, multilateral agreement committing the world community to nuclear disarmament and the spread of nuclear weapons: the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. And the result was a fiasco. It was worse than useless: not only were new agreements not achieved, but the largest nuclear power (the U.S.) in effect reneged on commitments it had made in the previous decade.

What, me worry? We got through the Cold War without blowing ourselves up, didn?t we, and now that?s long gone, so what?s the fuss about?

In a nutshell, it boils down to this: paradoxically, since the end of the Cold War, what former Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy called ?the political value of nuclear currency? has increased, not decreased. There are four reasons for this.

First, the emergence of the U.S. as ?hyperpower?. No empire in history has asserted military hegemony to such a degree over such a portion of the globe. Half of global military spending is American, and it is used not only to enforce American political will in particular cases, but also to universalize American rules for political, economic, and social conduct, the process we call ?globalization?.

But what if your nation doesn?t want to play by American rules, and doesn?t want to get bombed or subverted into ?regime change?? Then you?d better work out a strategy for deterring an American attack (Iraq) or an instigated coup (Haiti). Some nations such as Cuba have managed this by cleverness and determination, which has now successfully defied nine U.S. presidents since an anti ? American regime came to power. But not every defiant leader is

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as smart as Castro, and so many nations are tempted by option B: get a nuke, because then the Americans won't dare attack you. For this reason, American hyperpower has led more, not fewer nations to contemplate the nuclear option.

Second, the U.S. itself has lead the pack by proposing the development of new types of useable nuclear weapons, refusing even to consider significant nuclear disarmament measures, and giving the three actual nuclear "rogue states" - India, Israel, and Pakistan - tacit permission to continue their weapons development. Potential nuclear powers may be forgiven regarding this as rank hypocrisy, and insisting that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Third, regional power conflicts suppressed and overshadowed by the Cold War have re-emerged. Potentially the most serious is the growing animosity between China and Japan, which has led many in Japan to contemplate a hitherto unthinkable nuclear program. South Korea, Taiwan, and even Malaysia have dropped hints that a nuclear Japan could provoke them to begin their own programs. In the post - Cold War world, a hostile neighbour with nukes may be more threatening than a distant nuclear superpower, leading to a "contagion" of nuclear proliferation similar to the India - Pakistan nuclearization of 1998.

Fourth, in the last decade or so nuclear materials and technology have become far more readily available. Potential proliferants no longer need to reinvent the wheel; the crucial "bits and bobs" can be obtained from a variety of sources. In particular, nuclear enrichment and separation - the most difficult technical hurdles to overcome - are now accessible from a number of sources, and is well within the capability of any nation with a degree of industrial development and a modest high - tech infrastructure.

To sum up: the frantic American rhetoric about "rogue states with the most dangerous weapons" should be taken with a ton of salt. U.S. policies are themselves largely responsible for the dangerous proliferation situation, and some would go further and argue that the U.S. itself is itself by far the most dangerous "rogue state". But the rhetoric conceals a deeper truth: between unilateral American military actions, increased regional hostility, and the accelerating spread of nuclear technology, the world could find itself in an actual shooting nuclear war within the next decade or two. In the short term, an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities by the U.S. or Israel or both is a distinct possibility.

What to do? Only a few of the official delegations (including, I'm proud to say, Canada's) seemed interested in making real progress rather than posturing and threatening, despite dire warnings from Kofi Annan and the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei. But this committed and brave handful of nations cannot prevail by themselves against the turpitude and ineptitude of the majority, and especially not against the intransigence of the nuclear powers and nuclear wannabees.

If those who understand the urgency of "devaluing the nuclear currency" cannot prevail at the moment, we must commit ourselves to a different course. A useful model might be the Landmines Treaty signed in Ottawa in 1997 over the objections of the U.S. This treaty was successfully concluded entirely because of the indefatigable work of grassroots civil society

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groups, assisted by enlightened political leaders and diplomats led by our own Lloyd Axworthy.

Although nukes and landmines seem worlds apart, the parallels are closer than they seem: neither has any real military value in a conflict, and their victims were and will be almost entirely civilians. Another parallel; while official U.S. policy remains committed to these weapons, American civil society groups have and continue to be amongst their most vehement opponents. The "blue states" are on our side in this as in so many other issues.

So, a final, very radical thought: what if Canada and other sympathetic allies were to make any further security cooperation with the U.S. conditional on that nation re-committing itself to the principles it agreed to at the UN in 2000? As a start this would mean a) American ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; b) signing and ratifying a verifiable Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, c) removing American tactical nuclear weapons from the territory of its NATO allies, and d) removing from hair "trigger alert" the 2,200 nuclear warheads the U.S. continues to operate in that mode, and, finally e) entering into negotiations with the Russian Federation to modify the 2002 Moscow Treaty so that it yields real disarmament, real verification, and a serious effort to finance the cleanup of Russia's nuclear mess.

Since 9/11, the media have portrayed the nuclear danger as the theft of bomb materials by bearded religious zealots. In reality, it is the clean-shaven American "nuclear priesthood" that constitutes the real threat. Learning about and acting against this danger involves time and energy, and inevitably vilification by some American media and their Canadian toadies. But if we do not awaken to the danger now, our next wake-up call may be a very bright flash.

Michael Wallace is a nuclear activist and Professor of Political Science at UBC.
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