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Will NPT Be Extended Indefinitely?

At UN headquarters people are making bets about the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) — whether it will be extended indefinitely, for 25 years on a non-permanent basis, for 25 years on a permanent basis, or for five years. The fate of the NPT may largely determine the face of the world at the turn of the century.

In the betting process the word "hung" is important, for the conference to discuss this question may be "hung." In other words, debate will not end after the established four weeks, the agenda will prove to be vague, and the decision on extension will not be passed.

The NPT is a unique agreement, a fact which explains why countries regard it differently. This international treaty has turned into a treaty-organization. Every five years over the course of a quarter-century members assemble in Geneva or New York to discuss its effectiveness. Though it discriminates against states which were not originally part of the "Big Five," and more generally discriminates against the developing world as a whole, the treaty has received the backing of an overwhelming majority of states, not only in the North, but also in the South. The product of a hard compromise, the treaty structure makes it very difficult for anyone who wishes to amend it. Having prevented such countries as Iraq and North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons, the Treaty

failed to prevent Israel from arming itself. Since its term of validity is limited, under article X.2 the treaty must be extended by a conference of member-states. Theoretically, the treaty will "live after death." Lawyers have maintained that if the New York conference cannot reach an agreement, the treaty won't lose its legal validity.

The treaty contains only ten articles but harbors a great number of riddles which officials have been trying to decipher over the past few months, largely without success. Now they will have to be solved in New York. The most important question is: for how long will the treaty be extended? Those who agree to prolong NPT indefinitely include the United States, Russia, the CIS countries, NATO member-states, most other advanced countries and some developing ones (the number of supporters fluctuates from 70 to 82). This position has advantages. And like any other program-maximum it has no chance to be accepted by consensus. Those who until now could not be convinced of the need for indefinite prolongation will probably not change their minds in four weeks. The opposite tendency is much more likely, since many developing countries are irritated by the fact that the five nuclear states have repeatedly violated Articles 4 and 6 of the treaty, by moving too slowly to ban nuclear testing. As compensation for their sins, the nuclear countries (which are also permanent members of the UN) adopted at the UN Security Council a resolution confirming that they would not use nuclear weapons nor threaten a first strike. This is not even a concession to the Third World, but a logical and quite painless step (naturally, an important one). But the nuclear Five are

not ready for painful concessions.

If the treaty were indefinitely prolonged but in the process lost (even if not de-jure, then de-facto) a fourth, even fifth of its support, this would be an inadmissible luxury. The most weighty argument by advocates of the effectiveness of the treaty is that in recent years it was joined by China, France, Algeria, Ukraine, and South Africa. Hence, the treaty does not lose its attractiveness. Isn't it more reasonable to agree with a number of critical arguments, advanced by such countries as, say, Mexico, Nigeria and Egypt, and then to proceed to the prolongation of the treaty for 15-25 years through a consensus, by obtaining the consent of the developing countries to renounce their demands to add to the treaty all sorts of protocols and supplements. However, the compromise should not be too unsteady. It is important to avoid the conversion of the conference into "a trial of the North," not because of rhetoric (it is known), but in the essence of saving time. To drag out the conference would be equivalent to failure.

The states interested in keeping the non-proliferation regime in force must finish the conference at the fixed date, with an accurately worded decision, preferably passed via consensus to extend the treaty indefinitely. One possibility for indefinite extension has been suggested by two authoritative scientists and diplomats — George Bunn and Roland Timerbayev. This time Russian diplomacy is ready to display both flexibility and persistence. By the way, to balance Russian promises to America with its "indulgence" of non-aligned countries is easy only in theory, not in practice.

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