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Prepcom, NPT, and the Nuclear Ban

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The Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) opens its first session today at the Vienna International Centre (VIC).

This will be the first of three planned sessions that will be held prior to the 2020 Review Conference.

The Preparatory Committee, or simply *Prepcom*, as all delegates and experts know it, open to all States parties to the Treaty, is responsible for addressing substantive and procedural issues related to the Treaty and the forthcoming Review Conference.



This is the first gathering of the NPT member states after a dramatic failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference when three parties (United States, United Kingdom, and Canada) refused to accept the draft Final Document because of disagreements over the issue of the zone free of nuclear and all other WMD in the Middle East.

The 2017 Vienna Prepcom will be difficult, with attempts to muddle through it, at best; or ugly and swampy, at worst. For different reasons, parties to the Treaty come to Vienna today full of irritations or disappointments. The only good news about this session: there are absolutely no illusions. As one head of a very influential delegation told me the other day: "I would dream to escape Vienna".

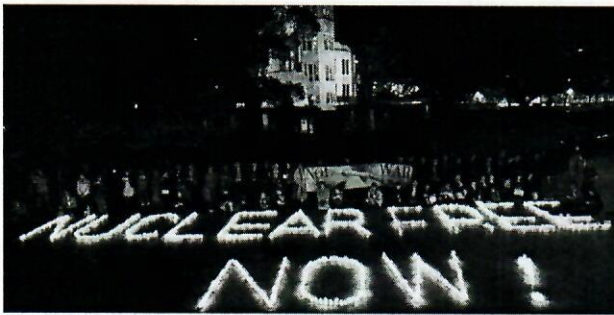
True, as far as the review circle is concerned, the first – Vienna - Prepcom is always mostly technical and mostly deals with agenda-related matters, not so much with substance. Substantive issues are on the rise at the second Prepcom (which traditionally takes place in Geneva and in this cycle will take place in Spring 2018) and will be in full blossom only at the third Prepcom (i.e. in New York in Spring 2019).

However, this year both irritations and disappointments are so high that there is a present danger of damaging the review process already in Vienna.

Situation around the issues of the conference to discuss the zone of nuclear and other WMD in the Middle East is an explosive combination of frustration and fatigue. No progress at all since 2010 is multiplied with even further decreasing of interest by the United States and certain other key players in this topic. Nobody any longer believes that substantial progress (and not imitation of it) is realistic at the moment.

In contrast, the second dividing issue - attitude towards Article VI – mixes pessimism of some with agitation of many. No doubt, this is the nuclear disarmament topic which will be energetically discussed not so much in VIC's halls but in its corridors and during ten days of lunches over the Danube.

This is why I find it timely today to look closer at the causes and consequences of this agitation.



The first session of the UN conference on developing a legally binding mechanism to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading to their total elimination, took place in March in New York. The event was attended by representatives of over a hundred states. The “cheerleaders” were Austria, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa, who received strong support from such disparate countries as Costa Rica, Brazil, Iran, Ireland, Morocco, and the Vatican. The conference is to reconvene on June 15, when negotiations will begin in earnest on the draft

of the proposed nuclear weapons ban treaty.

The radical proponents of disarmament are celebrating: as far as they are concerned, after a decades-long *Ice Age* in nuclear disarmament, there are finally some green shoots of progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons. Inspired by that success, they are ganging up on the nuclear-weapon states, which they believe are dragging their feet on their commitments under the NPT.

There is a growing international sentiment in favor of a *nuclear zero*. This is why I always tell my Russian colleagues – as well as colleagues from other NWSs - that sticking the head in the sand and denying that obvious sentiment would be ill-advised.

What, then, should the official *nuclear five* do in this situation? Making overtures to the disarmament radicals and coming up with excuses for being *more equal than others* in accordance with the terms of the NPT is not a productive strategy. This is also what I am telling my colleagues from the NWSs when asked for advice.

Worse, such a strategy would be dangerous and detrimental for international security and strategic stability.

In the current circumstances, playing at a nuclear arms ban treaty or convention would erode the NPT, which is the central pillar of the entire modern system of international security. If a single stone is removed from that edifice, the entire structure could crash down around our ears. Thanks to the NPT, there are now only nine states that possess nuclear weapons. Without that treaty, there would have been two or three dozen of them – and incidentally, half of them would be situated along the entire perimeter of the Russian border (as opposed to the borders of, say, Chile). The disarmament radicals prefer to take the entire debate outside the universal venue of the NPT Review Process. It is no coincidence that they began the ban exercise in the run-up to the Vienna sitting of the First Preparatory Committee for the NPT Review Conference, or that they plan to continue that exercise immediately afterwards.

What is more, by playing at the *nuclear zero* game, its advocates are trying to pull the rug from under another internationally recognized mechanism, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. There is of course no denying that the CD has long been in the doldrums. Everyone and their dog is eager to heap abuse on that mechanism – instead of making a concerted global effort to bring it back to life. Such revitalization would require some creative solutions; one of them, for example, would be to lift the consensus requirement, which has enabled Pakistan to hold the entire conference hostage for many years. Another would be to adopt an agenda in which nuclear disarmament would rightfully hold a prominent place – but not in isolation. The matter should be discussed in tandem with such pressing issues as preventing an arms race in the outer space, fighting chemical and biological terrorism, cybersecurity, fissile material cut-off, and



controls over military applications of AI technologies. That is a weighty and tightly intertwined package of problems. Trying to address the nuclear weapons problem in isolation, under the convenient pretext of the *immorality* of nuclear weapons, is to misunderstand the comprehensive and multi-faceted nature of global security. Such attempts ignore the obvious fact that in the next quarter of this century nuclear arsenals will be sidelined and superseded by such nascent technologies as prompt global strike or post-nuclear destruction systems based on different physical principles. In fact, that process has already begun. Or perhaps the disarmament radicals actually are familiar with this very well, and are merely trying to rock the boat for the sake of their five minutes of global fame?

Let us recall that it is not just the five nuclear-weapon states (including China, which made up its mind at the last minute and – to make it clear – after a long hesitation and a series of consultations with other P5) who were vehemently opposed to the nuclear-ban exercise in New York. Their opposition was shared by another 40 or so states. Especially telling is the negative reaction of India, which is one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, and of Japan, which is the only country in the world to have suffered the devastation of nuclear bombings. Let us also not forget that Japanese nationals currently hold two of the key international nuclear-related posts: the high representative of the UN Secretary General for disarmament affairs, and the director general of the IAEA.



Am I trying to argue that the nuclear-weapon states should actually ramp up their nuclear arsenals? Absolutely not. To the contrary: I believe they already have more nuclear weapons than is genuinely necessary for national security purposes. The *nuclear five* should make responsible joint steps towards nuclear arms reductions. The United States and Russia should continue to lead the way by extending the New START treaty and developing joint measures - not necessarily in the treaty format – for deeper reductions in the second quarter of the 21st century.

But the saber-rattling of the disarmament radicals, and their politicking in New York, could actually have the opposite effect of undermining the very ideas that lie at the heart of the NPT, causing a split between the NPT members, and making the very subject of further nuclear reductions an irritant for the nuclear-weapon states.

The radicals may well have only good intentions, but we all know where the road paved with good intentions leads...

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Comments

No comments

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