

The “Silver Thread” Torn Apart: Will Nuclear Superpowers Reestablish Dialogue?

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“We have warned that such wording would not work!”—the 9th (2015) and 10th (2022) NPT Review Conferences ended with the same message from the United States and Russia. Last time the U.S. accused Moscow, persuaded by Middle Eastern countries, of supporting the deadline for organizing a conference on the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East. In response, the Russian delegation blamed the Americans for shielding Israel that sought to thwart progress on this issue.

Seven years later, Russia is condemned for attacks on the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant in Ukraine. A mission of the International Atomic Energy Agency, sent to the site with a delay, after the conference had ended, refrained from identifying those responsible. The West remains

of the opinion that the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant was attacked by Russia, although no investigation has been conducted. And never will. The expected refusal of the Russian delegation to admit responsibility for the incident was called a stumbling block: it proved to be more advantageous to deem the conference a failure than to come to terms with Moscow that is conducting “military hostilities” in Ukraine.

THERE’S NO GETTING AWAY FROM IT

The deliberately poisoned seven-year cycle of the NPT review process (Margojev, 2018) illustrates that its guarantors do not seem to be concerned about the viability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime as much as they were when it was being established (Karnaukhova, 2022). The topic of the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant will leave the news agenda as soon as the hostilities around it end. And in the next NPT review cycle, the permanently growing dissatisfaction of non-nuclear countries with the regression in nuclear disarmament will continue to gain a critical anti-nuclear mass: as of September 2022, the NPT had been ratified by sixty-eight states.

Still, the threat of non-nuclear states to quit the NPT in favor of the TPNW looks unlikely and irrational: even the recommendation of the delegate from Kiribati to his government to withdraw from the useless treaty were not frightening. A legally correct withdrawal from the NPT is possible only if a participant decides that “extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country” and will notify not only all parties to the treaty, but also the UN Security Council, three months in advance. If the latter decides that withdrawing from the indefinitely extended Treaty of 1995 poses a threat to peace and security, such an act is fraught with sanctions.

Not all countries are ready to live like the DPRK. Even if the economic damage from the withdrawal from the NPT is mitigated, the country that leaves the Treaty will lose access to the international market for nuclear technology and to the negotiating platform where it has the right to demand that nuclear powers fulfil their disarmament obligations.

TO NEGOTIATE OR TO SPEAK OUT?

The patriarch of nuclear non-proliferation and one of the “authors” of the NPT, Roland Timerbaev, taught that nuclear non-proliferation was in the interests of all humankind and that the USSR and the United States had approached the negotiations with a common mission to stop the spread of military nuclear technology. Was this awareness an act of selflessness? Not at all. Concessions are part of the diplomatic process, but national interests were at the heart of the foreign policy of the architects of the nuclear world order in 1968 and so they are in 2022.

The difference is that the memory of the Cuban missile crisis was not in history books, but in the minds of the decision-makers, and their ability to agree behind the scenes was more important than their ability to speak out publicly. By 1963, Moscow and Washington had consented to the Partial Test Ban Treaty in a short time—thanks to the personal involvement of Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy.

The 1966-1968 negotiations on the NPT proceeded amid the fierce war that the U.S. was waging in Vietnam. Realizing the impossibility of defending the idea of multilateral nuclear forces with European allies participating in the negotiations, American diplomats held confidential consultations with the Soviet negotiators, keeping secret from the Europeans the fact that some of the “Soviet” drafts of the Treaty had been drawn up with the participation of the Americans (Timerbaev, 1998, pp. 73-75).

Later, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko confided to his son that “after the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco, this was his second most significant signature on a historical document. Leonid Brezhnev was very happy with this agreement, and indeed the entire Soviet leadership” (Gromyko, 1997, p. 49). In the conditions of confrontation between the capitalist and socialist blocs in the early 1980s, Gromyko supported the idea of consultations on nuclear non-proliferation between the USSR and the U.S. They were held every six months, and Gromyko called such a dialogue the “only silk thread” that connected the two superpowers (Timerbaev, 2007, p. 17).

SOME MORE IMPORTANT THINGS

The NPT Review Conference is a ritually significant, partly theatrical performance that reflects the mood in the creative team and the ability of its participants to agree on at least something. However, for the Treaty’s future it is important not only to successfully perform at the final concerts, but also live up to the expectations of the public.

The idea to convene a conference on the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East, blocked by the Americans in 2015, was finally implemented on the UN platform—the first two sessions were held in 2019 and 2021.

Also in 2015, the six international negotiators signed a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Nuclear Program with Iran. And although the Trump administration withdrew from it three years later, the remaining parties to the agreement waited for the change of administration and are now negotiating a restoration of the nuclear deal.

In 2020, the IAEA members contributed €128 million to the Technical Cooperation Fund, a 3.5-fold increase in extra-budgetary contributions. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the agency continued uninterrupted in the main area: in 2021, the IAEA conducted field inspections for 14,649 days, having monitored 1,334 objects (Mutluer, 2022).

In 2021, the U.S.-Russian Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions was extended for five years. Due to hostilities in Ukraine and suspended air traffic between Russia and the United States, inspections under this agreement have not been resumed since their suspension during the pandemic. Only the exchange of notifications about the state of strategic nuclear forces continues to work smoothly.

U.S.-Russia relations are hitting another bottom, and another NPT Review Conference, too. With the departure of the founding fathers of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the need for dialogue between the nuclear superpowers is more acute than it was during the Cold War. Diplomats are expelled before they have time to agree on something, but non-governmental specialists are taking up diplomacy efforts on Track Two. Such expert contacts will not lead to a breakthrough—and should not. Their role, like that of monasteries in the Middle Ages, is to preserve

the institutional memory (Margojev and Orlov, 2017) and the culture of dialogue (Orlov and Semenov, 2022) for those who will one day have to revive such a dialogue at the state level.

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