

Friday, December 12, 2008

DISARMAMENT, NON - PROLIFERATION AND THE UN

Since its founding, the UN has been trying to put the Nuclear genie back into the bottle. In 1946 it was the subject of the very first resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly.

The number of nuclear warheads has decreased since the end of the Cold War. However, the combined stockpile remains at a very high level: more than 25,000. Of these, more than 10,000 are considered operational and ready for use on short notice.

The situation is becoming increasingly dangerous. More nations are showing an interest in acquiring nuclear weapons technology. Today the gravest threat comes from the possibility of terrorists acquiring this nuclear capability. A further concern is the possibility that unstable or failed states can become nuclear.

Why do states want the bomb? One reason is prestige and the belief that it enhances their security. This deterrent effect is questionable. Even the greatest nuclear powers have actually lost wars against weak adversaries without being able to extract the slightest advantage from their colossal arsenals. Think of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the US in Vietnam.

An important step towards the UN's goal of eliminating nuclear weapons is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which entered into force in 1970. It provides that the non nuclear states agree to forgo developing or obtaining nuclear weapons. Further, it is very important to note, the nuclear weapon states are committed to pursuing general and complete disarmament. The non nuclear states in return receive help in nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Most states have signed the treaty. North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003. Only India, Pakistan and Israel have never signed the NPT.

NPT has had a certain amount of success. For example, the apartheid government in South Africa, on the eve to majority rule in 1993, announced it had destroyed its six secret nuclear weapons. Similarly, civilian governments in Brazil and Argentina in the 1980's stopped nuclear weapons research the military juntas had started. Also, we now know that UN inspection and dismantling programs ended Iraq's nuclear weapons program in 1991. In 2000, Libya became the most recent nation

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to abandon a secret program. Such progress may not last. The nuclear power states have not seriously honored their commitment under the NPT treaty to move towards disarmament.

As one UN report remarks, "non nuclear proliferation is not helped by the fact that the nuclear weapon states continue to insist that those weapons in their hands enhance security, while in the hands of others they are a threat to world peace."

Can civil society and a peoples movement help? The American Hydrogen Bomb Test on the Bikini atoll in 1954 made the world acutely aware of radioactive fallout. This was the beginning of a world wide test-ban movement started by a handful of London housewives-marches and demonstrations all over the world. The protests resulted in the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which bans any nuclear explosion in the atmosphere, in outer space or underwater. Nations voluntarily agreed to stop testing even underground. More recently North Korea tested a nuclear weapon in in 2006. A comprehensive treaty to include underground testing has not been signed by the US but has so far not tested underground. This may change , since the US stockpile is aging and some in the military want to modernize and may be tempted to resume testing.

Other disarmament victories for people power are the public campaigns to outlaw land mines and the use of anti-personnel cluster munitions.

There is some hope for a further and significant reduction in nuclear weapons. There is a window of opportunity. In January 2007, the Wall Street Journal published an article by George Shultz, Perry and Kissinger, lapsed cold warriors, outlining the need and vision towards zero nukes. US policy depending on nukes is totally outdated - a heritage of the long gone cold war and presently dangerous. In 2008 they reiterated their concerns and outlined detailed steps to be taken. They also urged signing the comprehensive test ban treaty. In October 2007 the Stanford Hoover Institute , a very conservative think tank, convened a conference with many veterans of the past six administrations. They found support from most secretaries of State and Defense as well as national security advisors for the

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Schultz and Kissinger vision of the importance of a world free of nuclear weapons and discussed the needed steps.

President-elect Obama has also proposed signing the comprehensive test ban treaty as well setting a goal of moving towards the elimination of nuclear weapons to lessen the threat of nuclear terrorism. When even conservatives, liberals and many leaders in the security field agree, there is a real window of opportunity for a change in policy.

Albert Einstein, fearing world war 3 foresaw the dangers of nuclear weapons. "I do not know what weapons World War 3 will be fought with, but World War 4 will be fought with sticks and stones."

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