

EMBASSY

The fissile material follies

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Fissile material is the stuff that nuclear weapons are fashioned from, and thus stopping the production of such material for use in weapons is one of the prerequisites for nuclear disarmament.

Although the international community has long espoused the negotiation of a treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, the initiation of such negotiations has remained elusive. Part of the problem has been the forum designated to undertake this work on behalf of the UN membership, the 65-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The CD operates on an extreme version of the consensus rule, which requires that every decision, procedural or substantive, be taken unanimously. The last achievement of the CD was the negotiation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty concluded in 1996.

Ever since, the CD has been in a state of paralysis, unable to agree on and implement any work program whatsoever. This procedural impasse has meant the neglect of all the core issues that have been assigned to it, including a fissile material production ban. Pakistan is the current overt blocker of a work plan for the CD, arguing that a fissile material ban is against its national security interests as it pursues a nuclear arms race with its neighbour.

This national position serves to highlight a basic inequity of consensus-based multilateral forums. What about the security interests of the other states that support such a negotiation—are their interests simply to be sacrificed for Pakistan's?

States associated with this 16-year-long failure to act have responded to the impasse with apathy or, in some cases, displays of crocodile tears lamenting the lack of political will amongst the CD members and pledging to redouble their efforts to find a solution for the CD.

That solution, however, has not been allowed to venture beyond the bounds of the CD, and its moribund procedures as maintaining a veto over any action at the CD is more important to these states than achieving progress on any of its agreed goals.

The five nuclear weapon states, or P5, for example, at their meeting in Washington in June, could not move beyond the worn-out declarations of support for the “immediate start of negotiations” on a fissile material ban treaty at the CD.

Repeating this hollow formula after experiencing years of nil results at this very same forum is a stance that borders on irresponsibility, cynicism, or both.

Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. In this sense, awaiting the start of negotiations at the CD year after year resembles an act of diplomatic madness.

Fortunately, not all states are stuck in the rut that has afflicted the CD and the goal of a fissile

material production ban. These states recognize that in diplomacy, if one is serious about the objective, one devises a suitable vehicle or forum for achieving it.

In the context of multilateral disarmament this means looking beyond the CD to the UN General Assembly that makes its decisions on the basis of majority voting rather than via the veto-prone consensus procedure.

This October at the General Assembly's first disarmament committee session, Canada introduced a resolution on the fissile material ban treaty that was designed to move beyond the present gridlock and find a way forward for this long-neglected file.

This resolution called for the establishment of a UN Group of Governmental Experts with an expanded membership of 25 states that would meet in Geneva for two sessions of two weeks in each of 2014 and 2015. The focus of their work would be on "possible aspects which could contribute to, but not negotiate, a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons."

Next year, 2013, would be used to collect views of member states on such a treaty. Although Canada had originally wanted a more robust text with the group meeting already in 2013, modifications had to be made in order to bring key states on board.

When the resolution was put to the vote on Nov. 5 the result was encouraging: 148 "yes" votes, a single "no" vote by Pakistan, and 20 abstentions. A review of the states abstaining included China, India, Israel, and most of the Arab League—these latter states more as retaliation for Canada's opposition to the Middle East proliferation risk resolution they support, rather than for the approach proposed.

Although states like India and Egypt justified their abstentions by reiterating their preference for the CD to negotiate this treaty, the Canadian-led resolution represents the first effort in over a decade to begin substantive work on the challenging issues raised by a fissile material production ban. One can only hope that this work, with the support of like-minded states, will build a momentum sufficient to launch actual negotiations on this treaty and rescue it from diplomatic oblivion.

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