

Nuclear disarmament: The hard slog to get beyond rhetoric

As next year gets underway it will require determined action by states like Canada to turn these openings into real vehicles for making progress.



Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization Photo

Lanterns on the Motoyasu River in Hiroshima, Japan, released in August, in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the atomic bombing.

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The annual session of the UN General Assembly's First (Disarmament) Committee recently wrapped up its work. Over 50 resolutions and decisions that addressed a wide spectrum of non-proliferation and disarmament issues were adopted by the committee.

The theme of nuclear weapons continued to be dominant, with many of the resolutions consisting of hardy perennials that set out in a formal manner various aims and principles of the international community in the nuclear realm.

This year three of these resolutions attempted to go beyond pious rhetoric and actually take some action in addressing the challenges of a world still awash with nuclear weapons and the fissile material from which they are made. In each of these cases, the proponents faced various degrees of opposition from the nuclear weapon states and others that appear to harbor desires to join this club.

The first and most modest of these action resolutions was one sponsored by the Non-Aligned Movement and which called for the convening of a high-level meeting of the General Assembly on Sept. 26, 2013 to address the impasse in multilateral

nuclear disarmament activity. Although convening a meeting is a low common denominator step, it does serve to direct some high-level political attention to the problem, a precondition in the view of many to finding a solution for it.

Even so, four out of the five nuclear weapon states, China being the exception, expressed puzzlement as to how such a meeting would further the goals of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and abstained on this resolution that was adopted with 165 "yes" votes.

The next action resolution was one that Canada led, and was concerned with the longstanding and equally-long neglected goal of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. As a sign of the importance of this treaty, its negotiation has been assigned to the 65-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, a body that has not been able to do anything for almost 15 years due to its inability to agree on a program of work.

Canada, in concert with like-minded states, was not prepared to see this treaty languish forever in the bog of the CD, and proposed a way forward that would see work on the substance of the treaty actually commence. Canada's resolution called for the establishment of an expanded Group of Governmental Experts with 25 states that would meet for two sessions of two weeks each in both 2014 and 2015, and report back to the General Assembly at the end of this period.

Although the resolution had to be watered down to gain support, it still provides for expert discussion of aspects that could contribute to a fissile material ban treaty, and hence promises a heady dose of substantive work for an issue that has suffered procedural games for years.

The resolution was adopted by a vote of 148 for one against (Pakistan) and 20 abstentions. Amongst the abstentions were the nuclear weapon possessing states of India, North Korea, and China, all of which are engaged in adding to their nuclear arsenals—as well as suspected nuclear wannabes Iran and Syria.

While supporting the resolution the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and France ensured behind the scenes that the GGE would not venture into actual negotiations and would not deviate from the consensus rule that has enabled a de facto veto of any multilateral outcome not to their liking.

The third and last resolution that sought to authorize something was a resolution sponsored by Norway, Austria, and Mexico ("the new NAM" as they are now known in UN circles), which called for the establishment of an open-ended working group "to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations". The working group would meet in Geneva in 2013 for one session of up to three weeks.

The prospect of having UN members gather to work on nuclear disarmament proposals caused consternation in the ranks of the nuclear weapon states and those who harbour similar ambitions. How dare they presume to discuss steps to hasten progress on nuclear disarmament and lessen the existential threat nuclear weapons pose for humanity?

This affront to the self-appointed arbiters of nuclear affairs was too much for the P4 to bear, and they voted "no" on the initiative, citing concern over the attempt to take negotiations outside the existing forum of the CD where they could ensure that nothing on this subject matter would ever occur. Such stalwarts of active nuclear disarmament as India, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Egypt were content just to abstain on the resolution, justifying their stance on their attachment to the dysfunctional CD.

Despite this coolness on the part of some influential states, the resolution still managed to garner 133 "yes" votes and thus represents a victory, albeit modest, for those states demanding that progress on nuclear disarmament requires real work and not just hollow rhetoric.

As next year gets underway it will require determined action by the non-nuclear weapon states to turn these openings into real vehicles for making progress on the issues that concern their security as much as they do the nuclear weapon possessors. Given the resistance of the latter to initiatives intended to overcome the paralysis of existing forums, progress will require a long, hard slog.

Παύλ Μεγερ ις α Ιθρωερ Καηαδιαη αωβα55αδθρ Ιθρ διατωαωερη. Ηε ις κυρτερητλγ αη αδλσηερ ρρθ,λε55θρ θ,ς ιητερηατιθηαλ 5τυδιε5 ατ Σιωθη Γρα5ερ Πηινερ5ιτυ αηδ α 5εηιθρ Ιελλθω ατ τηε Σιωθη5 Φθυηδατιθη.

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