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Whither a Fissile Material Ban Treaty?

The great majority of states, which support the negotiation of such a treaty, must move beyond paying lip service to this goal and agree to arrangements to get actual work underway.

By [Paul Meyer](#) in Embassy Magazine

Nations that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty are assembling at the preparatory committee in Vienna, which began April 30 and runs until May 11. They have repeatedly voiced their support for the immediate commencement of negotiations of a treaty to prohibit the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.

This comes as no surprise, given that such a ban has been an agreed goal of UN member states for over fifty years.

In statements and submissions, frequent references have also been made to Action 15 from the 2010 NPT Review Conference's action plan, which stated that "the Conference on Disarmament should, within the context of an agreed, comprehensive and balanced programme of work, immediately begin negotiations of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other explosive devices in accordance with the report of the Special Coordinator of 1995...and the mandate contained therein."

The formula is an old and respected one. The only problem with it is that it has proved impossible to put into effect.

Not since a couple of weeks in the summer of 1998 has the Conference on Disarmament been able to undertake official work on a fissile material ban. Fourteen years of idleness on this, as all the while certain states continue to add to their stockpiles of fissile material and the nuclear weapons fashioned from them.

It doesn't take a deep student of diplomatic affairs to discern the link between the consensus-based conference's inability to agree on a programme of work including a fissile material ban, and the fact that amongst its member states it counts those still actively producing this essential nuclear weapon material.

The more puzzling question is why has the vast majority of states supporting a fissile material ban put up with this situation for as long as they have?

Normally in the realm of international nuclear security affairs, one might expect the leading nuclear powers under the NPT to take the initiative to overcome the impasse and ensure that negotiations begin.

This would seem relatively easy for them to do so, given that none of the NPT nuclear weapon states currently are producing fissile material for nuclear weapons.

Regrettably, as shown in their group statement to this so-called PrepCom, the five permanent members of the Security Council have not been able to move beyond the threadbare formula of supporting the initiation of immediate negotiations of a fissile material ban at the conference.

To be repeating this formula in the face of almost fifteen years of inaction would seem to represent the triumph of hope over experience—or to put it more bluntly, of convenience over commitment.

In diplomacy, as in any other area of human endeavor, if your preferred approach to achieving a given objective is not possible, you try another approach. Applying another approach to get work underway on a fissile material ban is overdue. The effort made to identify other options will be a reflection of the seriousness in which states hold the goal of such a treaty.

More encouraging is the position adopted by the ten non-nuclear weapon states forming the Non Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative grouping. In their working paper introduced at this PrepCom the NPDI states declared that in light of the failure of the conference to agree on a programme of work that included a fissile material cut-off treaty, "we are currently consulting on options for such negotiations, taking into account the venues of past treaties."

These states are signaling their refusal to take the conference's failure to commence negotiations as the last word on the subject.

They are supporting both further scientific experts' meetings being organized by the Netherlands and Germany in May and June as well as laying the groundwork for initiating negotiations under other diplomatic auspices.

As suggested by the Canadian-led resolution at last fall's UN General Assembly that body, with its decision-making based on majority vote rather than consensus, could play a role in ensuring that work on a fissile material ban actually gets underway. Other forums for launching such a negotiation could also be envisaged.

The key point is that the great majority of states, which support the negotiation of a fissile material ban treaty, must move beyond paying lip service to this goal and agree to arrangements to get actual work underway.

To a considerable extent, the credibility of the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament enterprise centered on the NPT depends on this being done.

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