

The NPT Showdown: United David vs. Divided Goliath

Notes on the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, United Nations

Senator Douglas Roche, O.C. Chairman, Middle Powers Initiative

April 27, 2000

UNITED NATIONS - April 27, 2000. With the opening debate now winding down at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, the stage is set for a showdown between the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and the New Agenda Coalition (NAC).

To almost everyone's surprise, NAC jumped into a leadership position immediately. NAC tabled a Working Paper on the opening day calling on the NWS to "make an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals and, in the forthcoming review period 2000-2005, to engage in an accelerated process of negotiations and to take steps leading to nuclear disarmament..."

The NWS assumed a defensive position, claiming that the American-Russian reductions in nuclear weapons show their compliance with Article VI of the NPT, and that the nuclear powers should be left alone without the need to have pressed on them a "new agenda."

One by one, the seven NAC countries, Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, hammered home that they are unimpressed with reduction figures when nuclear weapons are at the same time being reaffirmed as central to strategic concepts for the indefinite future.

The NPT Review has now moved into the committee stage, prior to drafting a final declaration for the end of the conference May 19th.

A step forward was taken by the creation of two subsidiary bodies to focus on two key elements on which the conference will turn. Ambassador Clive Pearson of New Zealand will chair the group dealing with nuclear disarmament; Ambassador Christopher Westdal of Canada will chair the one on Middle East and South Asia issues, paying special attention to the refusal of Israel, a nuclear weapons capable State, to join the NPT. During the PrepComm process, the United States had resolutely opposed the creation of these two bodies.

NPT Reviews traditionally operate by consensus. Indeed, the president of the conference, Ambassador Abdallah Baali of Algeria, has signaled that he hopes to "bridge our differences" and find "common agreement" by all parties on ways to move forward. But a senior NAC spokesman told me privately that the discussions will be "eyeball-to-eyeball" right down to the final hours. NAC avers that it will not budge from its demand of an "unequivocal" commitment to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons. Since the NWS are presently committed to keeping their nuclear stocks, even at reduced levels, it is hard to see at this stage how a bridge between the two positions can be built.

At past NPT conferences, it was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which carried the flag for nuclear disarmament, calling for time-bound nuclear disarmament leading to a Nuclear Weapons Convention. But NAM, weakened by the nuclear testing activities of India and Pakistan (which do not belong to the NPT), has clearly been eclipsed in importance by the NAC, which did not even exist at the time of the 1995 Indefinite Extension of the NPT. NAC's seven core members are supported by 60 States spread around the world. NAC's positions are more moderate, and therefore more attractive to several key States, such as Canada and Germany, which can influence other NATO States.

* * *

A further complication for the NWS is the U.S. government's determination to develop a ballistic missile defence system, an issue that has not only split the U.S. from Russia but also virtually isolated the U.S. in the world community. Even the U.S.'s nuclear partners and strongest allies are publicly trying to dissuade the U.S. from proceeding because of the irreparable harm it will do the nuclear disarmament agenda. The U.S. is under siege at the NPT Review on two fronts: failing to implement Article VI and moving forward on a missile defence system.

Thus, the U.S. is trying at the same time to hold off the NAC attack and keep its nuclear partnerships from crumbling. But to hear or read the U.S. opening speech by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, one would get the impression that the U.S. is relaxed about its record and confident about the future.

The U.S. has dismantled 60 percent of its nuclear weapons, Ms. Albright said, and a START III process would cut U.S.-Soviet arsenals by 80 percent from Cold War peaks. "Simple math and common sense both suggest that it is folly to give up on a START process which is doing exactly what is called for in Article VI."

The Secretary added that NATO's nuclear weapons have been cut by 85 percent since 1991. "Such weapons now play a smaller role in our defense posture than at any time since the advent of the Cold War."

She highlighted the words of President Clinton in the Foreword to a glossy publication detailing how the U.S. is living up to its commitments to Article VI: "As we enter this new Millennium, we should all commit ourselves anew to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. The United States remains committed to this goal and will work tirelessly towards its ultimate achievement."

* * *

For the past few years, the U.S. has been getting support from Russia for its nuclear positions. Indeed, as Ms. Albright pointed out, the U.S. has paid \$5 billion towards the costs associated with Russia's nuclear disarmament programs. But Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor S. Ivanov, was not in a grateful mood. He warned the U.S. that reduction programs will be jeopardized if the U.S. proceeds with a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty is a cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime, he said, and cannot be tampered with. Whereas Ms. Albright said there was no good reason why the ABM Treaty could not be amended, Mr. Ivanov said plainly: "Compliance with the ABM Treaty in its present form without any modifications is a prerequisite for further negotiations on nuclear disarmament." He made the same point several times: "Further reductions in strategic offensive weapons can only be considered in the context of preservation of the ABM Treaty." He called attention to Russia's initiative to establish a Global Missile and Missile Technologies monitoring and defence system which could be an alternative to the destruction of the ABM system. But, as the New York Times reported the following day, the U.S. is intent on pursuing only a national missile defence system and is now wrestling with the \$60 billion cost to protect all 50 states of the Union. The day after his U.N. speech, Mr. Ivanov flew to Washington for discussions with U.S. officials who want to make a deal to obtain Russian approval for BMD in exchange for driving reductions to even lower levels, perhaps to the 1,500 warheads for each side sought by Russia. A Clinton-Putin summit is set for June.

However, China is wary of a Russia-U.S. deal on BMD. Ambassador Sha Zukang of China weighed in at the NPT Review with an attack on any kind of ballistic missile defence system as "posing a severe threat to the global strategic balance and stability." He accused the U.S. of trying to seek absolute security for itself, an impossible task that is tantamount to a nuclear arms buildup. He

warned that the international nuclear disarmament process would come tumbling down if the U.S. proceeds with BMD.

While more circumspect, the U.K. and France both expressed similar concerns. "Active missile defence raises complex and difficult issues," said Peter Hain, U.K. Minister of State. "We have made it clear to [the U.S. and Russia] that we continue to value the ABM and wish to see it preserved." Ambassador M. Hubert de La Fortelle of France said his country was "anxious to avoid any challenges to the [ABM] liable to bring about a breakdown of strategic equilibrium and to restart the arms race."

* * *

The NAC countries also all warned against BMD, coupling this concern with the urgency of making concrete progress on nuclear disarmament. Ireland came right to the point. Foreign Affairs Minister Brian Cowen said: "This Treaty may not survive intact for another five years without a fundamental change in approach by all.... We must overcome interminable arguments about the retention of nuclear weapons to respond to every new perceived threat to security." Sweden's Foreign Affairs Minister Anne Lindh warned that if the international community does not start the process of eliminating nuclear weapons, "we will see our own children demonstrating against us." South Africa said that if the international community cannot free itself from nuclear weapons, "We will never be liberated from the unspeakable destruction and human suffering which these weapons can cause." Brazil, a new signatory to the NPT and member of NAC, said that NAC was a "catalyst" for the elimination of nuclear weapons. NAC's composition, timing and comprehensive and balanced program of action "explains the increasingly broad support that it has been receiving from governments, parliaments, NGOs and civil society."

The NPT Review has become a drama of NAC versus the NWS. David against Goliath. At least David is united while Goliath is sorely divided. It remains to be seen how strong David will be on the nuclear weapons battlefield of the 21st century.

Senator Douglas Roche, O.C., is former Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament and author of Bombs Not Bread: A Political Agenda for Social Justice. His analysis of the NPT 2000 Review Conference will be posted on the Project Ploughshares Website: <http://www.ploughshares.ca>