

UN Meeting Offers Chance for Disarmament Progress
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An unprecedented high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament will be held at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 26.

For the first time in the 68-year history of the UN, heads of government or at least foreign ministers will devote their attention to “the complete elimination of nuclear weapons” as “essential to remove the danger of nuclear war.”

Though the UN resolution setting up the meeting was adopted nearly unanimously, the United States, United Kingdom and France abstained (Russia and China voted yes). Given this lack of enthusiasm by the three Western nuclear powers, what is this special meeting likely to achieve?

With world attention riveted on Syria, nuclear disarmament does not rate high in polls of public concerns. But as Syria showed with the actual use of chemical weapons, public outrage will skyrocket if an aggressor ever launches a nuclear device of some sort. Every informed observer knows that the only guarantee against the use of nuclear weapons is the complete elimination of all 17,000 of such weapons still remaining.

While the international spotlight has been on Iran’s nuclear program and North Korea’s testing of nuclear weapons, the heart of the nuclear weapons problem remains the intransigence of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the same five original members of the nuclear weapons club, who each possess a veto and who could not agree on Syria.

Even though calls for nuclear disarmament escalated through the years, the nuclear weapons states have consistently dodged any real efforts for nuclear disarmament. This year alone, they boycotted a Norway government conference attended by 127 states on the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of the use of nuclear weapons, and ignored three special inter-government meetings in Geneva called to do preparatory work for negotiating the end of nuclear weapons.

The US and Russia have engaged in bilateral rounds of reductions, but the trumpeting of lower numbers has masked their continued modernization of warheads, delivery systems and infrastructure. The 2013 Yearbook of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute states that the nuclear weapons powers, which continue to deploy new nuclear weapons and delivery systems, “appear determined to retain their nuclear arsenals indefinitely.”

A double standard has deeply conflicted NATO, which continues to claim that the possession of nuclear weapons provides the “supreme guarantee” of the security of its 26 member states. At one and the same time, the NATO states reaffirm their commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty goal of nuclear disarmament and their NATO dependence on nuclear weapons.

The policies are incoherent. The US, UK and France drive NATO and have made it the world’s biggest nuclear-armed alliance. The continued deployment of US tactical nuclear bombs on the soil of

Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey, though resisted by growing numbers of people in those countries, is a standing provocation to Russia, which is consequently disinclined to lower its own huge numbers of tactical nuclear weapons. Russia is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons while it is virtually surrounded by an expanding NATO.

US-Russia bilateral negotiations for deeper cuts are stalled over such issues as the US's proposed missile defence system in Europe, the militarization of space, and the US intention to militarily dominate air, land, sea, space and cyberwarfare. Nuclear disarmament is inevitably caught up in geopolitical tensions. US President Barack Obama, who in 2009 convened the first Security Council meeting devoted to the issue, has tried to move nuclear disarmament forward, but received little support from his allies.

Maybe the nuclear powers won't do much at the extraordinary meeting on Sept. 26, but this is definitely an opportunity for non-nuclear weapons states to make their views heard. They should demand that the long-awaited Middle East conference on removing all weapons of mass destruction from the region take place. Had this preventive diplomacy action been taken in a timely manner, the Syrian crisis might never have erupted.