

Nuclear disarmament: With what end in view?

The International Discourse about Nuclear Arms Control and the Vision of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World

PRIF-REPORT 46/1997

Summary

The classic security framework from the time of the East–West conflict no longer exists. NATO no longer faces any conventional threat. The relationship between Russia and the West, though not constituting a security community, is certainly no longer characterized by hostility. As a result, the nuclear arsenals of both sides are dwindling: more than one third of the strategic warheads existing in the 1980s have been done away with; according to the stated goals of the START II treaty, by the middle of the next decade, stocks will stand at less than a quarter of their historic highs. Types of tactical nuclear weapons have decreased dramatically in number; more than 90 per cent have been deactivated, and a large number dismantled. Britain and France have also reduced their stocks of nuclear weapons, albeit by a much more modest extent. Soon Britain will possess only one type of nuclear weapon, and France only two. The flexibility of the various arsenals has markedly diminished as a result of this reduction in variety.

These developments have cleared the view to a long-observed goal of nuclear arms control: a nuclear-weapon-free world. Our subject here is the international discourse about nuclear disarmament. In tackling it, we wish to distance ourselves from a view that sees politics merely as an exchange of blows between 'robust interests' in the arena of power politics, with the accompanying rhetoric serving merely to spread an ideological and legitimatory smoke-screen over this 'hard core'.

Whether comprehensive nuclear disarmament has any chance of being achieved is, in our view, signalled firstly—though not exclusively and entirely—by the way in which it is discussed in international politics. It is this discussion that we shall examine here. We shall try, firstly, to establish how the justification for, and military and political role of, nuclear weapons is dealt with in various international forums, in the nuclear-weapon states themselves, and in Germany; secondly, we shall try to gauge whether, within these debates, any changes can be identified which would permit some kind of diagnosis and prognosis of trends.

The NPT Extension Conference constitutes a dividing-line in this regard. The contracting parties themselves were at odds about the importance of nuclear disarmament from the outset. A brief account of the course of this dispute is therefore given, before the NPT Review and Extension Conference of spring 1995 is analysed in detail. This conference was of great importance in setting the agenda for the global discussion about nuclear weapons.

The decision to extend the treaty also marks the start of a new era in the debate about nuclear disarmament. The extent to which the disarmament obligations of the nuclear-weapon states, which are not laid down anywhere else but in the NPT, were endorsed and concretized was striking. Whereas previously, the rather ambiguous wording of Article VI could have given the impression that the NWS were duty-bound to enter into negotiations but not to produce results, and that disarmament was a process but not necessarily an end-point, the Principles and Objectives agreed during the Extension Conference preclude this interpretation: they talk unequivocally of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

In addition, fixing 1996 as the deadline for the halting of tests marked the nuclear-weapon states' first-ever acceptance of a fixed date for an arms-control measure; and the demand for the immediate commencement of negotiations on a 'cut-off' is tantamount to another deadline. Lastly, there was a call for the 'determined pursuit ...of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally'; this is more precise than the vague call to pursue negotiations 'in good faith' contained in Article VI of the NPT. In his final statement to the conference, the American representative acknowledged this fact: the ultimate goal, he said, was a nuclear-weapon-free world.

Following the end of the Extension Conference, there was no more disputing the fact that the ultimate objective was comprehensive nuclear disarmament. However, at the debates conducted within the framework of the United Nations and the Geneva Conference on Disarmament, the various parties now got stuck into deciding 'how', 'how fast', and 'in which forum'. In this matter, the nuclear-weapon states and the threshold countries that were not party to the NPT occupied the extreme ends of the spectrum, whilst the non-nuclear-weapon industrialized countries and non-aligned states, with their various political variants, occupied the space in between.

An overview of all the multilateral forums that deal with nuclear disarmament produces a strangely ambivalent impression. On the one hand, the nuclear-weapon states do not reject the aim of comprehensive disarmament; on the other hand, they fight shy of any concession, even verbal, that might propel them into unforeseen, undesired measures. In so doing, however, they also signal that they have clearly become sensitive to this kind of pressure—whether it emanates from diplomatic sources or from world opinion. Their ostentatiously intransigent attitude is therefore as much an expression of political uncertainty and vulnerability as of strength resulting from *de facto* power. Where this pressure becomes extremely strong, and extends unequivocally to their own allies—as in the case of the test ban—opportunities arise for concessions that were initially held to be impossible, as in the 'zero threshold' modalities of the ban. The non-aligned countries still display the weakness of frequently going for a traditional disarmament purism that preserves the cohesiveness of their otherwise disparate movement, rather than for practical political demands that would do more to advance nuclear disarmament than does 1950s- or 1960s-style rhetorical self-gratification. However, there is a new median position (e.g. that of South Africa) which may in the long run present more of a threat to the hard-liners amongst the NWS than do unrealistic New-Delhi-style conjurations.

The effects stemming from the increase in nuclear-weapon-free zones merit considerable attention. This increase entails a restriction in the scope of the NWS to move freely over the world's oceans, and to deploy nuclear weapons outside their own territories. This could eventually further undermine the legitimacy of nuclear-weapons ownership. The signature of the relevant protocols by the NWS has, in the last two years, led to an ever greater number of states coming to enjoy binding security assurances from them. The geographical area within which the threat to use, and the use of, nuclear weapons would even be legally permissible has thus considerably diminished in size.

Two major international institutions—the Canberra Commission for Nuclear Disarmament, created by a Western-oriented government, namely Australia, and the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which is addressing the question of the legality of nuclear weapons—constitute new forums for discussion of the issue. They will undoubtedly help advance the discussion about the future of nuclear weapons. But how far they can make a practical contribution on the path to a nuclear-weapon-free world remains to be seen. That contribution will stand or fall according to how the International Court of Justice's ruling and the recommendations of the Canberra Commission are received, and the extent to which account is taken of them in future disarmament discourse.

We end our study with a short overview of the national policies and discourses of some of the major players. The aim of this is not to provide a full, in-depth analysis of the various national debates, but to highlight the main positions and—where appropriate—identify changes in relation to the status *quo ante*.

The positions of the nuclear-weapon states and of the most important of the non-nuclear-weapon states, Germany, betray a remarkable ambivalence. In the nuclear-weapon states, the desire to preserve national status clearly predominates. However, this desire is being overlaid by the growing realization that nuclear weapons can no longer be decreed a purely national affair, and therefore a taboo subject, and that disarmament is part and parcel of the transitional legitimation for continued nuclear status.

This paradoxical state of affairs leads to a situation in which the nuclear-weapon states, albeit reluctantly, are subordinating themselves to requirements which, although not a sufficient condition for nuclear disarmament, are none the less a necessary one—namely, transparency and a restricted scope for action. But the ambivalence remains: the process is fragile and could easily be reversed; on the other hand, the fact that it is now acceptable to raise certain topics in the internal American debate suggests that a nuclear-weapon state may consider that its long-term interests are better safeguarded in a nuclear-weapon-free world.

As far as Germany is concerned, the question it faces is to decide where it stands in this debate, given its status as a major non-nuclear-weapon state. No clear line is at present discernible, and the debate is extremely rudimentary. Between Nibelungen-like loyalty to the Western alliance's first-use option and a spirited attempt to secure greater transparency in the nuclear powers' nuclear-weapon complex, there is a palette of opinions and attitudes for which no clear common denominator is yet discernible. This is all the more regrettable in that, in this debate more than any other, Germany's voice carries great weight, and its absence is constantly being used by advocates of nuclear weapons in its partner countries to prove the necessity of their existing arsenals, because otherwise—so they claim—Germany, feeling itself insecure, could institute its own nuclear option.

The opening-up of a discussion on German security-needs, and the contribution which nuclear weapons make, or do not make, to it, is unavoidable. It has essentially already been rendered inevitable by the French offer of 'extended deterrence'. It should not be sidestepped.