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## **NPT Conference Collapses in Acrimony**

Erika Simpson

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The abysmal failure of diplomats from 188 nations to agree on Friday to anything at all -- not a single document or proposal -- means that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has reached the greatest crisis point since its inception in 1968. In fact, the entire nuclear non-proliferation regime faces its greatest and most daunting threat ever, augmented by the United States' decision to pull-out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and to renege from signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

The blame for this sorry state of affairs will be placed squarely by countries in the Non-Aligned Movement on the current U.S. administration, even as they begin thinking about possibly acquiring nuclear weapons of their own. The fact that nobody could agree on any proposals to reign in Iran and North Korea, despite a plethora of ideas from non-governmental organizations in North America and the European Union, means these two countries will be perceived as having implicitly obtained the 'go-ahead' to acquire nuclear arsenals of their own. We face the frightening prospect of a world of nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots' where possession of nuclear weapons is perceived as a state's right, even a normal state of affairs. Moreover, future attempts at the UN to control terrorists from acquiring their own nuclear arsenals will probably be jeered at outright because diplomats wasted precious time at this NPT Review Conference arguing about diplomatic wording, instead of solving pressing nuclear problems. A disturbing precedent has been set for any future arms control and disarmament conferences.

### **Debates about punctuation marks dominate the diplomatic discussions**

Historians will look back at the failed Review Conference of May 2005 and explain that strong disagreement centred around the placement and retention of an asterisked sentence that was uttered by the chair of the review conference, Ambassador Sergio Duarte from Brazil. Fervent debate about 'the asterisk' was supported by the Non-Aligned Movement and opposed by the U.S. and other members of the Western group. But this final debate was preceded by a month of similarly distressing debates about whether to include documents from the previous 1995 and 2000 Review Conferences in the agenda. These fervent debates were not just the normal daunting challenges faced by career diplomats; they disguised basic opposing interests that could not be bridged despite pressure and lobbying from over 5000 representatives from non-governmental organizations all over the world. Even the united appeal of over 2000 mayors in a missive organized by the Mayor of Hiroshima, as well as strong messages by UN Secretary General Koffi Annan, and former

U.S. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara failed to impel the diplomats to come to any agreement whatsoever.

### **Secret discussions focus around the motives of the United States, U.K., and Iran**

The diplomatic discussions were held behind closed doors -- ending in acrimonious disagreement late Friday afternoon -- but it is evident that the original nuclear weapons states (U.S., Russia, U.K., France, and China) were roundly criticized for not having lived up to their obligations under Article VI of the NPT to move decisively toward the irreversible elimination of their nuclear arsenals. In particular, the United States' relative inaction led to well-warranted charges of hypocrisy by many non-nuclear weapon states. To some, it was particularly galling that the United States and the United Kingdom were seeking to deny access to nuclear technologies to Iran at the same time as their own nuclear stockpiles remained far higher. It seemed unfair that the nuclear powers condemned Iran for attempting to process nuclear technology at the same time as they turned a blind eye to Japan's development of nuclear processing facilities. Even more disturbing for some from the Middle Eastern bloc (particularly Egypt) was the United States' implicit support of Israel's retention of its own nuclear stockpile (its 'bomb-in-the-basement'). Proposals for a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East were met with disinterest or opposition by mid-level American diplomats, and high-level U.S. diplomats, like Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice chose not to attend the conference.

### **Prior work of the Canadian government and various organizations comes to naught**

In preparation for this year's Review Conference, the Canadian government and many organizations and individuals around the world worked to prepare lengthy reports and detailed suggestions. For example, last spring the Middle Powers Initiative and Pugwash Canada sponsored a roundtable for Canadian officials and NGO representatives which recommended building bridges between the member states of NATO and those of the 'New Agenda Coalition' to strengthen the 'moderate middle' of the nuclear debate. We discussed building bridges between the nuclear-weapon states and the non-nuclear-weapon states to open the road to substantive progress on disarmament and non-proliferation. The paper was circulated worldwide and used to prepare many policy-makers, politicians, and journalists for the substantive discussions that were expected at the NPT Review Conference. But the Conference itself was spent in endless debate about procedural issues. Consequently, delegates from NGOs around the world had plenty of time on their hands to network in the basement of the UN headquarters, and calls for more radical action can probably be expected in the future.

## **The root cause of the conference's collapse**

It was hoped that a month of discussions at the UN would produce solid recommendations and a substantive final document. But the conference was simply adjourned with no final report, chairman's summary or even minimal public details about the sources of the conflict. When asked on Friday what the fundamental cause of the failure was, the chair of the conference said, "I think you can write several books on that." Most of the meetings were held behind closed doors so it is difficult to ascertain what, exactly, happened. But it seems clear that the most fundamental problem at the heart of all the procedural wrangling was the United States' approach to the relative weight that should be given to disarmament and non-proliferation. The Bush administration refused to countenance that the treaty's chief priority should be disarmament, as promised under Article VI by the nuclear powers and previously agreed upon by the Clinton government. The previous Clinton administration had promised to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, reduce U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, refrain from testing, and halt the production of weapons-grade nuclear materials. These commitments were included in the final documents of the previous 1995 and 2000 Review Conferences in what became known as "the 13 steps" -- specific actions the nuclear powers agreed to as part of their disarmament commitments under the NPT. Indeed, the 13 steps included "an unequivocal undertaking by the Nuclear Weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals." Apparently, the Bush administration sought to break free of these promises by denying their importance.

Instead American diplomats obfuscated by insisting upon focusing on proliferation threats by rogue states such as North Korea and Iran. U.S. officials argued that counter-proliferation was key while many others (including Canadian diplomats) argued that the U.S. and the other Nuclear Weapon States were at fault for not honouring their NPT obligations to disarm. In fact, U.S. administration officials said in interviews reported in the New York Times on Friday that they had given up hope several weeks ago that the meeting would accomplish anything, and they defended their decision not to send Secretary Rice to press Mr. Bush's agenda. Instead, the American representative, Jackie W. Sanders, said the United States wanted to continue the discussion "in other fora," without describing when or where. As Canada's Ambassador Paul Meyer summed up, "We have seen precious time that might have been devoted to exchanges on substance and the development of common ground squandered by procedural brinkmanship."

## **Many efforts to develop common ground and build bridges are stymied**

Just prior to the Conference, a 'bridge' on the long road to nuclear disarmament was built when eight NATO States supported a New Agenda Coalition resolution at the UN calling for more speed in implementing commitments to the NPT. The bridge gained extra strength when Japan and South Korea joined with the NATO 8 -- Belgium, Canada, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway and Turkey. It was hoped these states, along with the New Agenda countries -- Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden -- would form an impressive centre in the nuclear weapons debate and could play a determining role in the outcome of the 2005 NPT Review Conference. What happened?

It is too early to say whether the New Agenda Coalition and the Middle Powers Initiative played any significant role. Whilst it was true that seven NATO states joined with Canada, which for two years had stood alone in NATO in supporting the New Agenda resolution, the fact that important NATO players such as Germany, Norway, The Netherlands and Belgium took a more pro-active stance seems to have had little, if any impact on American officials. The message these countries tried to send to the Nuclear Weapons States (especially the U.S.) to take more significant steps to fulfill commitments they already made to the NPT seems to have utterly failed.

### **Working toward nuclear disarmament -- despite the Bush administration's recalcitrance**

It is now up to the friends and allies of the United States -- who live in open democracies -- to steadfastly question whether the Great Powers' enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons are necessary. It may be that the diplomatic problems at the NPT Review Conference could be tackled next year at an unofficial conference sponsored by Canada that focuses on striking a 'balance.' We could focus on issues concerning 'vertical' proliferation -- which relate to Article VI and promises to decrease, rather than increase the numbers of weapons of the Nuclear Weapons States. Plus we could wrestle with issues surrounding 'horizontal' proliferation -- which revolve around handling the concerns of countries, like the U.S. and France, about possible Iranian or North Korean plans to acquire or develop nuclear weapons. It may be that the 13 Steps need to be entirely jettisoned in favour of smaller stepping stones toward nuclear disarmament, at least until the current American administration changes. But the most pressing problem we need to tackle at such a global conference, possibly in Ottawa, relates to the Great Powers' threats to possibly resort to pre-emptive nuclear war rather than rely on minimal deterrence. Instead of moving toward

nuclear disarmament -- and eventual nuclear abolition -- they are drastically decreasing global security.

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