

# The challenge of sustaining disarmament momentum

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A combination of factors has brought the idea of eliminating nuclear weapons back onto the international security agenda. The realization that the cold war constraints are long gone; that the proliferation of nuclear technology is occurring rapidly; and that a catastrophic nuclear terrorist attack could be perpetrated have made a nuclear-weapon-free world appealing to many political leaders, including US President Barack Obama. This project, however, is daunting even in its infancy—a reminder that, in the words of British historian Michael Howard, “the nuclear dragon may be sleeping, but it is certainly not dead” (Howard, “Are We at War?” *Survival*, 2008).

While there have been recent successes and many opportunities on which to build, sustaining disarmament momentum over the long term will be challenging. Ultimately, success is dependent on bringing all nuclear-armed states into the fold. It also requires successful resolution of current proliferation crises, such as those involving Iran and North Korea; significant strengthening of the nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear security regimes, including bringing India, Israel and Pakistan into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; and reaching international consensus over the idea that sensitive enrichment and reprocessing technologies should be restricted. These challenges are immense and could stall or even halt disarmament momentum. That is why we argue in our new book that the nuclear dragon may not be sleeping at all, but resting, with one eye open. (Ogilvie-White and Santoro, *Slaying the Nuclear Dragon: Disarmament Dynamics in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Georgia Press, 2012).

## Continuing belief in nuclear deterrence

The most serious obstacle to nuclear disarmament is the persistent belief in many states that nuclear deterrence works and is still necessary. The roles and numbers of nuclear weapons are declining in some states, but they continue to be regarded as having value. The United States and the United Kingdom have made clear that while nuclear weapons now play a reduced role in their security policies, they still serve an important purpose and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Both countries regard the retention of their nuclear capabilities as a strategic responsibility to their own populations and those of their allies.

Belief in nuclear deterrence is also strong in the other nuclear-armed states, where a lack of disarmament leadership (and in the case of China, India and Pakistan, nuclear expansion) makes their commitment to nuclear

weapons appear entrenched. France is blunt in its statements on the value of nuclear deterrence, with French President Nicolas Sarkozy informing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in October 2010 that France “is not going to give up on its nuclear deterrent, whether or not this will disappoint you.” Moscow and Beijing are less blunt, but the former is modernizing its nuclear-weapon systems, and although the latter adheres to a declaratory policy of “defensive deterrence,” it is expanding and enhancing its small nuclear arsenal. There are also growing doubts over the seriousness of China’s no-first-use pledge.

These developments are contributing to proliferation pressures, as India aspires to strategic parity with China and Pakistan aspires to strategic parity with India. Despite voicing support for the Obama administration’s disarmament agenda, strategic momentum in these two south Asian states—and Israel—is moving away from disarmament, with all three nuclear establishments working to achieve survivable second-strike arsenals.

## The status and prestige attached to nuclear weapons

The development of nuclear weapons has long been associated with status and prestige. Although decision-makers in the United Kingdom now recognize that nuclear-weapon possession comes with significant diplomatic costs, this knowledge has not undermined the belief that Trident enhances the United Kingdom’s influence, justifying an expensive replacement programme. Prestige is also a major factor in the nuclear-weapon retention and/or development of other nuclear-armed states and nuclear-weapon aspirants. In the future, prestige factors could create proliferation pressures among nuclear threshold states such as Brazil and among states pursuing nuclear-energy programmes, such as Egypt and Vietnam.

Challenging the prestige value of nuclear weapons has been a goal of many non-nuclear-weapon states, including New Zealand, but their advocacy efforts have had a limited impact. In some countries, domestic support for the retention of nuclear weapons remains strong. In the United States, for example, even though the current administration has declared support for a nuclear-weapons-free world, there is strong domestic opposition to the Comprehensive Test-Ban-Treaty and calls from some quarters for comprehensive nuclear warhead modernization.

## Doubts about the disarmament agenda

Adding to these difficulties, there is scepticism among key states over the motivations behind the current Western-led disarmament drive. This is the case in Russia and China, where there are questions about whether it is motivated by a desire to weaken the nuclear-weapon capabilities of adversaries and strengthen the US conventional advantage. These doubts are likely to become a serious obstacle to nuclear disarmament if/when a follow-on treaty to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty is negotiated. A likely scenario is that Russia will insist that further negotiations are contingent on multilateral efforts to reduce nuclear weapons stocks, knowing that further reductions will become complicated by the inclusion of other nuclear-weapon states in the process, notably China.

Concerns over growing US conventional superiority may also be encouraging key states to swim harder and faster against the disarmament current, by either quietly or overtly developing, expanding, or enhancing their nuclear, biological, and chemical-weapons to serve as strategic equalizers. This dynamic could be one of the negative unintended consequences of the current nuclear disarmament momentum. Some states are looking to unconventional weapons to enhance their position relative to US superiority in conventional weapons, with potential knock-on effects on neighbours and regional rivals. The expansion of fuel-cycle technologies is thus a genuine concern, because the enriched uranium and reprocessed plutonium used for generating nuclear energy can also be used to develop nuclear weapons capabilities. The indigenous production of these sensitive materials thus poses a serious proliferation risk, especially where regional disputes remain unresolved and cooperative security mechanisms are weak.

Suspicious about the motivations driving the current nuclear disarmament leadership are not limited to concerns about US conventional superiority. Some states see a broader Western-dominated security agenda, which is transforming the institutions of global governance and challenging the legitimacy of states not conforming to international rules and norms. In the nuclear non-proliferation regime in particular, all states are being asked to sign up to an array of intrusive measures, which are regarded by some developing states as undermining their national sovereignty and their right to unfettered technological development. Resistance to this dynamic increased during the George W. Bush administration and has failed to dissipate since. Periodic episodes of intensified nuclear defiance by Iran and North Korea and the clandestine nuclear activities of a few others may be an indication that this resistance is growing.

Resentment over Western-dominated security agendas and questions over what is driving them are also generating scepticism over the current nuclear disarmament agenda among developing states more generally. South Africa, for example—a state that dismantled its nuclear weapons and

is theoretically in a position to demonstrate disarmament leadership—has retreated towards harder-line positions on non-proliferation and disarmament, convinced that Obama's agenda is not genuine. This is significant, because (along with Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and Sweden) South Africa is a member of the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), a group of developed and developing states that work together in the United Nations to promote a balanced approach to dealing with nuclear challenges. Overcoming this wariness is not easy because it is linked to numerous issues, including long-standing accusations that Western states are promoting a regime of technology denial at the expense of the developing world.

## Regional conflicts

Further complicating matters, there is scepticism over whether there is genuinely a connection between disarmament and non-proliferation. This scepticism is especially strong in France, where decision-makers are not convinced that global nuclear disarmament momentum will help alleviate proliferation challenges in the Middle East, South Asia and Northeast Asia, where nuclear policies are tied to complex and long-running regional disputes. But few, if any, of those driving the current disarmament agenda are under the illusion that - alone - it can eliminate proliferation dynamics in the most volatile regions. Rather, it is widely recognized that the focus must be on addressing the underlying causes of disaffection, defiance, and regional instability, via bilateral and multilateral initiatives in which nuclear proliferation and disarmament are among the many issues on the table. The regional initiatives that have been launched, such as the troubled Six-Party Talks process over North Korea's nuclear programme, demonstrate that resolving multiple, inter-related disputes simultaneously is a fraught, long-term undertaking that requires patience, resilience, and determination. The problem is that in the meantime regional instabilities could undermine the broader disarmament push, and may even be used by nuclear-armed states to justify stepping back from their disarmament commitments. The NAC has an important role to play to try to prevent this happening, but that role is made more difficult by divisions among some of its members over the wisdom and sincerity of current non-proliferation and disarmament leadership.

## Sustaining disarmament momentum: New Zealand's role

New Zealand has played a crucial role in keeping disarmament debates alive in international forums, even when the prospects for progress have been bleak. But at a time when efforts to sustain disarmament momentum are more important than ever, cuts in New Zealand's already stretched diplomatic resources and uncertainties over shifting international power dynamics could result in less proactive advocacy in future. This would be unfortunate because the period since Obama declared US support for a nuclear-weapon-free world has exposed the difficulties of

achieving this goal more starkly than ever before. It thus requires steadfast commitment from the advocacy states, including New Zealand, to help keep momentum from dissipating.

One way for New Zealand to help sustain current momentum would be to invest more of its diplomatic capital where it could have the greatest short-term impact: by engaging the nuclear threshold states and states that are embarking on nuclear-energy programmes. These states could help stall or accelerate nuclear disarmament, depending on their future nuclear activities and diplomacy.

For example, there are proliferation concerns over Brazil's lack of transparency at the Resende nuclear facility, its rejection of the key safeguards measures, and its plans for nuclear-powered submarines. As a fellow member of the NAC, New Zealand could encourage greater nuclear transparency and restraint from Brazil. Similarly, Japan's reprocessing programme sets an unhelpful precedent in the non-proliferation regime, and the fact that Japan continues to rely on the US nuclear umbrella reinforces perceptions that nuclear weapons enhance security. Encouraging Japan to ensure that its policies help promote rather than undermine nuclear disarmament could reap rewards. Finally, New Zealand could use its strong non-proliferation credentials to help increase awareness among new nuclear-energy aspirants of the relationship between strengthening the non-proliferation regime and the prospects for achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world. Most importantly, this could include expressing New Zealand's concern over the potential expansion of enrichment and reprocessing technologies. These technologies pose very serious safety and security risks, and their development by additional states in volatile regions would seriously undermine the prospects for sustaining disarmament momentum.