



“Unequivocal Undertaking”: Rhetoric Must Now Become Reality

*IPPNW Statement on Conclusion
of 2000 NPT Review Conference*

For four weeks in April and May, the 187 state parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) met in New York for the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The parties meet every five years to review the status of international efforts to curb the spread of nuclear weapons, assess compliance by the parties with their treaty obligations, and to chart future courses of action to realize the goals of the treaty, among them the elimination of nuclear weapons.

At the conclusion of this year's NPT Review Conference, the first since the NPT was indefinitely extended in 1995, a considerably detailed final consensus document was issued by the parties to the NPT. This document, which followed long and difficult negotiations, provides an important basis for measuring the success, and/or shortcomings, of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. In our view, the Review Conference produced some modest victories for those who advocate the prompt and complete abolition of nuclear weapons. It was also, for reasons explained below, a political success for the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), a group of middle powers (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, and Sweden) seeking to advance the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world.

Deeds, not words, however, will ultimately determine whether the 2000 NPT Review Conference, and indeed the NPT itself, has succeeded in its avowed purpose. Some aspects of the final document are very encouraging. Advocates of abolition, both NGOs and states, must now use the leverage provided by the final document to push, prod and compel all NPT parties to fulfill their commitments.

We are also cautious in our appraisal of the NPT Review Conference at this stage because of an issue that loomed over the conference without being addressed directly in the final document, and that is the possible U.S. deployment of a national missile defense system (NMD). Russia, China and even many NATO allies are firmly opposed to NMD. Indeed, Russia has threatened to withdraw from all existing nuclear arms control treaties if the U.S. proceeds with deployment and has made its recent ratification of START II conditional on non-deployment. We are, therefore, mindful that any progress on non-proliferation and disarmament that may have been made in New York could be undone if U.S. President Clinton, or his successor, decides to proceed with NMD.

Enforcing compliance with Article VI of the treaty is particularly important to IPPNW. Article VI contains the core promise, the essential quid pro quo, that lies at the heart of the NPT: a promise from the nuclear states (the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France and China) to eliminate their own nuclear arsenals in exchange for the non-nuclear weapon states' pledge not to acquire nuclear weapons.

Below is a brief overview of what we consider to be the key elements of the 2000 NPT Review Conference final document.

1. Unequivocal Undertaking

Throughout much of the NPT's history the nuclear powers, especially the United States, have stated that the abolition of nuclear weapons was an "ultimate goal." These words, "ultimate goal," were used as a rhetorical shield by the nuclear weapon states against accusations that nuclear disarmament was not proceeding quickly enough. They allowed the nuclear status quo to remain in effect for three decades and had the effect of postponing, perhaps indefinitely, the principal objective of the NPT: the establishment of a world without nuclear weapons.

The word "ultimate" was dropped from the Review Conference final document to describe the goal of elimination of nuclear weapons. Instead, the final document, in referring to Article VI, speaks of "an unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals..." This is the strongest political statement on abolition by the nuclear weapon states to date. While no timetable is established, this wording narrows the "wiggle room" available to the nuclear powers, particularly the U.S., to indefinitely defer their full compliance with Article VI. The statement further asserts that "the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons." Again, however, deeds, not words, are needed to turn rhetoric into reality.

2. Preserving and Strengthening the ABM Treaty

NMD was implicitly addressed at the NPT Review Conference when the parties called in the final document, again referring to implementation of Article VI, for "preserving and strengthening the ABM Treaty." Without modifications, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty would prohibit NMD and the U.S. is seeking to negotiate such modifications with Russia. The language of the document ("preserving and strengthening") is ambiguous in that it allows Russia and the vast majority of NPT state parties to argue that the ABM Treaty must remain unchanged. Our concern, however, is that the U.S. might argue that modifying the ABM Treaty qualifies as "preserving and strengthening" -- a transparent and, in our judgment, disingenuous argument that would undermine the basis of consensus that led to the final document. Abolition advocates, and opponents of NMD, must vigorously support the majority view.

3. Nuclear Doctrines

The final document also included an unprecedented commitment toward "a diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination." This provides a basis for challenging the nuclear doctrines of the nuclear weapon states and NATO.

4. Irreversibility

Another first for the NPT was agreement on the "principle of irreversibility to apply to nuclear disarmament, nuclear and other related arms control and reduction measures." This means that once weapons are dismantled or destroyed they should not be rebuilt or replaced.

5. Increased Transparency

The final document calls, for the first time in the history of the NPT, for "increased transparency by the nuclear-weapon States with regard to their nuclear weapons capabilities and the implementation of agreements pursuant to Article VI..." Although there are no specific examples of how the nuclear weapons states are to fulfill this obligation, there is now a bona fide basis for demanding it.

6. Further Reductions of Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons

Again, for the first time, the NPT parties have explicitly called for the "further reduction of non strategic nuclear weapons, based on unilateral initiatives..." This part of the final document explicitly asserts the expectation of the parties that the nuclear weapons states will move unilaterally to reduce tactical or theater nuclear weapons. This assertion takes on particular significance in light of current NATO practice as well as Russia's new nuclear doctrine, which lowers the threshold for nuclear weapons use to deflect a conventional attack on its territory, and the potential introduction of tactical nuclear weapons into regional conflicts. Again, the language provides leverage for pushing the nuclear weapons states to act on their own to reduce non-strategic nuclear arsenals.

7. De-alerting

IPPNW, as a member of the Back from the Brink Campaign, has been advocating that the nuclear states should take a variety of measures to take their nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert. Although the final document does not explicitly call for the de-alerting of nuclear weapons now on high alert, it does call for "concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems." This is, effectively, a call for de-alerting nuclear weapons to help avoid

nuclear war by accident or miscalculation. This language provides potential leverage for abolition advocates who view de-alerting, as we do, as a high priority.

8. De-linking Nuclear and General Disarmament

The nuclear weapon states, and the U.S. in particular, have historically argued that the language of Article VI only contemplates nuclear disarmament in the context of general and complete disarmament. This interpretation has allowed the nuclear weapon states to essentially defer forever their obligation to eliminate their nuclear arsenals since general and complete international disarmament is, at best, a goal that may only be achieved in an unforeseeable future. The final document now clearly de-links nuclear disarmament from general disarmament while re-affirming "that the ultimate objective of the efforts of the States in the disarmament process is general and complete disarmament under effective international control."

9. Universality

The final document urges all states not party to the NPT (Cuba, India, Israel and Pakistan) to accede as non-nuclear weapon states "promptly and without condition." The document also explicitly states that despite their nuclear test explosions in 1998, India and Pakistan are not considered by the NPT state parties to be nuclear weapon states, and it calls upon India, Pakistan, and Israel to place their nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. The final document also calls upon India and Pakistan to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (which Israel has signed).

10. Fissile Materials Ban

The final document recognizes that fulfillment of NPT Article VI requires a "non-discriminatory, multilateral and internationally and effectively verifiable treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices..." and "regrets that negotiations have not been pursued on this issue." Progress in the Conference on Disarmament on a fissile materials cut-off treaty has been non-existent since 1995, when the NPT Review and Extension Conference recommended such negotiations.

11. Nuclear Weapons Free Zones

In several paragraphs the final document reaffirms the importance of nuclear weapon free zones in the nuclear disarmament process and urges the continued creation of such zones "around the globe."

In our view, these are among the most significant developments to arise from the 2000 NPT Review Conference. We see the final consensus document as further support for the view that abolition is a legitimate and achievable goal and that possession, use, and threatened use of nuclear weapons is, as the World Court has said, illegitimate and illegal under international law. We believe the final document provides rhetorical and political leverage for our efforts to de-alert nuclear weapons, to prevent deployment of NMD, to bring about prompt, dramatic reductions in nuclear arsenals, and, most importantly, to advance the complete elimination of nuclear weapons through negotiation and implementation of a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

At the same time, we recognize that the signing of the NPT some thirty years ago raised similar hopes that were dashed as the years passed. Nuclear disarmament has proven an elusive goal. Accordingly, we take a guardedly optimistic view of the outcome of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The NPT remains intact and the parties have evinced a commitment to try and realize its full promise. For that promise to be fulfilled, however, IPPNW and other NGOs, as well as the non-nuclear parties to the NPT must be prepared to wage a constant and energetic campaign.

The 1996 World Court Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons, which IPPNW was instrumental in securing, played a significant role in the deliberations of the 2000 NPT Review Conference and is cited in the final document as a legal basis for some of the commitments the parties have agreed to undertake with regard to nuclear disarmament. The New Agenda Coalition (NAC) countries provided critical leadership at the Review Conference in the face of nuclear weapon states' pressure on non-nuclear weapon states during the deliberations. The NAC countries were steadfastly outspoken

advocates of the need to move more quickly towards complete nuclear disarmament. IPPNW has supported the NAC directly and through the Middle Powers Initiative, which is headquartered at IPPNW's headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In summary, the 2000 NPT Review Conference produced a final document that reflects many important and favorable developments. Since the late 1980s, IPPNW has been a staunch advocate of the abolition of nuclear weapons. Our understanding of the health and environmental consequences of nuclear warfare, and our solemn obligation as physicians to protect and preserve life and health make abolition, for us, a moral imperative. Thousands of nuclear warheads remain on hair-trigger alert and tens of thousands more could be launched in hours. Just one of these weapons is capable of slaughtering millions. And explosion of just a few could have devastating and long-lasting effects on the environment, disrupt transportation and delivery of food, fuel, and medical supplies, and possibly trigger famine and mass starvation.

The NPT remains vitally important to efforts not only to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, but to achieve a nuclear weapons free world. It is now up to IPPNW, the NGO community, and sympathetic state parties to the NPT to make the abolition of nuclear weapons, the promise of the NPT, a reality.

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