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Presentation by Tom Sauer (Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium) about the desirability of nuclear disarmament

Abstract

The choice is between a nuclear weapons world (the one that we know) and a nuclear weapons free world. The former is a guarantee for more proliferation, possibly including the risk of nuclear terrorism. The latter is the only realistic endgame if we want to contain the spread of nuclear weapons. The longer the nuclear weapons states keep their nuclear arsenals, the more nuclear weapons states will show up, and the bigger the chance that nuclear weapons will be used again. That was the key passage in the Canberra Commission report (1996) and many studies thereafter (such as the Blix report, ICNND,...). This logic is also what is driving President Obama to get rid of nuclear weapons (see his speech in Prague, 5th April 2009). In fact, this logic was already recognized in the 1960's, or even before. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), still the cornerstone of the current nuclear nonproliferation regime, requires the nuclear weapon states to disarm their nuclear weapons (art.6). The NPT Review Conferences (esp. in 1995, 2000, and 2010) have clarified what "nuclear disarmament" means: nuclear elimination. Nuclear abolition is therefore also an international legal obligation. If the nuclear weapon states do not fulfill this legal obligation, they – and their allies – have no legitimacy in asking non-nuclear weapon states that are not in compliance with the NPT (like Iran) to fulfill their obligations.

Last but not least, the so-called benefits of nuclear weapons have been overblown in the past and do not weigh up against the risks of nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence does not always work. Human beings are fallible. History is plenty of political and military miscalculations. Miscalculations in a world with ten, fifteen or more nuclear weapons states should better be prevented by eliminating nuclear weapons (although a kind of post-existential nuclear deterrence will be with us for a long time).

To conclude, a rational cost-benefit analysis makes us to conclude that the best way to prevent nuclear proliferation and to improve international security is Global Zero. Of course, different conditions have to be fulfilled before reaching Zero (like universality; an intrusive verification mechanism; a sanctions regime; a different constellation of the UN Security Council; and a different collective security regime, including limiting conventional weapons and preventive doctrines. But all these conditions are in principle feasible.