

A New Bridge to Nuclear Disarmament

By Douglas Roche

A bridge on the long road to nuclear disarmament was built when eight NATO States supported a New Agenda Coalition resolution at the United Nations calling for more speed in implementing commitments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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.

These States, along with the New Agenda countries – Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden – now form an impressive and perhaps formidable center in the nuclear weapons debate and can play a determining role in the outcome of the 2005 NPT Review Conference.

The bridge they have formed links the nuclear weapons States, which are entrenching nuclear weapons in their military doctrines, and the Non-Aligned Movement, which wants immediate negotiations on a time-bound program for nuclear disarmament.

It is hard to know what to call this new collection of important States in the center. It is certainly not an entity. To be called a working

partnership, it will at least have to pursue a common goal. And it is by no means certain that the tensions within the center can be contained.

Nonetheless, the strategy adopted by the New Agenda Coalition to make its annual resolution at the U.N. First Committee more attractive particularly to the NATO and like-minded States – and thus shore up the moderate middle in the nuclear weapons debate – is working.

Although the bridge needs strengthening, it is firm enough for the centrist States to exert leverage on the nuclear weapons States to take minimum steps to save the NPT in 2005.

These steps are spelled out in the New Agenda resolution. It starts out by expressing “grave concern” at the danger to humanity posed by the possible use of nuclear weapons, and reminds nuclear weapons States of their 2000 “unequivocal undertaking” to the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. It then calls on “all States” to fully comply with their nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation commitments and “not to act in any way that may be detrimental to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation or that may lead to a new nuclear arms race.”

The resolution identifies priorities for action: universal adherence to the NPT and the early entry-into-force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons and non-development of new types of nuclear weapons; negotiation of an effectively

verifiable fissile material cut-off treaty; establishment of a subsidiary body to deal with nuclear disarmament at the Conference on Disarmament; and compliance with principles of irreversibility and transparency and verification capability.

The resolution was adopted by a vote of 135 States in favour, 5 against and 25 abstentions. This was a considerable gain over the 121-6-38 vote for the New Agenda's much more extensive resolution last year.

China voted for the resolution and Russia abstained. The three Western nuclear weapons States, the U.S., the U.K. and France, all voted no, along with Israel and Latvia. Not able to object to what was in the resolution, the Western NWS said their "no" was based on what was not in it, namely recognition that the Moscow Treaty "commits the United States and Russia to reduce their nuclear arsenals by several thousand warheads over the next decade." Nonetheless, the Western NWS looked forward to "ongoing dialogue" at the NPT 2005 Conference.

The U.S. took an aggressive stance against the resolution, both in meetings at the U.N. and in demarches in capitals. Some NATO States were obviously intimidated, but the presumed NATO solidarity was cracked when seven NATO States joined with Canada, which for two years had stood alone in NATO in supporting the New Agenda resolution. The fact that such important NATO players as Germany, Norway, The Netherlands and

Belgium have also now taken a pro-active stance indicates that they wanted to send a message to the U.S. to take more significant steps to fulfilling commitments already made to the NPT.

Japan, which annually offers its own resolution, “A Path to the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons,” suddenly decided to support the New Agenda resolution, in order, as the government explained, to engender a “favourable atmosphere for nuclear disarmament.” This was a statesmanlike step, especially since the New Agenda countries failed to reciprocate when they abstained on Japan’s resolution. To parse the minute differences between the New Agenda’s and Japan’s resolutions is to engage in the technical games that experts play that result in diplomatic paralysis and public apathy.

The situation the NPT finds itself in is so serious and the threat of nuclear terrorism so real that governments need to put aside their quarrels and power plays and take meaningful steps to ensure that the NPT will not be lost to the world through erosion.

The centrist States have shown that they can cooperate in at least a basic manner to vote together on a program of meaningful action. They will now have to find ways of effectively negotiating with the NWS at the 2005 conference. They can do this provided they retain a confidence that the

bridge they have built can hold and trust one another in the forthcoming NPT deliberations.

Here the role of civil society should be noted. Like the States within the NPT, civil society is itself composed of groups with different viewpoints about how to achieve elimination. Some groups, understandably impatient, want fast action. But the resistance of the Western NWS, particularly the U.S., is so strong that demands for immediate comprehensive negotiations run up against a brick wall.

Intermediate gains, such as the steps outlined in the New Agenda resolution, would go a long way in moving the international community down the path to nuclear disarmament. The New Agenda strategy of building up the center for moderate, realistic achievements deserves the full-fledged support of civil society.

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