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# The Role of International Institutions in the Disarmament Process

## The Value of Working Backward From the Solution

With this paper, George Perkovich and James Acton provide immensely valuable intellectual input into the analysis of what is, in my opinion, the most daunting problem of humanity: the continuing existence of nuclear weapons. They have done it by raising the very hard questions inherent to this challenge but without claiming to have the answers. This may be too modest a position for, in fact, the authors' explorations more than hint at possible solutions to some of the complex dilemmas involved in the problem.

I find their general approach—identifying and exploring the challenges to be overcome to achieve complete abolition of nuclear weapons—particularly attractive. In fact, it coincides with the way in which my own institution has tried to stimulate discussion of the subject among experts in this field, most recently at a conference on abolition in February 2008.[1]

In motivating participants, we explained that the approach at our conference would be to think not about how to go about the process of getting rid of nuclear weapons beginning from today's conditions, though indeed we have great respect for that method. Instead, we asked them to think about what would be the security and geopolitical conditions that would have to be met in the end for this process to actually occur—when countries decide it is no longer necessary to possess nuclear weapons—and then work backward to the present. We asked them to imagine, first,

that disarmament had already taken place and then to envision the final construction of an international regime that would guarantee a world without nuclear weapons and what it would look like. Our aim was to provoke inquiries not only about the international covenants and enforcing institutions that would be required in such a world, but also about the specific conditions that would have to be fulfilled from the perspective of every one of the present and potential nuclear powers.

In fact, given our objective, had this Adelphi Paper been available at the time of the conference, I would have encouraged our participants to address the arguments expressed in it. The paper offers both a comprehensive, pertinent agenda for discussion and concrete ideas to be subjected to deeper analysis. In this respect, the authors' suggestion to form an international consortium of research institutes to explore solutions for the multiple problems that the elimination of nuclear weapons entails goes well beyond an exhortation; they are facilitating adoption of this idea by providing an ambitious prospectus and solid terms of reference for such a consortium's undertakings.

It is gratifying that the authors have not swept thorny issues under the rug, as frequently happens with high-level panel reports that, for the sake of political balance and correctness, sink into ambiguities or simply refrain from addressing tough questions. Perkovich and Acton tell it like it is when they dissect the current strategic interests and attitudes of the nuclear-armed states; point to the necessity of solving long-standing regional conflicts; deconstruct the complexities of developing robust systems of verification and safeguards; discuss the tension that exists between the objectives of nuclear disarmament and the expansion of nuclear energy; and depict the enormous challenges of enforcement.

Their analysis makes clear that the abolition of nuclear weapons would be the most ambitious global public good ever undertaken and achieved by the international community. Think of every difficult issue that could possibly be confronted in the provision of any global public good, and all of them will be encountered along the road toward abolition. Indeed, every one of the following problems are acute barriers to getting to zero nuclear weapons: preserving sovereignty (countries' reluctance to accept international binding rules and monitoring of their own compliance with agreements); differing preferences (the fact that countries have different strategic, economic, and political stakes in specific solutions to global problems); free riding (the incentive for every party to wait until the others provide a solution and then enjoy it); the problem of the weakest link (that a solution can only be effective if every country fully complies with

a common approach); and summation (where the successful solution of a global problem is the sum of the individual efforts of all the separate participants).[2]

## Fulfilling the IAEA's Potential

Perkovich and Acton clearly delineate the kind of exceptional collective action and surrender of traditional national sovereignty to which countries would have to commit if abolition is to be achieved. Their argument implies that an unprecedented multilateral order would need to be put in place. To do so, historically unique international cooperation and political willingness would be required, as well as substantial reinforcement of some institutions and radical reform of others. An obvious example of the former is the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). As this Adelphi Paper repeatedly shows, much could be done by the IAEA in a world truly determined to eliminate nuclear weapons. The same conclusion was reached in a recent report on the IAEA to 2020 and beyond.[3]

That report envisions a new global nuclear order with increased collective action and partnership, expanded transparency, increasingly effective standards for safety and security worldwide, new nonproliferation measures, and progressive steps to reduce and ultimately eliminate nuclear weapons. The report describes a reinvigorated order that allows for nuclear technologies that make rapidly growing contributions to human well-being while not contributing to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It calls for safe and secure expansion of nuclear energy in countries that seek it, helping to power a growing global economy while mitigating the threat of climate change; expansion of the role of nuclear technologies in saving lives, growing crops, and providing jobs in the developing world; reduction in the dangers of nuclear accidents and nuclear terrorism; and provision of a path toward dramatically reduced dangers to humanity from nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation.

The report appreciates that the IAEA has a strong role to play in nuclear safeguards, safety, and security and in maximizing the contributions of nuclear technologies to human well-being while minimizing the risks. And yet what the commission found is that despite its admirable record, the IAEA is underfunded and understaffed. The agency has been an extraordinary bargain considering the low cost at which it carries out responsibilities of immense value to humanity. The IAEA's responsibilities have already increased dramatically, and the likely growth and spread of nuclear energy will further increase demands on the agency. Without additional and reliable funding to replace current unpredictable and voluntary

arrangements, the IAEA will not be able to carry out numerous essential functions, including independently analyzing safeguards samples; combating nuclear terrorism and ensuring the safety of nuclear power plants and other nuclear facilities; providing adequate and prompt international coordination and assistance in the event of a nuclear accident or terrorist act involving nuclear material; ensuring that the many new countries considering introducing nuclear power programs do so in a carefully planned, safe, and secure manner; responding to pressing global crises in food security, health, and the availability of drinking water through the use of nuclear technology; and meeting, in a timely manner, urgent requests relating to verification of non-proliferation.

No robust systems of nuclear safety, security, and safeguards and effective multilateral verification consistent with zero nuclear weapons could be possible without a strengthened IAEA that has adequate authority, resources, personnel, and technology. Such an organization is absolutely essential to reinforce the global nuclear order for peace and prosperity. The cost of providing these would be insignificant compared with the benefits to be gained—or with the costs and risks of failure to act.

### The Challenge of Security Council Reform

As much as substantial reform of some multilateral institutions like the IAEA is needed to build a new nuclear order, radical reform is warranted in other institutions to enforce such an order. The authors rightly point out that there would be hardly any alternative to the UN Security Council to enforce a regime of abolished nuclear weapons. Their analysis also shows, however, that the Security Council, if it were to continue as it has functioned until now, would be far from adequate. A Security Council that becomes deadlocked more frequently than not can hardly serve as an effective enforcement body or be a guarantor of disarmament. To perform this job adequately would require radical reform of the Security Council—and let us keep in mind that not even limited reform has been possible in more than forty years.

More precisely, Perkovich and Acton claim, and rightly so, that the issue of the veto would need to be addressed. Unlike the case of other thorny issues for which they suggest possible avenues toward a solution, on this challenge they do not. Probably they shy away from going deeper into the topic because they know that veto reform was not even attempted during recent reform efforts, leaving only Security Council enlargement as the focal point of the (failed) 2005 reform negotiations and all previous negotiations.

In some sense it is fortunate that past Security Council reform attempts that focused solely on enlargement have not gone forward. There is no obvious reason why an enlarged Security Council would inherently be more functional than the present one. Achieving consensus in a larger Security Council, *ceteris paribus*, would conceivably become harder, and therefore the probability of deadlock would become higher. Some have argued that decisions by a larger, and consequently more representative, Security Council would acquire a higher degree of legitimacy. That is true, but it is also irrelevant if the Security Council consistently failed to agree on crucial issues. Furthermore, the success of partial reform—limited to enlargement—would probably make it even harder to undertake comprehensive reform later on.

Proponents of reform that entails enlargement alone should pay serious attention to the unpleasant verdict of bargaining theory: The veto gives its possessor lofty power; no veto proffers nil or very little power. It is for this reason that I am convinced that failure to accomplish veto reform would leave the abolition process in a dead end. Therefore, on the road toward abolition, the power of the Security Council veto must be moderated and eventually eliminated altogether. Over time, the veto-based mechanism should be replaced by a system of weighted voting in which a supermajority would be required for the most important decisions, including those of enforcing nuclear disarmament, and where each member's weight in the Security Council would be determined as a function of variables such as GDP and military capacity.

The authors are right in stressing the indispensability of a process that, once in motion, is capable of making tangible progress on the two fronts of disarmament and non-proliferation. I question their argument, however, that the only way to solve the problem of "who goes first" is to move on both fronts simultaneously. On the contrary, I believe that the pursuit of simultaneous movement risks paralysis.

It is in the global public good nature of nuclear weapons abolition that the process must be ignited by a rather limited number of relevant players willing to exercise catalytic leadership and action. And although the biggest non–nuclear-weapon states should soon come on board, it is up to a subset of the nuclear powers to trigger the remobilization of the system. The United States and Russia have not only the capacity but also a special responsibility to play this role. The nuclear giants have the responsibility to move first once again toward nuclear disarmament, by putting forward initiatives for enhancing cooperation and committing resources. And when this happens, international leadership will emerge, not as an

imposition but as a result of the assumption of responsibility. With this type of leadership, the United States and Russia could then persuade the other nuclear powers to join them and make practically unavoidable the engagement of the non–nuclear-weapon states in the construction of the new nuclear order that Perkovich and Acton have so ably depicted.

For example, a number of non–nuclear-weapon states are now reluctant to undertake further non-proliferation commitments such as the adoption of the Additional Protocol, and certainly not safeguard obligations going well beyond this, as proposed in the report "Reinforcing the Global Nuclear Order for Peace and Prosperity: The Role of the IAEA to 2020 and Beyond." This position should be expected to change if the nuclear-weapon states move seriously toward disarmament. This need not be an assumption or a guess; strengthening safeguards could be negotiated through the NPT review process. For that to happen, however, the United States and Russia must first take new steps to bolster confidence that nuclear disarmament is not a false promise.

## Notes

[1] "Nuclear Weapons—The Greatest Peril to Civilization: A Conference to Imagine Our World Without Them," Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, Yale University, February 21–22, 2008, http://www.ycsg.yale.edu/activities/conferences.html.

[2] The nature of these barriers to solving global problems are discussed in *Meeting Global Challenges: International Cooperation in the National Interest*, the 2006 Final Report of the International Task Force on Global Public Goods, Stockholm, which I co-chaired.

[3] *Reinforcing the Global Nuclear Order for Peace and Prosperity: The Role of the IAEA to 2020 and Beyond*, report prepared by an independent Commission, which I chaired, at the request of the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, May 2008, http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/2008/2020report.html.