



Ask the Disarmament Guru

Dear Disarmament Guru

I'm a non-proliferation official in the foreign ministry of a nuclear-weapon state (I'd prefer not to say which one). At recent multilateral meetings, we and our allies have been criticising the proposal for a treaty banning nuclear weapons. We say that a ban treaty will not get rid of nuclear weapons. But then we say that a ban treaty will risk creating a very unstable security environment, which suggests that a ban *will* get rid of nuclear weapons, and that's what will be destabilising, and it's bad - even though we made an unequivocal undertaking to get rid of them - because we need the stability provided by nuclear weapons to achieve our goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. To tell the truth, we're in a bit of a muddle here. What should we do?

- Accumulating Doubts And Muddles

Dear ADAM

Breathe, relax and set your troubled mind at ease. It is true that your rhetoric is a tad incoherent, but fortunately nobody is paying much attention. I would suggest that you continue doing nothing. It has worked very well for you so far. Why risk changing anything? The Conference on Disarmament is admirably suited to your purposes. And every five years you can do nothing at the NPT review conference too. It would be different if there were any imminent prospect of non-nuclear-weapon states actually going ahead to negotiate a ban treaty, but given the lack of vision and intestinal fortitude on display in recent months, it seems you are pretty safe for the time being.

Peace and consensus be upon you.

The Guru

Dear Disarmament Guru

How should we take the important security dimensions of nuclear weapons into account, and how can we work to create the security conditions necessary for real progress on nuclear disarmament?

- A. F. Weasel

Dear A. F.

I don't know what you have been smoking, my child, but it seems to be potent. Allow me humbly to suggest that you cut down a little, or at least stop inhaling. The important security dimensions of nuclear weapons have been taken into account right from the beginning. It was the important security dimensions of nuclear weapons that levelled the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 70 years ago. Even in our current age of social media, online pornography and smartphones, I do not believe that anyone has lost sight of the important security dimensions of nuclear weapons.

But remember: all those enlightened nations that joined the NPT decided - having taken these important security dimensions fully into account - that nuclear weapons must be eliminated all the same. In their wisdom, these nations joined the NPT even though Article 6 of that holy text does not make its provisions subject to security conditions or anything else.

It is curious and revealing that your question is never asked of that other great pillar of the NPT: non-proliferation. Try it now: close your eyes, breathe deeply, and ask loudly and clearly: "How can we work to create the security conditions

necessary to stop states from wanting to acquire nuclear weapons?" People are staring at you, no? Perhaps you should have done this exercise in private. But the lesson is clear: like non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament is an obligation, regardless of security conditions. If you truly believe otherwise, perhaps it is time for you to take the honest path and leave the NPT.

Peace and consensus be upon you.

The Guru

Dear Disarmament Guru

I am disappointed and sad that the humanitarian consequences initiative has not been a unifying force for disarmament. We had high hopes, but the nuclear-armed states and their allies seem to have been driven further away, and everything is polarised. Surely we can only make progress if we build bridges, find common ground, and pursue an inclusive approach that engages the nuclear-armed states. Don't both sides need to compromise, not just the P5 and their allies?

- Not Persuaded Disarmament is Impossible

Dear NPDI

Your gentle and conciliatory spirit makes me weep. Alas, so does your cluelessness. I am sorry to be harsh, my child, but there is no other way to say this: you are a gullible fool. Let me take you by the hand for a contemplative walk from your rainbow hall of dreams back down to the dismal basement of reality. Where shall we begin? Perhaps with this recent quote from an esteemed ambassador of Switzerland: "it would be helpful if the P5 were to come up at the next meeting with a clear commitment on going forward on the implementation of these commitments". This is an unwittingly clear illumination of what "common ground" would mean in nuclear disarmament

discussions: a commitment to meet commitments. And no doubt this would be followed by a commitment to meet commitments to meet commitments, and so on, in an infinite series of recursive procrastination (or resolutions all the way down, as the cosmologists might say).

The trouble is that the bridges were built, the common ground found, and the compromises made long ago. The nuclear-armed states have been included and engaged for decades. There is no problem with what has been agreed; the problem is that what has been agreed has not been done. What then is the point in building the bridges, finding the common ground, and making the compromises all over again?

While you are pondering that, my child, let us turn to the humanitarian consequences initiative. I am afraid that you are confused about the purpose of this initiative. It is not to unify the international community, but rather to evaluate the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The process has shown that the impact is too great to bear, and will affect all states, large and small, north and south, regardless of their security situation, or whether they have nuclear weapons. It would certainly be most welcome if this conclusion brought the international community together and resulted in united action. But the conclusion holds even if no state acts upon it. It is absolute, objective and clear. It is the solid platform upon which any state can stand and declare: "nuclear weapons must be prohibited now, and we are ready to negotiate a ban treaty with whoever will join us".

You cannot control what other states will do. You can only decide for yourself: will you stand on the platform of prohibition, or return to chasing rainbows?

Peace and consensus be upon you.

The Guru

Questions about nuclear disarmament?
Write to guru@wildfire-v.org