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Open-ended Working Group to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons

Geneva 2013

Item 5 of the agenda

Develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons

Summary¹

Discussions by the Moderator² of Panel II entitled “towards a world free of nuclear weapons”

Submitted by the Chairperson

1. The panel provided a useful discussion on the nature of nuclear-weapon-free zones, the positive role zones have played and continue to play, and some of their challenges. Looking ahead, there was also focus on the potential of zones (and elsewhere the nuclear-weapons-free status of certain States) in galvanizing further efforts toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

2. One of the panellists, Ms. Gaukhar Muchadskova, Senior Research Associate at the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, summed up the situation well by suggesting that zones were a “feel-good story” but with some caveats and challenges. The clearest “feel-good” elements were their practical effect in limiting where nuclear weapons could be stationed and developed, as well as placing limitations on nuclear umbrellas within relevant zones. Various obligations of zone treaties extended the scope of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (such as prohibitions against dumping of radioactive wastes) or addressed perceived ambiguities with existing obligations (such as the question of stationing under Article I of the NPT).

¹ These reflections are offered in a personal capacity and have no official status.

² Mr. Paul Wilson, Deputy Permanent Representative of Australia to the Conference on Disarmament.

3. Among caveats expressed and questions raised during the discussions were whether in the short term, zones had reached their physical limit. Proposals (of significantly varying degrees of current activity) for zones in the Middle East, the Arctic, North-East Asia and South Asia remained proposals. Some expressed concern about the perceived difficulty of extracting negative security assurance from the NPT nuclear-weapons States through zones. A couple of interveners also questioned the historic role of zones as disarmament measures in the strictest sense of that term, as opposed to non-proliferation measures.
4. However, on the first two issues, a number of interventions reflected the broad view that the positive historical and contemporary record of zones were such that further zones could make a significant contribution to advancing efforts regionally or globally toward a world without nuclear weapons and that the relationship between zones and the NPT nuclear-weapon States remained an important element in the development of existing zones.
5. On that last point, the historical reflections of the two panellists – Ms. Gioconda Ubeda, Ambassador, Secretary-General of OPANAL and Ms Muchadskova – as well as those of other participants on the political contexts in which certain zone treaties were developed, highlighted a different perspective. As well as reinforcing NPT obligations and variously moving beyond the scope of the NPT within a framework of good neighbourliness, the development of some zones had been specifically driven by disarmament concerns of relevant regions. Moreover, in all existing zones, nuclear-weapons programmes had previously been considered actively or in some cases even initiated.
6. The point taken by the Moderator from this part of the discussion was not semantic. If zones were consigned merely to non-proliferation concepts in either an historical or a contemporary context, there was a risk that their potential as vehicles for future disarmament might be curtailed. It was clear from Ms. Ubeda's interventions a driving notion of a regional community galvanized over time, focused on a collective disarmament goal, regional as well as international in its ambition, and consciously creating something which was part of a linked-up global security architecture.
7. This notion of linking up, of bridging was highlighted throughout the discussion. A number of those who intervened recognized that the differences in obligations and institutional arrangements between zones created the problems for coalescence of efforts. But there was not a sense that this was insurmountable. Some recalled the meetings of zones and Mongolia which coincided with NPT Review Conferences and asked whether more could be made of those meetings. Some also asked whether States within particular zones should collaborate more closely during NPT meetings themselves. Other ideas for enhancing cooperation and collaboration between relevant regions included creating similar institutions within zones and having countries such as Mongolia and those with relevant constitutional laws (such as Austria) more actively seek their own bridge-building efforts.
8. In conclusion, the Moderator suggested that it would be useful if the Open-ended Working Group could consider the value and means of further enhancing and exploiting substantive cooperation and collaboration between existing zones. The positive practical effect of zones was being realized regionally; their potential for positive political effect globally could still be realized and recommendations pointing in that direction might be of use.
