

Comments on Tariq Rauf's article "Postponement of the 2020 NPT Review Conference: Possible Implications"
By Angela Kane, May 2020

Tariq Rauf's article is divided into five sections, each of them looking at different aspects of the postponement: (i) the atmospherics, (ii) prospects for consensus final document, (iii) challenges and opportunities of delay, (iv) unintended opportunities, and (v) specific activities that could be undertaken.

The section on atmospherics gives a useful overview of the current situation, and I agree that the geopolitical changes that have occurred over the last years, coupled with the abrogation of arms control treaties and increasing military expenditures have been further aggravated by the deterioration in the polite discourse in multilateral disarmament bodies and now by the existence of a pandemic which prevents us from conducting diplomatic business as we know it. If the NPT Review Conference takes place in January 2021, it is highly unlikely that this political climate will have undergone much improvement; in fact, the US presidential election to take place in November – and the fight for political grandstanding - this year will only deepen the fissures that are already so evident.

A rather radical proposal is the postponement of the review conference to 2022, but upon closer examination, Tariq's suggestion has a lot of appeal. The conference could take place in the time slot reserved for the first preparatory conference in Vienna, Covid-19 would hopefully be behind us, and there would be more clarity concerning the US administration and the fate of the remaining arms control treaties.

Tariq assesses the outlook for a consensus final document as bleak – an assessment I fully share. If it had earlier been hoped that the mere fact of commemorating 50 years of this landmark arms control treaty would make states more amenable to compromise and to gloss over some deep-seated differences and close ranks, this hope has been dashed.

It has been dashed by the unequivocal rejection that agreements made in previous final documents are still valid – a rejection couched in particularly odious language by one of the nuclear weapon states. Let us however recall that a group of states led by Sweden has prominently called for the implementation of past commitments, realizing that wholesale dismissal is not going to be accepted or acceptable. Yet the hope has also been dashed by the continued dismissal of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons by the nuclear-weapon states and their allies – despite the fact that it continues to gain support, with only 13 more ratifications needed to bring it into force.

I do not agree with Tariq that the narrative of review conference outcomes is controlled by the NWS, with the blame for deadlock usually assigned to the NNWS. This was made very clear during the 2015 review conference which highlighted the

refusal by the US and UK to hold the Middle East conference. Subsequently, the NWS and their supporters decided to ignore – and not attend – this conference in late 2019 organized under the auspices of the General Assembly and this only deepens resentment among NNWS.

While it is useful that Tariq reminds us that the NPT review process cannot resolve every problem related to the international security environment, I believe that it is inevitable that such problems bleed over into the NPT deliberations. No conference takes place in a bubble. The NPT forum is a powerful instrument for dialogue and the only one where NWS can be held to account, so it will be used to bring up a gamut of related issues.

So what can be done to improve the atmosphere and the prospect for consensus? Tariq makes useful suggestions, many of which I support. I do not, however, agree that the Chair's consultations are overrated. Maybe for a veteran of review conferences like he is, nothing new can be learned, but none of the president-designates will have such vast experience and background in NPT conferences. Consultations bring valuable exposure to a variety of views, in addition to allowing for face time to build personal rapport – and that is often highly appreciated when it comes to the negotiations of the final document.

For this reason - and contrary to Tariq - I also support holding regional meetings; they are a way of making the principal/s better aware of the positions and provide an opportunity to learn and exchange views ahead of the review conference. Diplomats rotate frequently in their functions and have rarely a long continuation in the same field, so familiarization or refreshers with NPT topics is very useful. Also, in the absence of a permanent NPT secretariat, support for the president-designate is provided by the staff of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, in addition to their other duties. The establishment of a permanent structure to provide capacity for research, backstopping and other substantive support should be considered.

Tariq discusses the president-designate's focus on the NPT's third pillar - peaceful uses - and is doubtful that this strategy will be successful. I agree with him. It may be a way to play it safe, but the benefits of peaceful uses are widely acknowledged; it is the other two pillars that need attention and focus – and enhanced engagement from the NWS.

The article also contains a set of recommendations for the way ahead that are highly relevant. I am sure more proposals could be added. It would be useful to have a preliminary timetable attached to the proposals or listing them by priority. Equally useful would be to identify who would initiate these actions. All this depends, of course, on financing being provided – always the Achilles heel of initiatives to be taken.

Finally, Tariq touches on the perception of national security and related concepts, particularly as they might be affected by the current pandemic. I agree it would be

useful to start to re-think or re-assess the various security paradigms, but the NPT review conference cannot possibly be the vehicle to address this question.

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