Is “Global Zero” constructive? On the prospects of nuclear disarmament

On 5 April 2009, US President Barack Obama declared in Prague that his presidency would affirm "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”. Obama’s speech rekindled the vision of a nuclear-free world and enlivened the discussion on the steps needed to achieve it. Yet the event should really have been of limited news value. After all, every US president, except Obama’s predecessor George W. Bush, has paid lip service to the dawn of a nuclear-free world. And the United States, just like the other nuclear powers, Russia, China, France and United Kingdom, undertook back in 1968 under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

Nuclear weapon numbers yesterday and today

In 1985, still in the context of the Cold War, the nuclear-weapon states had a combined arsenal of more than 60,000 nuclear weapons—an overkill capacity to destroy the world many times over. Around 98 per cent of all nuclear weapons were in the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the East-West antagonism, the nuclear weapons count underwent a sharp decline: In 2005, there were still 27,000; in 2013 around 17,270 (figures from "World Nuclear Forces", “SIPRI Yearbook 2013: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford, p. 283f). Of these, Russia holds around 8,500, the United States 7,700, France 300, China 250 and the United Kingdom 225 warheads. These five pre-treaty nuclear powers have since been joined by India and Pakistan, each with approximately 90 to 120 and by Israel with around 80 nuclear warheads. Then there is North Korea, which has enough fissile material to produce six to eight nuclear weapons. In total, there are about 4,400 deployed nuclear weapons, with 2,000 kept on full alert. So over twenty years after the Cold War ended, 94 per cent of nuclear weapons are still in the hands of the former adversaries, the United States and Russia. Indeed, both countries have embarked on extensive and expensive programmes to modernize their nuclear arsenals, production facilities and delivery systems (aircraft, submarines and intercontinental missiles).

“Global Zero” – Pros and cons

The fresh talk of a nuclear-free world met with a positive response worldwide. And it was in part this “vision” that led, a short time later, to Barack Obama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Some time before Obama’s Prague speech, a number of high-ranking former politicians had already spoken out in favour. Among others, former US secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former US Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former US Senator Sam Nunn penned a joint appeal in 2007 entitled “A world free of nuclear weapons”. The Wall Street Journal (4 January 2007).

One reason for the partial rethink in the United States was the worsening relations between the United States and Russia, especially in the wake of the decision by President George W. Bush to reject arms controls—a stance that had caused a standstill in nuclear disarmament efforts. Moreover, there were concerns about the continued spread of nuclear weapons, and the US administration would hardly appear credible in opposing proliferation if it were not seen to be pursuing disarmament itself.

Critics of the goal of a nuclear-free world, like former US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, argued at the time that this vision was not only "illusionary" but actually "counterproductive" (Brown, H. & Deutch, J. (2007). The Nuclear Disarmament Fantasy. The Wall Street Journal, 19 November). The German political scientist Professor Christian Hacke has also argued in this vein, saying the West should not renounce nuclear weapons because nuclear deterrence secured "American hegemony and freedom of action". In his view, "Global Zero" would weaken the free world: "If nuclear weapons were completely prohibited, dictators and rogue states would have an ace up their sleeve and hold the West to ransom," (Hacke, C. (2010). Abrüsten – aber mit Verstand: Neun Gründe gegen 'Global Zero'. Internationale Politik, No. 5, September/October).

There is no doubt that the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free world is a "Herculean task". Every state would have to join such a denuclearization treaty, which has not yet proved possible in the case of the treaties banning biological and chemical weapons. It would also require strong control mechanisms to ensure early identification of attempts by states to break away. Finally, there would have to be regional and international conventional arms control arrangements and systems of collective security to deal with the concerns about military imbalances and security deficits that might result from giving up all nuclear capabilities (on the problem of "Global Zero", cf. inter alia Franceschini, G. (2010). Eine Welt ohne Atomwaffen: Falsche und richtige Fragen. In Fröhlich, C., Johannsen, M., Schoch, B., Heinemann-Grüder, A, & Hippler, J. (Eds.). Friedensgutachten 2010, Berlin, p. 317 ff). Indeed, US superiority in every weapons category and its continued pursuit of global military dominance prevent other nuclear powers from accepting a zero solution.

On the other hand, the real significance of nuclear weapons is often overestimated. One reason for possessing or seeking to acquire nuclear weapons has been the hope that they offer a key to gaining prestige and regional or international influence. We must ask, however, whether, for example, France, with its major nuclear arsenal, actually has more international influence than Germany, with no such weapons? Indeed, one could question the security policy benefits of the atom bomb. Although it may ultimately help a country to counter the conventional superiority of an adversary, any first-use of nuclear weapons would cause such massive suffering that the user would have to reckon not only with military retaliation but also with fierce international condemnation and political isolation as a direct consequence. This, argue nuclear critics, is a risk that no country would take, so the actual use of nuclear weapons would be neither politically nor militarily acceptable (cf. Mueller, J. (2010). Atomic Obsession. Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, Oxford/New York).

Although the danger of new countries getting their hands on nuclear weapons is very real, dealing with that threat demands international agreements on stricter measures to control nuclear facilities

Prospects of nuclear disarmament

The discussion of the vision of a nuclear-free world ignited in 2009 by US President Obama's speech has since grown quiet. In any case, it was accompanied by relatively few practical steps towards this vision. True, in 2010, the United States and Russia agreed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, designed to make further cuts in their strategic nuclear arsenals, taking out more than 1,550 warheads on either side. However, the United States never attempted a fundamental departure from nuclear weapons. Washington has also refused to renounce nuclear first-use. Under pressure above all from the Republican majority in Congress, Obama came out in support of comprehensive modernization of the US nuclear weapons complex. Moreover, the United States has continued its plans to deploy missile defence systems and replace scrapped nuclear weapons with new conventional long-range missiles. Yet it is precisely these measures that are seen by Russia as a potential threat to its strategic second-strike capabilities, leaving Moscow, in turn, less willing to agree further nuclear disarmament. Nor did Obama succeed in securing Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, which had been concluded back in 1996. China, alongside the United States, has also failed to ratify this Treaty.

Whether or not we advocate the vision of a nuclear Global Zero, there is no question that progress on nuclear disarmament is rational and feasible. The enormous nuclear arsenals that exist today are of no use in providing security for the nuclear powers nor in protecting against a state or terrorist group on the verge of developing a nuclear weapon. There are a number of practical steps that could be taken in moving towards nuclear disarmament:

- The United States and Russia could reduce their strategic arsenals to below 1,000 warheads respectively, as Obama proposed in the summer of 2013. This requires, however, prior agreement with Russia on a limitation of the number and quality of US missile defence systems.
- The superpowers could unilaterally, i.e. without a bilateral arrangement, make cuts in their nuclear arsenals without any disadvantage.
- The approximately 200 nuclear warheads stationed by the United States in Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey could be withdrawn since they are of doubtful military use. Russia could, for its part, pull back and/or scrap some or all of its 2,000 tactical warheads, many of which are stationed in European Russia.
- The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty should be ratified as soon as possible by the United States and China so that it can finally become effective.
- Only if Russia and the United States each possess fewer than 1,000 warheads does it seem likely that the minor nuclear-weapon powers will be persuaded to reduce their arsenals. The UN General Assembly has supported (in December 2012 – with 134 yes votes, four no votes and 34 abstentions) a resolution to draw up proposals on "Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations", http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/56). The member states voting against this position were the United States, Russia, France and the United Kingdom, and the abstainers included the nuclear powers China, India, Pakistan and Israel.
- One proposal is to convene an international nuclear weapons convention aimed at banning nuclear weapons and agreeing a timetable for their destruction. The Global Zero Initiative by 300

leading world figures has advanced its own plan to destroy, step by step, all nuclear weapons by 2030 (the "Global Zero Action Plan", 2010; http://www.globalzero.org/files/gzap_6.0.pdf)[1].

Sources and further information

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