

Counterpoint

Tom Markram commentary on Tariq Rauf's article "Postponement of the 2020 NPT Review Conference: Possible Implications"

Tariq Rauf comprehensively describes some of the most significant substantive and political factors facing the Tenth NPT Review Conference (RevCon). Overall, he offers a good analysis of the current trends affecting the nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation regime. He also offers several helpful recommendations regarding the timing of the conference and well as valuable ideas for constructively using the additional time now at the disposal of States parties for further preparation.

On the significant substantive factors, I agree that it is unlikely that, between now and January 21, States can bridge their differences over core issues, such as the pace and level of ambitions for specific disarmament steps or how to characterize the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

I also agree that, given current trends, reaching a consensus outcome at the RevCon will be difficult. The history of the nine NPT review conferences is chequered, with five producing a substantive outcome and less than half achieving agreement on the review component. Although current expectations are low, there are nonetheless many ways to frame a consensus and ways to achieve it. It demands creativity, a will by the most interested parties to succeed, and the ability to settle for possibly humble results.

One flaw in the character of the review process is that States "keep their powder dry" through the preparatory meetings by sticking to national positions and not seeking compromise until the actual RevCon.

It is worth remembering that failure to obtain a comprehensive outcome document will not doom the Treaty or regime. Failure to achieve any concrete outcome can, however, undermine the value that so many States place on the review cycle as a way to fully implement the NPT.

It is likely that TPNW-supporting States have decided not to make TPNW the critical issue, and instead have chosen to prioritize a push for the implementation of past disarmament commitments. Support for the TPNW per se should not affect the incentives of States to compromise.

My impressions differ from those of Tariq regarding the narrative of past review conferences and some of the dynamics among the major political groups and issue-based coalitions could be better elaborated for those unfamiliar with them. There could also be some elaboration on the function the NPT review process serves, rather than what it shouldn't do. When it works, for instance, it fills a gap left by the lack of outcomes in the Conference on Disarmament and the UN Disarmament Commission over the past two decades. In this sense, the NPT review process has been the *de facto* negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament within the United Nations system.

On the Middle East, it would be my hope that the Tenth NPT Review Conference could acknowledge that the 2019 conference mandated by the UN General Assembly was held and adopted a declaration. It was a historic achievement that many regard as a surprising success. The onus is on those States that participated to continue demonstrating that the new process is genuine and not just a perfunctory exercise borne of an elaborate pressure strategy. Plans are underway to hold a virtual informal intersessional workshop on good practices and lessons learnt from existing nuclear-weapon-free zones in July, and preparations are still proceeding for the second session of the conference, scheduled for November.

On the opportunities, I think we can all grasp the potential benefits of delaying the Tenth Review Conference, especially if certain positive developments occur. However, I'm dubious of the benefits of combining the delayed RevCon with the preparatory committee for the next cycle. This is an issue for NPT States parties to decide in conjunction with the president-designate and the bureau, and I don't see any political or substantive impediments. The same applies to a possible change of venue. There are advantages and drawbacks to any change in response to the COVID-19 situation, but much will depend on the availability of conference services and conference rooms.

On the specific activities that the president-designate and other relevant actors might usefully undertake, I'm a strong believer in a "3 P" formula: prepare, prepare and prepare. Each review conference is unique and each president brings his or her style, vision, and personal approach to leading conference proceedings and to molding a robust outcome, especially when a critical mass of political will to succeed exists. All presidents are from the Non-Aligned Movement grouping and, coming generally from developing countries, they are usually limited in the level of funding and resources they have to undertake their own consultations. The president-designate will have to make the best of the opportunities that do exist—irrespective of who handles the technical arrangements—and, through innovative diplomacy, build trust in their leadership among the States parties while at the same time exercise the maximum amount of transparency possible.

Tariq provides some important ideas on activities and events that can be undertaken on a broad spectrum. While I am aware there is some work underway to further strengthen the review process, it requires sustained efforts to obtain some progress on this issue at the Tenth Review Conference. The more effective we use this time before the actual RevCon to prepare, the more we improve our chances of a successful conference that will contribute to strengthening the implementation of the treaty.