

The NPT and Corona: No Time for Disarmament?

Jannis Kappelmann B.A.

Open for signature since 1968, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is widely considered to have built the ground for later multilateral and bilateral disarmament as well as arms control agreements, including the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Every five years, the member states of the NPT meet to review the treaty. Scheduled for April and May 2020, this year's Review Conference (RevCon) was postponed to a later date- April 2021 latest- due to the countermeasures in place to combat coronavirus. Following this inevitable decision, the article should firstly investigate the current challenges of the non-proliferation regime, then secondly provide insights into the way forward after postponement. Finally, it must conclude why strengthening disarmament and non-proliferation is of utmost importance, especially during a pandemic.

Regional tension and proliferation are among the most pressing issues for the NPT. Since withdrawing from the treaty in 2003, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has conducted six nuclear tests between 2006 and 2017. A proliferation of nuclear weapons to the potentially fragile, and largely isolated North Korean regime remains a grave concern, not only for the heated East Asian region, but for global society overall. Additionally, the recent collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which limited the capabilities of Iran's nuclear programme, might result in proliferation of nuclear weapons within the Middle East, a dangerous scenario considering the regional conflicts and tensions in recent decades. Efforts for a possible Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone are trying to be revitalised, but achieving progress seems, due to the wide variety of expectations and perspectives, a complicated task. With these issues in proliferation remaining, many non-nuclear weapon states are concerned about the lack of progress that has been made under Article VI. In this paragraph, member states comply to undertake efforts towards complete disarmament. With the missing recognition of the humanitarian consequences, states opposing nuclear weapons argue that nuclear weapon states would not comply with the treaty. In fact, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, an effort to promote Article VI by many non-nuclear weapon states, is currently supported by 123 states.

With the RevCon now postponed, the considerable efforts to resolve these challenges will most likely be of limited effectiveness until the conference takes place. Although the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, is calling for a global ceasefire, whilst civil society actors are demanding to freeze the

production and supply of weapons, the processes to resolve the challenges within the non-proliferation regime seem to be on hold.

In addition, the organisers might hope to hold RevCon before February 5th 2021. On this date, NewStart, the last bilateral arms control agreement between the United States and Russia, is set to expire, with little hope for extension.

The three pathways for the NPT RevCon all seem to be limitedly attractive on their own:

- (1) Holding the conference in January, before the expiration date of NewStart, might seriously endanger the health of participants. In addition, reducing the size of the conference would most likely harm civil society actors the most, which have been responsible for much of the progress made in recent years.
- (2) The organisation of an online conference would be a vast challenge. Ensuring confidentiality in side negotiations would be nearly impossible. So far, none of the NPT member states have shown willingness for the organising of a remote RevCon.
- (3) Holding the conference after the expiration in February, possibly after a large fraction of society is vaccinated against COVID-19, would ensure a conference of its usual size, but would add the New Start, along with the absence of bilateral arms control between the US and Russia, to the list of existing obstacles. In the end, it may be the only way to hold an effective conference whilst protecting the health of its participants at the same time.

Considering the lack of progress in disarmament since the Cold War, the paths complementing the NPT from outside its operative framework are being explored through the TPNW. With the postponement contributing to the uncertainty of the RevCon delivering further steps forward, concerning the most pressing issues, the TPNW could build the momentum needed to ensure that steps towards disarmament are still taken.

During the coronavirus pandemic, disarmament seems like a subordinate topic. But in a world of interconnections, the example of the NPT postponement demonstrates that disarmament and the pandemic are closely linked and the issues within each are intertwined. Disarmament could contribute to reduced military spending, a budget that could be used to prevent future pandemics, and strengthen the emergency preparedness of states' health systems, as several civil society actors suggested. Observing how hospitals in some of the most developed countries, have become overwhelmed by the impacts of the pandemic, shows that no region in the world would be equipped for a conflict involving nuclear

weapons. The humanitarian consequences would be severe, and hospitals are nowhere near equipped for such an emergency. With the NPT facing delicate challenges, and a pandemic exposing the weaknesses of healthcare systems, it is imperative that we put the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons at the centre of the discussion on non-proliferation and disarmament.