



Principles of Nuclear Disarmament: The Hoffmann Doctrine

What is the Hoffmann Doctrine?

The Hoffmann Doctrine is a diplomatic strategy of steadfastly continuing to pursue approaches that have not worked in the past, that are not working now, and that show no signs of ever working in future, while strenuously resisting any attempt to try something new. The Hoffmann Doctrine is widely used in multilateral nuclear disarmament settings.

What is the origin of the Hoffmann Doctrine?

The Hoffmann Doctrine is named after Hellmut Hoffmann, ambassador of Germany to the Conference on Disarmament from 2009 to 2013, who famously articulated the concept in a statement to the 2013 incarnation of the Open-ended Working Group. Hoffmann referred to “an unfortunate tendency, especially among NGOs” to advocate new measures when existing approaches were not working. Although the Hoffmann Doctrine had been successfully employed by many governments for decades, Hoffmann’s statement was the first explicit recognition of a deliberate strategy to avoid trying new things when faced with deadlock or failure.

Why use the Hoffmann Doctrine?

To quote a famous mountaineer: *because it’s there!* Why go to the trouble of changing policy, writing new speeches, or exploring potentially disruptive new avenues, when you can just keep doing what you have always done, and claim it is a virtue? This is particularly appealing if, deep down, you actually prefer the status quo, but for political reasons need to appear to support progress on nuclear disarmament. The approaches endorsed under the Hoffmann Doctrine, while unsuccessful and impracticable, are invariably laudable in their aims and safe to support. No diplomat will ever be fired for calling for the “early entry into force of the CTBT” or for a “return to substantive negotiations in the CD”.

What are some examples of the Hoffmann Doctrine in practice?

The textbook example is the Conference on Disarmament. Every year since 1996, CD member states reaffirm that the CD is “the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community” and announce that it is absolutely vital that it get back to work negotiating disarmament treaties. And every year it does nothing. Even after 20 years of this repeated failure, many CD members resist any attempt to pursue disarmament negotiations outside the CD.

Another prime example is seen in the NPT review process. Every five years, members of the NPT come together to review the operation of the treaty. They express concern over the lack of progress with nuclear disarmament, then attempt to negotiate a plan to move forward. Sometimes this attempt fails; sometimes (as in 2000 and 2010) it succeeds. If it succeeds, the nuclear-weapon states spend the next five years ignoring the agreed plan. And then the cycle repeats.

Is the Hoffmann Doctrine just for Western states?

Not at all! Some of the finest examples of the Hoffmann Doctrine come from the Non-aligned Movement. Many NAM members continue to resolutely support the CD as the preferred forum for nuclear disarmament negotiations, despite 20 years of paralysis and the fact that the majority of NAM members are not even represented in the CD. Similarly, the NAM continues to call, year after year, for the negotiation of a comprehensive nuclear weapons convention, when it is clear that there is no prospect of the NPT nuclear-weapon states ever accepting this. Then there is India, which each year has presented to the UN General Assembly essentially the same resolution calling for a convention prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons — since 1982! Thirty-four years of unswerving dedication to an approach that demonstrably does not work is the Hoffmann Doctrine *par excellence*.