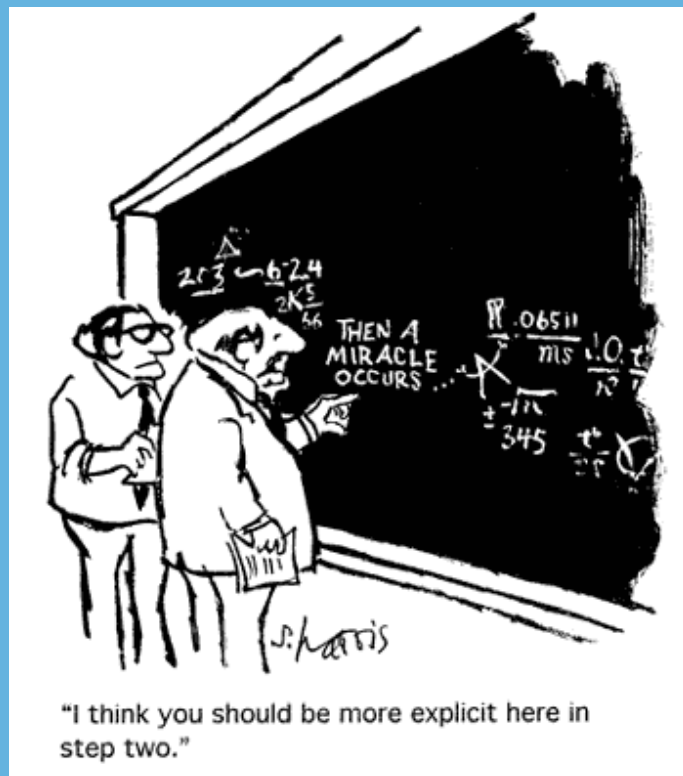


Magical Realism

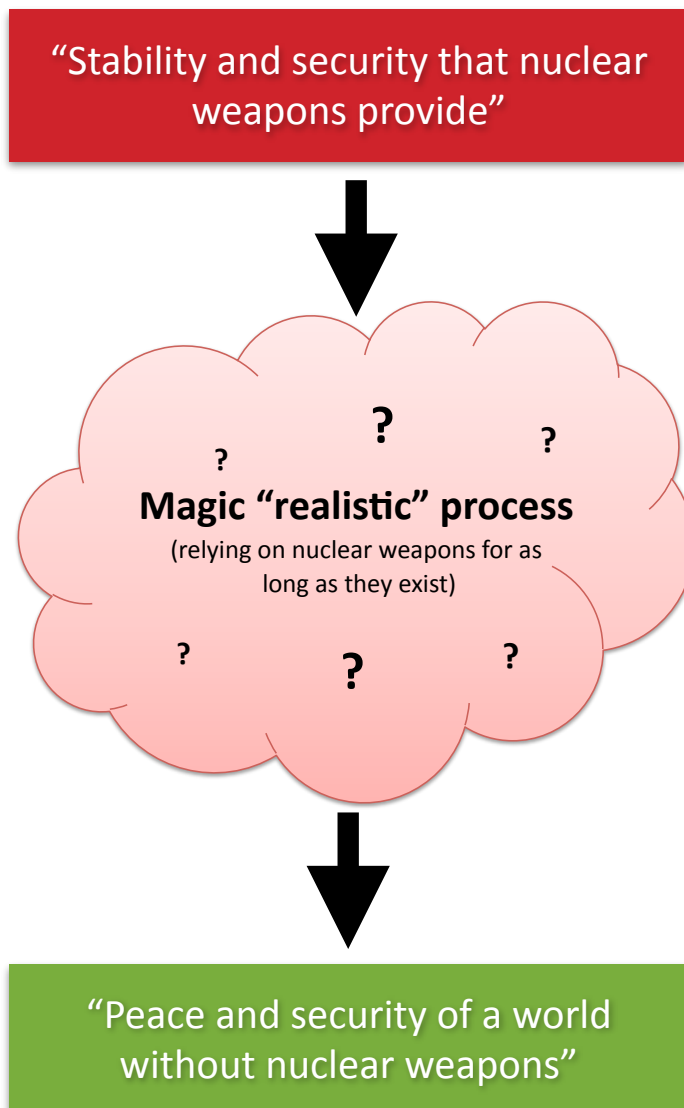
Nuclear-weapon states and weasels like to characterize their approach to nuclear disarmament as “realistic”, arguing that there is “no alternative to verifiable, step-by-step disarmament”. They dismiss novel ideas, such as a treaty banning nuclear weapons, as unrealistic and impractical, with some portraying the ban treaty as a “magic wand” that the deluded proponents naively believe will conjure nuclear disarmament into reality.

Let’s put aside for the moment the fact that, as far as Wildfire>_ is aware, no proponent of the ban treaty has ever claimed that it will magically lead to disarmament. And let’s ignore for now the consideration that the ban treaty is not an alternative to “verifiable, step-by-step disarmament” but rather a means of helping it get started. Let’s focus instead on the notion that pursuit of a ban treaty is unrealistic fantasy, while the approach preferred by the nuclear-weapon states and the weasels is hard-headed, pragmatic realism.

Under this “realistic” approach, which we should recall has been pursued unsuccessfully for over 40 years now, a situation in which several countries claim to depend on nuclear weapons for their security will be transformed into a situation in which these same countries benefit from the “peace and security of a world free of nuclear weapons”, through a series of steps which sound plausible but which are never taken. The steps can’t be taken, because under the “realist” approach, the conditions that would allow them to be taken can only exist after they have been completed (“as long as nuclear weapons exist, we will keep ours / continue to depend on extended deterrence”). The “realistic” step-by-step approach as advocated by the nuclear-weapon states and weasels is therefore reminiscent of this well-known cartoon by S. Harris:



Somewhere in the sequence of “realistic” steps, a miracle is needed, by which nuclear weapons are magically transformed from “things we need for our security” into “things we are more secure without”.



Magical realism is a literary genre where magical elements play a natural part in an otherwise realistic environment. It has been described as “what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe”. What could be a better description of the current approach to nuclear disarmament? Look at some of the things that the “realists” of the current approach believe in:

- The Conference on Disarmament as an effective means of pursuing nuclear disarmament;
- Achieving universal membership of the NPT;
- Entry into force of the CTBT;
- Step-by-step disarmament, when they can’t or won’t take any of the steps;
- Eliminating nuclear weapons while still depending on them;
- Fairies.

We made up that last one. But it’s just as credible as the others on the list.

So which is the truly realistic option for making progress on nuclear disarmament? Continue with the magical realism approach of hoping vaguely for a miracle at some unspecified point in the future? Or get to work now on a practical instrument that will stigmatize nuclear weapons and establish an unambiguous norm against them as a means of providing security?