

Obstacles to nuclear disarmament - and how to overcome them

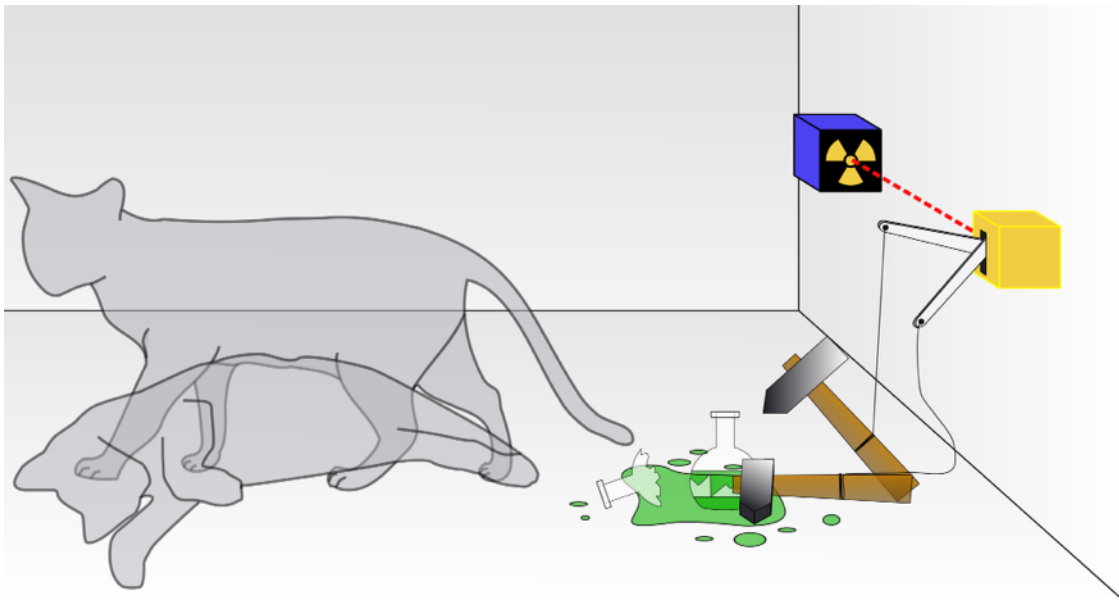
1. Ambiguity and ambivalence

Of all the factors obstructing progress with nuclear disarmament, the most significant is the curious ambiguity over the goal of nuclear disarmament itself, and the remarkable ambivalence of many supposed proponents of disarmament.

Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment, where the principle of quantum superposition implies that a cat sealed in a box is simultaneously both alive and dead, has some interesting parallels here. Schrödinger's cat exists simultaneously in two states until someone opens the box to look, when the superposed states will collapse into either living or dead.

The nuclear-armed states, and their weasel friends, simultaneously value and despise their weapons. They want to get rid of them, and to keep them too. We once summed up their many convoluted statements as "Nuclear weapons are goodbad. They bring stabilitydanger. We must eliminateretain them".

This was a parody, but recent statements from the NPT nuclear-weapon states have been almost as stark. At the 2014 NPT PrepCom, the United Kingdom said "We consider that nuclear weapons have helped to guarantee our security, and that of our allies, for decades. We want a world without them, but we need to proceed to it carefully". In the strange, quantum-mechanical world of UK foreign policy ("not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we can imagine"), nuclear weapons are simultaneously a valuable security guarantee and something they want to get rid of. This paradoxical state will continue indefinitely - until someone opens the box.



The interesting part is that pursuing a treaty banning nuclear weapons would have the effect of opening the box. Once you are faced with the choice of either supporting or opposing a process to outlaw nuclear weapons, you can no longer have it both ways. The

cat is either alive or dead; you either want to keep the weapon or you are genuinely ready to give it up.

The effect is particularly telling on the weasel states, which are vulnerable because as NPT non-nuclear-weapon states they have already outlawed nuclear weapons for themselves. If they oppose a ban, it calls their sincerity and NPT compliance into question. Hence the comical rhetoric we have heard from the weasels as they desperately try to put the lid back on the box and make the ban treaty idea go away.

But we are not just talking about the nuclear-armed states and weasels here. We also need to consider the strange tendency of genuine non-nuclear-weapon states and civil society to support nuclear disarmament in lukewarm and half-hearted ways, to undermine their own rhetoric, and generally to shy away from definitive statements and bold action.

The ambiguity pops up everywhere. If you follow almost any discussion on how to advance nuclear disarmament - from high-level diplomatic conferences, to web commentary flame wars, and everything in between - you will notice that it quickly evolves from a debate on how best to advance disarmament into a debate on whether disarmament is actually a good idea. People start arguing in earnest about strategic stability and the value of deterrence, and once that has started it goes on forever (or until the adjournment for lunch).

Yet for all members of the NPT, and for most if not all the others, the argument was settled long ago: they are committed to disarmament and a world free of nuclear weapons. Why, then, do non-nuclear-weapon states and disarmament NGOs keep engaging in the argument? It gives the impression that they are still trying to persuade themselves. Worse, it takes time and energy away from the real question of how to actually make progress with disarmament.

Then there is the ambivalence and hedging. The classical example here is the infamous ICJ opinion of 1996, which stated that use of nuclear weapons would be “generally” illegal. Couple this with the fact that the legal instrument through which the non-nuclear-weapon states forsake nuclear weapons - the NPT - permits (to some degree) their possession by others, and you have essentially a collective declaration that “nuclear weapons are kind of illegal - mostly”. Even the Red Cross, which you would expect to take a clear line on this, says things like “we find it difficult to envisage how any use of these weapons could be consistent” with international humanitarian law. Difficult to envisage? So maybe if you shut your eyes and tried really hard, you could do it? Is there really any doubt here?

This shilly-shallying and lack of clarity, resolve and commitment makes movement impossible. A key benefit of a treaty banning nuclear weapons is to make a clear and unambiguous declaration that nuclear weapons are illegal, immoral and unacceptable. From that base, all else can follow.