

# Obstacles to nuclear disarmament - and how to overcome them

## 2. The Conference on Disarmament and the NPT

The NPT and the CD - especially the CD - come in for a lot of criticism, from many quarters. But most of this criticism focuses on their ineffectiveness in advancing nuclear disarmament. Less often discussed, but more significant, is their role in actively obstructing progress.

The CD is supposedly the “single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community” - as its members never tire of moronically repeating. It is hopelessly unrepresentative, but does include all nine nuclear-armed states. This is often cited as an important factor in its favour, since whatever the CD does do on nuclear disarmament will involve all those countries with nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, whatever it doesn't do on nuclear disarmament will also involve them all. And as we know, it hasn't done anything for over 18 years.

The CD works by consensus, which means each member has a veto. This is convenient for the nuclear-armed states (they even say this publicly), as they can block anything they don't like. This leaves each nuclear-armed state free to earnestly advocate the approaches to disarmament it does like, demonstrating its pious commitment and good faith, while being confident that others will reciprocate by blocking its proposals and advocating their own preferred approaches - which it can block in turn. Wildfire>\_ suspects that this is more an emergent behaviour than a coordinated strategy, but either way it works very well. The result is like an insect trap: energy and good intentions are lured into the CD by its nuclear-armed membership credentials and “single forum” status, and then quietly suffocated.

The NPT works somewhat differently, but is no less a tool of the nuclear-armed states. It provides legal cover for its five nuclear-armed members, but its principal obstructive effect is to conflate their interests with those of the non-nuclear-weapon states. The objective becomes “the treaty” or “the regime”, which members are expected to unite to promote and protect, eschewing “divisive” measures such as harping on the failure of the nuclear-weapon states to fulfil their Article VI disarmament obligations. And however much they may gripe about it, the non-nuclear-weapon states have little option but to cooperate, since losing the non-proliferation benefits of the treaty would not be in their interests. They have no leverage, and the inherent asymmetry of the NPT traps them by their good intentions.

A new treaty banning nuclear weapons would overcome these obstacles simply by providing a path around them. It would provide a forum for disarmament negotiations that is not under the control of the nuclear-armed states. And it would provide an unambiguous legal channel that is not fatally compromised by having to accommodate the interests of those disinclined to disarm, freeing the non-nuclear-weapon states from having to pursue disarmament through an instrument that legitimizes nuclear weapons.

There is another factor that amplifies the effectiveness of the CD and NPT as obstacles to nuclear disarmament, but that also forms an obstacle in its own right: group politics. We will cover this in the next instalment.