

Norway's conflicted relationship with nuclear weapons

Richard Lennane

Citing NATO's "Strategic Concept", foreign minister Børge Brende has stated that Norway will not join the Austrian Pledge on nuclear disarmament, launched at the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in December 2014. In doing so, he has only worsened the incoherence and contradictions of Norway's nuclear weapons policy.

The pledge catalogues the pressing humanitarian reasons for eliminating nuclear weapons that have been identified by three major international conferences held over the past two years (the first, ironically, was convened by Norway in Oslo in March 2013). The pledge goes on to urge all members of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to renew their commitment to "the urgent and full implementation" of the disarmament obligations of the treaty, and "to this end, to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons".

Why would the Norwegian government hesitate to join such a pledge? Norway, along with all its NATO partners, is already a member of the NPT and is therefore both committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons and legally obliged to support "effective measures" for nuclear disarmament.

Furthermore, Norway has long been at the forefront of efforts to promote disarmament on humanitarian grounds, and was a driving force in creating the successful treaties banning antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions. Norway's determined and effective leadership in this field has won it considerable respect and influence internationally.

More recently, the current government has made statements at the United Nations and elsewhere emphasizing the humanitarian imperative for nuclear disarmament. At the Vienna conference, Norway said, "We all share the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. Listening to the experts, reaching that goal seems more urgent than ever before ... We welcome initiatives that contribute to meaningful progress towards our common goal of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The humanitarian approach to disarmament and non-proliferation is a contribution to achieving progress".

Yet back in Oslo, Brende declines to join a pledge that embodies precisely these principles, apparently on the grounds that the pledge is incompatible with NATO's reliance on nuclear weapons for collective security. Think for a moment about the absurd contradiction that this implies: Norway wants to get rid of nuclear weapons, but wants to keep them too. Norway supports nuclear disarmament, but only after it has happened.

And think about the message this sends to an international audience. First, while Norway has persuaded many developing countries – some in acutely vulnerable security situations – that they should place humanitarian considerations first and forswear antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions, it applies a different standard to itself when it comes to nuclear weapons.

Second – and worse – the implication that Norway, as a member of NATO, needs to rely indefinitely on nuclear weapons for its security is essentially an incitement to proliferation, undermining the non-proliferation objectives of the

NPT. Why should policymakers in Tehran or Pyongyang not reach the same conclusions on the necessity of nuclear weapons?

NATO is not inherently a nuclear alliance: the North Atlantic Treaty itself says nothing about nuclear weapons. One day, once the disarmament goal of the NPT is realized (something NATO itself claims to be working for), NATO will no longer be a nuclear alliance, and the Strategic Concept will have been revised to reflect that. Nobody disputes that nuclear disarmament will be a long, complex and delicate process, and nobody expects Norway, or other NATO members, to wean themselves off reliance on nuclear weapons overnight. So why is Brende behaving as if a pledge “to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons” is some kind of reckless, precipitate step that would compromise Norway’s security?

Unlike the other weapons of mass destruction – biological and chemical weapons – nuclear weapons are not yet explicitly prohibited by international treaty. This is the “legal gap” the Austrian Pledge resolves to fill. A new treaty banning nuclear weapons would fill it. Such a treaty can and should be supported by all states – including Norway’s nuclear-armed NATO partners, since they have all given an “unequivocal undertaking” as NPT members to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

Yet we have seen again and again the nuclear-armed states behaving as addicts: they earnestly promise to disarm, but somehow never manage to act. The reluctance of Norway and other non-nuclear NATO members to endorse a clear legal and moral norm against these weapons of mass destruction enables this addictive behaviour. It makes them co-dependents, complicit in the failure of the nuclear-armed states to take serious steps towards disarmament.

By refusing to join the Austrian Pledge, Brende is casting doubt on Norway’s sincerity in pursuing nuclear disarmament and fulfilling its NPT obligations. He is betraying the humanitarian principles which form the basis of Norwegian foreign policy, inviting charges of hypocrisy and special pleading, and diminishing Norway’s credibility and influence.

The Austrian Pledge is fully compatible with Norway’s security interests and NATO commitments. Refusal to join it is unconscionable and does nothing to promote security. If Brende will not reverse his decision, the Parliament must act.

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