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Freeing the World of Nuclear Weapons



One of our founding partners, **Peter Jenkins**, whose 33-year diplomatic career culminated in his serving as the UK's ambassador to the United Nations at Vienna and to the International Atomic Energy Agency, after spells in Washington, Paris, Brasilia and Geneva (UN and WTO), chairs the British branch of Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs.

The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was based on a bargain. The five states already in possession of nuclear weapons (United States, USSR, UK, France and China) pledged "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and on nuclear disarmament" in return for all other parties to the treaty pledging not to acquire such weapons and accepting international inspections.

The close of the tenth review conference of the NPT on 26 August spurred us to question Peter about Pugwash and the world of nuclear weapons.

Why "Pugwash"?

Pugwash is a fishing village in Nova Scotia. It is where scientists from several countries met in 1957, at the home of a Canadian-American philanthropist, and founded the Pugwash movement. Inspired by the concern of Albert Einstein and Sir Bertrand Russell (the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto) that thermonuclear weapons would destroy humanity, they committed themselves to the ideal of a world free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and without war. In addition they resolved to spread recognition that scientists have social and moral responsibilities.

Why was Pugwash awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1995?

The Nobel Peace award cited Pugwash's "efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and, in the longer run, to eliminate such arms". Between 1957 and the end of the Cold War Pugwash members met in various formats nearly 200 times. Pugwash pioneered the "Track 2" process, bringing together non-governmental experts to prepare the ground for inter-governmental agreements. While still an active professor at Harvard, Dr Henry Kissinger took part in Pugwash meetings. Pugwash is credited with having produced epistemic and technical underpinning to the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, the 1968 NPT, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), bilateral US/USSR strategic nuclear weapon reduction treaties, and the biological and chemical weapons conventions.

Can the five recognised nuclear-weapon-states (USA, Russia, UK, France, China) congratulate themselves on having made major progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War?

Not really. The period opened promisingly with a 1991 US/USSR treaty that reduced the parties' deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 6000 each, and a so-called Presidential Initiative, which

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resulted in the elimination of a host of tactical nuclear warheads. But there have been only two positive developments since then: the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the 2010 US/Russian “New START”, which reduces deployed strategic warheads to 1550 on each side. Meanwhile, several regressive occurrences include the refusal of the US senate to ratify the CTBT; US denunciation of the 1972 ABM and of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty; US and Russian renewal of all three legs of a triad of nuclear delivery systems; and China embarking recently on what is thought likely to be a quadrupling of its stock of deployed warheads to about 1000.

French and British warhead holdings are modest in comparison – in the 200s – but both remain attached to nuclear deterrence and to a defensive role for nuclear weapons that the NPT denies 185 other states. At least the UK seems more sincere than the other four NWS in professing a commitment to “step-by-step” progress towards a nuclear-weapon-free world, and it has taken a lead in seeking to conceptualise what form those steps might take.

Do you see the war in Ukraine as having heightened the risk of nuclear weapons being used for the first time since 1945?

Since 2020 Russia’s published nuclear weapon doctrine envisages use in the event of:

- The launch of ballistic missiles in the direction of Russian territory
- The use of nuclear or other WMD against Russia
- Cyber or other forms of attack on Russia’s nuclear infrastructure (e.g., early warning and command & control systems)
- Conventional aggression that jeopardises “the very existence of the Russian state”,

As there has been no sign that NATO or Ukraine intends to ignore these Russian “red lines”, it seems unlikely that Russia will have cause to break the post-1945 “nuclear taboo”. But, of course, it cannot be entirely excluded that Moscow will choose to interpret certain occurrences as tantamount to infringements of a “red line”, or to depart from the 2020 doctrine.

Is nuclear counter-proliferation an area of Pugwash activity?

Pugwash contributed to the Track 2 process that paved the way for the 2015 agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme; this JCPOA agreement provides for intrusive international surveillance to deter Iran from giving in to a temptation to harness dual-use technologies for nuclear weapon purposes. Pugwash has not been able to obtain any purchase on North Korean, Israeli, Pakistani or Indian decision-making. These four and South Africa are the states that have acquired nuclear weapons since the entry into force of the NPT in 1970. South Africa later dismantled its nuclear warheads. (Brazil and Argentina turned their backs on nuclear weapon acquisition in the 1980s. In Iraq and Libya international inspectors oversaw the disposal of equipment intended for fissile material production. In 2007 Israel destroyed a reactor which it suspected Syria of intending to use to produce plutonium.)

How do you view the outcome of this year’s delayed five-yearly review of parties’ implementation of the NPT?

The conference failed to adopt consensus conclusions. Russia withheld assent to avoid tendentious references to Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant on the banks of the Dnieper. Arguably, this was no great loss. The draft conclusions suggested all too plainly a continuing NWS lack of ambition on nuclear disarmament and a reluctance to agree to

concrete measures for reducing the risk of nuclear use. It did contain a US/Russian pledge to “pursue negotiations in good faith on a successor framework to New START before its expiration in 2026, in order to achieve deeper, irreversible, and verifiable reductions in their nuclear arsenals.” But whether these two states will have the political will to live up to that pledge – and whether the other three NWS will help them to do so by offering reductions in their nuclear arsenals - remains to be seen.

How does the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons fit into the picture you have painted?

The TPNW comprehensively prohibits nuclear weapons with the goal of eliminating them. It is the work of more than a hundred non-nuclear weapon states whom the inhuman, catastrophic potential of nuclear weapons dismays, and who had tired of the repeated prevarications of the five NWS in relation to nuclear disarmament. The five NWS and the four other nuclear-armed states have made clear that they have no intention of adhering to the TPNW or complying with its provisions. So, for now its value lies in establishing an international norm. In the fullness of time this norm may or may not prove fruitful.

As an idealist I am rooting for the TPNW to bear fruit. As a realist, noting the extent to which US relations with Russia and China have deteriorated since the early 90s, observing US readiness to denounce past achievements, and seeing no reason to believe that four of the five NWS will find the will to embark on ridding the world of nuclear weapons, I fear it won't.

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