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'People of all countries want a world without nuclear weapons'

Austrian diplomat Alexander Kmentt on the outdated dogma of nuclear deterrence and other means of achieving security

How successful was the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)?

The NPT is a successful agreement when you consider the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In the 1960s, we assumed seeing a trend towards 20 to 25 nuclear weapon states. The NPT recognises five nuclear weapon states: China, France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States. India, Israel, and Pakistan have not yet acceded to the treaty. North Korea withdrew in 2003. Nevertheless, the NPT has been able to clearly limit the spread of nuclear weapons.

The track record of the NPT when it comes to nuclear disarmament is significantly worse. Of course, the number of nuclear warheads has been significantly reduced from the level of the Cold War, mainly because of the scrapping of old weapon systems. There is little evidence that nuclear weapon states are serious about nuclear disarmament and achieving a world free of nuclear arms. But this is as much a contractual obligation of the NPT as non-proliferation. Enormous budget funds are currently being allocated to modernise the arsenals and there is nothing to suggest that a serious move away from the precarious concept of nuclear deterrence is being considered.

On the contrary, we are seeing some very risky behavioural patterns. The danger of using nuclear weapons, whether on purpose – for example, President Trump's nuclear threats towards North Korea – or due to miscalculation, human or technical errors, is far greater today due to the large number of nuclear actors and global tensions than most people assume. It's not for nothing that the famous "doomsday clock", which indicates the risk level that nuclear weapons will be used, was just recently set forward to 100 seconds before midnight. Symbolically, we weren't this close to world destruction even during the Cold War. The NPT has therefore not achieved the

urgently needed steps to nuclear disarmament. Unfortunately, the nuclear weapon states are clearly behind schedule.

The next NPT Review Conference will take place in New York from 27 April to 22 May. What do you expect the outcome of the negotiations to be? What can we expect in the best case?

It will be very difficult to achieve a credible consensus at the NPT Review Conference. On the subject of nuclear weapons, the rifts within the international community run quite deep. The nuclear weapon states are at odds with one another: the United States in particular is involved in disputes with China and Russia. Then there are differences regarding the (non-)fulfilment of disarmament obligations. In addition, there's the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran as well as the very controversial issue – in the context of the NPT – of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

There's also the risk that the United States, for example, could question the binding nature of the disarmament commitments agreed in the past. If this happens, I see no chance of any agreement. The outlook for the NPT Review Conference is therefore pretty bad. Some actors are currently calling the entire multilateral treaty system into question. This affects also the NPT and the disarmament and arms control regime. A strengthening of the NPT through significant positive developments is hardly possible at this conference.

However, I hope that at least further setbacks can be avoided and that there will be a reaffirmation of the importance of the NPT, of multilateralism and the binding nature of the disarmament measures agreed upon in the past.

If there's no consensus in New York, could the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) be a diplomatic alternative to the NPT in order to achieve the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons?

The Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons is not and has never been conceived as an alternative, but rather as complementary to the NPT. A prohibition of on nuclear weapons constitutes an important contribution and a central element for nuclear disarmament and achieving a world without nuclear weapons. In the same way that the area of non-proliferation requires legal instruments in addition to the NPT, this is also the case with disarmament. Only the opponents of the NPT see it as an "alternative", which rather emphasises that they are neither serious about nuclear disarmament nor want to pursue it with any urgency in the foreseeable future. This

is because they are unwilling to initiate or even consider turning away from nuclear deterrence.

A delitigimisation and prohibition of nuclear weapons, as included in the TPNW, is a key step in enabling disarmament by turning away from nuclear deterrence. Nuclear weapon states apparently do not want to or are unable to take this step on their own. Because of the catastrophic humanitarian impact that any use of these weapons would have, along with the ultimately uncontrollable risks, nuclear weapons are not something with which responsible states should build a system of collective security over the long term.

I am convinced that this debate will also become increasingly important in Germany, the EU and within NATO. In any case, I am hoping for an open and broad discussion on the sustainability of the nuclear deterrence system in the 21st century and that the positions taken in regard to the TPNW will be more constructive.

Do we simply have to live with the fact that the dogma of nuclear deterrence will continue to determine international security policy in the future?

The fact that the TPNW was created in the first place and that two thirds of the UN member states are in favour of this ban, is a sign that many states are unwilling to "just live" with the dogma of nuclear deterrence. You are right to call it a "dogma". Just as we no longer accept many dogmas of the past, this one must also be seriously and urgently questioned.

I am also convinced that people of all countries want a world without nuclear weapons. As long as it works, nuclear deterrence is an attractive concept. However, people cannot trust that it will "always" work, but it is necessary that it "always" works since the consequences of its "not working" would be catastrophic. The problem is that sensible nuclear deterrence presupposes the permanent, credible threat of nuclear weapons use. It's obvious that with so many nuclear actors and numerous global tensions, this represents a huge existential risk for all of humanity.

In your view, what alternatives could there be to nuclear deterrence? Could these also be attractive to defence alliances like NATO?

Deterrence per se is not the problem. The problem lies in nuclear deterrence and the threat of destruction with the potential to destroy all of human civilisation. Albert Einstein said, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." I would like to pose the question, based on what "right" do nuclear weapon states pose this existential

threat toward the entire planet?

Can national security ever justify this threat? If, say, a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan can lead to a nuclear winter and famine – in Africa for example – this raises profound ethical questions and questions of international law. In which scenario would the use of nuclear weapons actually ever be justified in the light of these consequences? In today's world, which is so closely interlinked, deterrence can be achieved by other means than military deterrence – for instance by economic and financial measures.

The use of violence will always be an aspect of deterrence. However, this can also be achieved through weapon systems that do not lead to global humanitarian catastrophe. NATO is actually the military alliance that is most likely to have non-nuclear deterrence available. NATO does not need nuclear weapons, but – at least for the time being – it lacks the political will to reduce the importance of nuclear weapons in its military doctrine. Outlawing nuclear weapons, precisely because of these effects and risks, is a crucial step in – hopefully – ushering in this development.

This interview was conducted by Konstantin Bärwaldt.



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