

TO NEW YORK, A MESSAGE FROM GENEVA

*Holding an existing treaty hostage to progress on another
is the wrong way to go about arms control.*

BY DAVID COX

AT FOUR IN THE MORNING OF 15 SEPTEMBER – FIVE HOURS AFTER the official deadline for the end of the Fourth Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) – four weeks of diplomatic negotiations among the states party to the Treaty appeared to have failed. Amidst threats that the translators would soon leave, the air conditioning would stop and the lights would go out for want of money, the Conference President received a one paragraph report from the Conference drafting committee. It stated simply that the committee was unable to agree on common language describing progress, or the lack of it, in halting the nuclear arms race and, most significantly, in achieving a comprehensive ban on all testing of nuclear weapons.

A latecomer to the conference might well have been puzzled by the stalemate. The past year has been full of promise for arms control and disarmament, particularly in Europe, where the end of the Cold War and reductions in conventional forces must surely be welcomed. Led by Mexico, however, the non-aligned states zeroed in on the single issue – an end to nuclear weapon tests – which they see as the touchstone of super-power good faith in the collective effort to prevent nuclear proliferation.

The Geneva Review Conference was only the first round in an on-going attempt to confront the United States on the test ban issue. The second round is scheduled for early January in New York, when, again on the initiative of a group of non-aligned states, the signatories to the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty will gather to consider an amendment which would ban all nuclear tests. In turn, the New York meeting will set the tone for future actions and policies which may well determine the ultimate fate of the NPT, for in 1995 the next review conference will decide whether to extend the Treaty, and for how long.

In the last hour of the Review Conference, therefore, it was well understood that the disagreement involved far more than the inability to find common language for a final document. The United States wanted an acknowledgement of its negotiations with the Soviets on verification protocols for the existing threshold treaties as part of a step-by-step approach to a Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB). Mexico did not agree, taking the view that any such acknowledgement would detract from the essential point that the Bush administration, like its predecessor, had no intention of seeking an end to nuclear weapon tests. On that single sticking point, efforts to achieve compromise language stalled.

WELL AWARE OF THE BROADER ISSUES AT STAKE, CONFERENCE PRESIDENT Oswaldo de Rivero of Peru had prepared a last ditch compromise which he was in no mood to discuss further. When the plenary session reconvened, Mexico asked for the floor and objected, confirming that its month long opposition to the Western position was not a bluff intended to wring the maximum concessions at the eleventh hour. The compromise draft was withdrawn, and, amidst mutual recriminations, the President gavelled the meeting closed.

The failure to achieve a final document is not a death threat to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The 1980 Review Conference was also

unable to agree on a document, and in 1985 failure was averted only by a diplomatic sleight of hand. The five-year review conferences, however, are not simply a month of wrangling about nuclear weapon tests. The NPT is a framework within which the flow of commercial nuclear technology and materials is authorized, regulated and monitored. It is a forum in which the non-nuclear weapon states can reaffirm their own belief that security is enhanced by not having nuclear weapons in their arsenals and address the problems posed by the commercial trade in nuclear goods.

Canada, for example, pressed hard and successfully to secure a draft agreement governing trade in tritium. Such an agreement, which would have been included in a final document, is part of a broader attempt to bring non-nuclear materials, including heavy water and possibly beryllium, into a safeguard system. This is intended to give assurance that materials intended for peaceful purposes are not diverted into weapons development.

When such tangible, practical purposes of the Review Conference are lost, the damage is not so much to the fundamentals of the Treaty as to the ability of the signatories to tackle cooperatively the serious issues that threaten to erode the non-proliferation regime. These include the failure to date to draw “threshold” or near-nuclear states such as Brazil, Argentina, Pakistan and South Africa into the Treaty, and the monitoring of increasingly large plutonium stockpiles which are a by-product of civilian nuclear facilities.

IN 1963, AFTER SEVERAL YEARS OF UNSUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATIONS TO ACHIEVE a total ban on all nuclear weapon tests, the United States and the Soviet Union were able in a matter of weeks to agree on a partial ban which did not apply to underground tests. The preamble to the Partial Test Ban Treaty, however, reaffirmed the determination of the superpowers to negotiate a comprehensive agreement. Five years later, without any real progress made, the preamble to the NPT repeated the same commitment.

Despite these treaty declarations, it is doubtful whether a compelling case can still be made for a direct linkage between a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapon tests and the substantive issues of non-proliferation. There is a broad scientific consensus, for example, that near-nuclear states do not need to test in order to develop and deploy first generation nuclear weapons – fission weapons, with yields anywhere from a few kilotons to perhaps a hundred kilotons.

Moreover, even if a single test were thought necessary, it would likely be a “deniable” test, such as India undertook in 1974, and Israel and South Africa may have done in 1979. In regional contexts, the fine tuning of nuclear weapons – perhaps only possible through testing – may be militarily unnecessary. The political and deterrent impact of Israeli nuclear weapons in the Middle East, for example, is not diminished by the possibility that they may be of relatively small yields. Used against cities or large military targets, a basic fission weapon is more than adequate to alter irrevocably the course of battle.

The key to home-built nuclear weapons, therefore, is not testing but the availability of weapons-grade fissionable materials. It follows that