

BETWEEN 20 AUGUST AND 14 September, 1990, the parties to the Treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) are to meet in Geneva to examine the functioning of the Treaty. It is an important event, because it will be the last meeting of its kind before the parties meet again in 1995 to decide whether the Treaty will remain in effect for an indefinite period, or be extended for one or more additional limited terms.

After many years of negotiations at the UN, the NPT (as it is commonly called) was opened for signature in 1968. It is expressly intended to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. According to the provisions of the Treaty, which came into effect in 1970, states with nuclear weapons commit themselves not to transfer such weapons to any other party. Non-nuclear-weapon states, for their part, agree not to acquire nuclear weapons. To verify compliance with this obligation, states without nuclear weapons also agree to submit activities they undertake in the area of peaceful uses of nuclear technology to the safeguards enforced by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The fourth review conference

■ The 1990 Conference (like those in 1975, 1980 and 1985) is one of the meetings which, according to the Treaty, is to take place every five years, and aims at ensuring that the provisions of the Treaty are being implemented. The first three conferences, however, did not always arrive at a consensus in this respect.

As far as the non-nuclear-weapon signatories are concerned, the NPT is not only intended to prevent the dissemination of those weapons, it is also supposed to achieve nuclear disarmament. Under Article VI, all parties to the Treaty "undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date, and to nuclear disarmament." Moreover, in the Preamble to the Treaty, the signatories call for "the determination of the Parties to the Treaty banning nuclear weapon tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water (PTBT) ... to seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons."

Because of the increasing quality and quantity of nuclear weapons held by nuclear-weapon powers that are party to the Treaty (the US, UK, and USSR), these countries have, in the past, been criticized by several non-

ARMS CONTROL DIGEST BACKGROUND

THE FOURTH REVIEW CONFERENCE OF THE TREATY ON THE NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

nuclear-weapon states for not trying hard enough to achieve the NPT's goals. According to the critics, it is incumbent upon the powers which are allowed under the Treaty provisions to own nuclear weapons and continue testing, to meet the requirements of the Treaty related to disarmament. The issue was so contentious that at the Second Review Conference of the Treaty in 1980, the parties could not agree on a final Declaration.

Although significant progress has been made on nuclear disarmament – namely the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF) which bans a whole category of missiles and, more recently, advancement of the START talks on the possible reduction of strategic nuclear arsenals by fifty percent – it is expected that the issue of a complete nuclear test ban will be of central concern at the 1990 discussions. Two of the three depository governments of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (the US and UK) have openly stated that they would oppose any initiative seeking to convert that treaty into a complete nuclear weapon test ban agreement at an amending conference scheduled for January 1991. Their efforts will probably not go unnoticed at this next NPT Review Conference.

Peaceful development of atomic energy is another important goal of the NPT. However, since nuclear technologies are less in demand (mainly because of economic factors, and disasters such as Chernobyl), the issue should attract less attention than at previous meetings. On the other hand, the problem of the nuclear capabilities of states that have not signed the Treaty could, once more, generate considerable controversy. On this point, many countries find the NPT flawed because it does not ban cooperation between signatory and non-signatory states, and the latter do not accept the IAEA's complete verification measures.

What is at stake?

■ In its twenty-year existence, the IAEA has not detected a single violation of the Treaty's provisions, and none of the parties has invoked its right to withdraw – a right a country can exercise under the Treaty if, in its view, its supreme interests are threatened. Although it is now recognized as the cornerstone of the international regime for preventing the spread of

nuclear weapons, the NPT remains a fragile instrument. Since China and France have not yet signed (although there have been some recent hints that France is reconsidering its policy) only three of the five nuclear-weapon powers are officially bound by the Treaty provisions. Moreover, Israel, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Bra-

zil and Argentina have not signed it either and they are all suspected of owning, or wishing to procure, nuclear weapons – a fact which presents a serious challenge to the very existence of the Treaty.

Despite the significant disagreements that could arise on some issues, no-one thinks the 1990 Conference will fail. The meeting may, however, signal the beginning of talks on the future of the Treaty after 1995. The idea of extending the NPT for only a very short term in exchange, for example, for a firm commitment to conclude a complete nuclear test ban treaty at a definite date, could monopolize informal talks at the conference. For the advocates of the NPT, adopting such a strategy would be extremely dangerous, and could jeopardize the treaty. If the Treaty is abrogated, the IAEA will no longer have the right to inspect several nuclear programmes which, until now, have always been recognized (thanks to the Agency's verification measures) as being conducted for peaceful purposes only. Since one cannot distinguish between civilian atoms and military atoms, the disappearance of the NPT-IAEA system would shroud many nuclear programmes in uncertainty – an uncertainty that would be even greater since at least thirty countries will have the capability to build nuclear weapons before the end of the decade.

Some twenty-five years passed between the time atomic energy was discovered, and when the NPT came into effect. During that period, many attempts at preventing a greater proliferation of nuclear weapons were made, with varying degrees of success. Even though the Treaty is not without flaws, its advocates recognize that the implementation of a new international non-proliferation agreement would confront insurmountable difficulties. It is why the success of the 1990 Review Conference is so important to them. □

– MARIE-FRANCE DESJARDINS

Marie-France Desjardins is a researcher at the Institute.