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This May, the United Nations will be holding a review conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a key nuclear arms control and disarmament agreement to which 188 countries are now parties.

Originally proposed by the U.S. and Soviet governments, the NPT was signed at the United Nations in 1968 and went into force in 1970. Under its provisions, non-nuclear nations agreed to renounce the development of nuclear weapons and nuclear-armed nations agreed to divest themselves of their nuclear weapons through good faith negotiations for nuclear disarmament. In this fashion, nations on both sides of the Cold War divide signaled their intention to halt the nuclear arms race and move toward a nuclear-free world.

For decades, there was substantial progress along these lines. Non-nuclear nations refrained from building nuclear weapons. And the nuclear powers, despite their frantic stockpiling of nuclear weapons to bolster their world dominance, signed a series of important nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties: the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; two Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties; the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty; two Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties; and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. At times, they even reduced their nuclear forces unilaterally. As a result, by the late 1990s, no additional nations belonged to the nuclear club, while the number of nuclear weapons deployed by the nuclear nations or in their stockpiles declined dramatically.

Since 1998, however, the nuclear arms race began to revive. Determined to place their nations within the ranks of the nuclear powers, the governments of India and Pakistan exploded their first nuclear weapons that year. Since then, they have engaged in dangerous and mutually threatening nuclear buildups. Other non-nuclear nations, including North Korea, took the first steps toward going nuclear, though the extent of their progress along these lines remains uncertain.

The nuclear powers, with the United States taking the lead, also began to abandon their NPT commitments. In 1999, the U.S. Senate stunned much of the world, including U.S. allies, by rejecting ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Taking office in 2001, the administration of George W. Bush withdrew the United States from the ABM Treaty, opposed ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, began deployment of a missile defense system, pressed for the development of new U.S. nuclear weapons, and abandoned negotiations for nuclear disarmament. Responding sharply to U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and U.S. plans for missile defense, the Russian government announced its intention to deploy a new generation of nuclear missiles. And China might not be far behind.

Why has there been a reversal of earlier progress toward a nuclear-free world?

A key factor behind the turnabout is the decline of popular pressure for nuclear disarmament.

Rival nations -- and before their existence, rival territories -- have always gravitated toward military buildups. This is based on the assumption -- what might be called the "old thinking" -- that national security is best achieved through military strength. Not surprisingly, then, in a world of competing and sometimes hostile nations, governments are tempted to develop nuclear weapons to secure what they consider their "national interests." Thus, beginning during World War II and continuing during the Cold War, a growing number of rival governments commenced developing powerful nuclear arsenals.

Fortunately, however, the nuclear arms race of the Cold War era inspired widespread public resistance -- resistance that took the form of mass movements for nuclear disarmament, feisty antinuclear marches and rallies, and public critiques of nuclear weapons by religious bodies, scientists, and cultural leaders. Polls found public opinion strongly opposed to nuclear buildups and nuclear wars. As a result, governments were pushed, often reluctantly, into agreements for nuclear arms control and disarmament.

But, since the end of the Cold War, the mass nuclear disarmament movements of the past have declined dramatically and public awareness of and about nuclear weapons has dwindled. Furthermore, much of the lingering public concern has been manipulated by cynical government officials to bolster their own policies -- as when the Bush administration exaggerated the Iraqi government's readiness to wage nuclear war in order to justify its invasion of Iraq. Thus, freed of the constraint of popular pressure for international nuclear disarmament, governments gradually jettisoned their NPT commitments.

The situation, however, may be changing once more. Just as the nuclear arms race of the Cold War era inspired massive popular protest, the reviving nuclear arms race of recent years is beginning to generate substantial public opposition.

Much of this public opposition is crystallizing around the May 2005 NPT review conference at the United Nations, where nuclear and non-nuclear nations almost certainly will condemn one another for reneging on their treaty commitments. United for Peace and Justice (the major peace coalition in the United States), along with Abolition 2000 (a group focused on the nuclear issue), is laying plans for a nuclear abolition march and rally in New York City on May 1, the day before the review conference convenes. Noting that the NPT is "in serious disarray," the organizers of these events have called for "a massive demonstration" to "demand global nuclear disarmament and an end to nuclear excuses for war." Large antinuclear meetings and other related events are taking shape in numerous American cities, with informed speakers drawn from political, academic, and cultural life.

International organizations are also focusing their efforts on the NPT review conference. Stressing the importance of the gathering, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War is mobilizing for it as part of a Campaign for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free 21st Century. Mayors for Peace, an organization of top municipal officials from more than 700 cities around the world, has become particularly active in pressing the case for nuclear abolition. Headed by Hiroshima's mayor, Akiba Tadatoshi, Mayors for Peace will be sending a substantial delegation to the NPT review conference for this purpose. It will be joined there by a group of Japanese hibakusha, who desire to make their presence felt at the United Nations in this sixtieth anniversary year of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Thus, at this time of widespread uncertainty about the future of the NPT -- and, more broadly, about the future of nuclear arms control and disarmament -- there are signs that popular pressure is developing to put the world back on track toward nuclear disarmament. Whether this pressure will prove powerful enough to save the NPT remains to be seen. But there is certainly movement on this front. Fortunately, in the most dangerous of circumstances, people have a tendency to rise to the occasion.

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