

On the 40th Anniversary of the Entry into Force of the NPT

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I will begin my brief remarks by thanking Theresa Hitchens and her colleagues at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research for having organized this event to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

The NPT is often called the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Others have heralded its broader contributions in strengthening international peace and security. On 12 June 1968, following the General Assembly's endorsement of the Treaty, President Lyndon Johnson called the NPT "the most important international agreement in the field of disarmament since the nuclear age began."

That was a remarkable statement indeed, because it framed the historical importance of this treaty explicitly in the context of global nuclear disarmament.

It was of course regrettable that significant progress in disarmament over the years that followed would have to await the end of the Cold War. By 1986, the global stockpile of nuclear weapons, held overwhelmingly by two States Parties, the United States and the Soviet Union, reportedly expanded to a level of over 70,000, while the Treaty faced additional challenges, from both inside and outside its regime.

Moreover, since the Treaty's entry into force, India, Pakistan, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea acquired such weapons, and experts and historians still dispute when Israel acquired its own nuclear-weapon capability. In addition, Iraq and Libya once had nuclear weapon programmes despite their status as non-nuclear-weapon States. Serious concerns have also been voiced about actions by other States Parties, whether regarding disarmament commitments or non-proliferation obligations, including those contained in Security Council resolutions. Several Parties have raised questions about additional limits on peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Yet despite these difficulties, despite additional concerns over the wording of certain parts of the Treaty, despite its undeniable element of imbalance in the allocation of rights and responsibilities—despite all of these, the Treaty continues to enjoy overwhelming support in the world community. According to published estimates, the global nuclear stockpile has dropped significantly from its peak in 1986 to a level today that is about a third of that total. No less than 190 States have become Parties to the Treaty, which brings it almost as close to universal membership as the UN Charter itself. There is no evidence whatsoever of any cascade of States seeking to acquire nuclear weapons—in fact, we have been witnessing in recent years a political tsunami in favour of their abolition.

The continued existence of large numbers of nuclear weapons, as well as instances or allegations of non-compliance are of course matters of serious concern—yet they do not negate the merit of this treaty. It remains the only multilateral treaty obligating the nuclear-weapon States to pursue global nuclear disarmament. The fact that there have been cases of non-compliance does not weaken the legal effect of this treaty. In this respect, international law is not much different from domestic law—the mere fact of non-compliance with domestic laws against murder, for example, has not led to murder becoming a new norm.

The architects of the NPT were wise to recognize a need for a process to review its implementation, a recognition that led to a formal agreement at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference to regular five-year review conferences, as registered in Decision One concerning “strengthening the review process for the treaty.” The review process was further strengthened at the 2000 Review Conference. Several ideas have been advanced and certainly efforts will continue to be underway to strengthen it further in the years ahead. Among other proposals, some Parties have highlighted the need for more detailed reporting on implementation of commitments on nuclear disarmament, while others want to explore the possibility to take a second look at the review process itself.

In my view, the Treaty’s review process is a kind of diagnostic tool for informing its States Parties about the general health of their Treaty. If there is discord and acrimony, we should not blame the proverbial messenger—in this case the process itself—but instead use these readings from our diagnostic tool as grounds for reflecting more deeply upon the differences in the policies and practices of the States Parties.

It seems sometimes that the zeal of individual States to promote their own particular interests has at times clouded their ability to comprehend how their actions are viewed by other States Parties. Each year, young students gather from around the world to participate in what are called “model United Nations” events, in which students have to play the role of diplomats from different countries, even perceived enemies of their home states.

In an ideal world, the States Parties of the NPT would recognize the benefit of such an exercise and convene their own model NPT Review Conference, with each Party having to understand and advance the interests of other States. I would hope that such an exercise would prove to be a useful learning experience, in fostering a deeper understanding of the common interests—often called “global public goods”—that are the subject matter of this Treaty.

Until such an ideal world arrives, however, we have little choice but to persist in our common efforts to achieve full implementation of the Treaty, and to improve the ability of the review process to assess the basic issues of compliance. By common efforts, I do not only mean by like-minded States Parties, but also by cooperation with actors in civil society who have long worked on behalf of the solemn goals of this Treaty.

With a combination of enlightened leadership from States with the largest nuclear arsenals, determined leadership by middle-power and other states around the world, encouragement from the rest of the diplomatic community, and strong support from civil society—with all of these, there is indeed hope for a bright future for this Treaty. Together, these form what might be called the four political pillars of this Treaty.

My message today is therefore, let us work together to make our next NPT commemorative event an occasion not just for reminiscing on past historic events, but for rededicating ourselves to the achievement of a world entirely free of nuclear weapons.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

XXXVI President of the United States: 1963-1969

308 - Remarks Before the U.N. General Assembly Following Its Endorsement of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

June 12, 1968

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Your Excellencies, delegates to the General Assembly:

I have asked for the privilege of addressing you this afternoon

--to acknowledge this momentous event in the history of nations; and

--to pledge, on behalf of the United States, our determination to make this but a first step toward ending the peril of nuclear war.

Four and a half years ago, shortly after the awesome responsibility of leadership was thrust into my hands, I instructed our negotiators at Geneva to seek a treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

I recalled the modest and mutual reductions in arms spending that had been achieved by the United States and the Soviet Union. And I said then, "Let us pray that the tide has turned--that further and far-reaching agreements lie ahead--and that future generations will mark 1964 as the year the world turned for all time away from the horrors of war and constructed new bulwarks for peace."

Four and a half years of patient and painstaking negotiations in Geneva--and of further debate and refinement here in the United Nations--were to follow. Now, at last, the work of many governments has become one instrument of international peace and sanity. The hands of many peoples have written a testament to reason--and to the will of mankind to endure.

The resolution that you have just approved commends to the governments of the world for their speedy ratification the treaty for the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.

It is **the most important international agreement in the field of disarmament since the nuclear age began.**

It goes far to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

It commits the nuclear powers to redouble their efforts to end the nuclear arms race and to achieve nuclear disarmament.

It will insure the equitable sharing of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy--under effective safeguards--for the benefit of all nations.

On behalf of the Government and the people of the United States, let me congratulate all who have contributed to this historic event.

But we should not linger long in mutual congratulations. The quest--and the need--for disarmament is too urgent for that.

Many further steps are needed if this treaty is to fulfill its great purposes, and if we are to move beyond it toward the ultimate goal that we all seek--peace in the world.

As regards the treaty itself, no time should be lost in bringing it into force. I pledge you this afternoon that we of the United States will move rapidly
--to open the treaty for signature,
--to sign it on behalf of our own Government, and
--to seek its prompt ratification in accordance with our Constitution.

We shall urge other nations to complete their ratification speedily so that the treaty can enter into force at the earliest possible date.

I further pledge that, as soon as the treaty has entered into force, we of the United States will carry out our responsibilities under it--in full measure.

First, we shall fully and scrupulously discharge our obligations as a nuclear-weapon party:
--not to transfer nuclear weapons, or control over them, to any recipient whatsoever; and
--not to help any nonnuclear state acquire such weapons.

Second, we shall cooperate fully in bringing the treaty's safeguards into being--safeguards that will prevent the diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful uses to weapons.

Third, we shall, as the treaty requires, facilitate the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials, scientific and technical information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. We shall give particular attention to the needs of the developing nations.

We shall share our technical knowledge and experience in peaceful nuclear research fully, and we shall share it without reservation. This will include very important new developments in electrical power generation, agriculture, medicine, industry, and in the desalting of sea water.

Fourth, we shall continue our research and development into the use of nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes. We shall make available to the nonnuclear treaty partners--without delay, and under the treaty's provisions--the benefits of such explosions.

Finally--in keeping with our obligations under the treaty--we shall, as a major nuclear-weapon power, promptly and vigorously pursue negotiations on effective measures to halt the nuclear arms race and to reduce existing nuclear arsenals.

It is right that we should be so obligated. The nonnuclear states--who undertake with this treaty to forgo nuclear weapons--are entitled to the assurance that powers possessing them, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, will lose no time in finding the way to scale down the nuclear arms race.

We desire--yes, we urgently desire--to begin early discussions on the limitation of strategic offensive and defensive nuclear weapons systems.

We shall search for an agreement that will not only avoid another costly and futile escalation of the arms race, but

will deescalate it.

I believe that this treaty can lead to further measures that will inhibit the senseless continuation of the arms race. I believe that it can give the world time--very precious time--to protect itself against Armageddon. If my faith is well founded, as I believe that it is, then this treaty will truly deserve to be recorded as the most important step toward peace since the founding of the United Nations.

Further, the nonproliferation treaty will serve not only as a deterrent to the spread of nuclear weapons, but also as a powerful stimulus for the peaceful use of the atom.

When this treaty comes into force, the growing number of nuclear-power reactors around the world--with their inevitable byproduct of plutonium--need no longer cause anxiety as potential sources of nuclear weapons material. Under the safeguards of the treaty, those reactors will be pledged and will be guaranteed as peaceful sources of energy--as vital instruments of growth and development.

My fellow citizens of the world, what we have achieved here today few men would have dared to even hope for a decade ago.

Nations that were long beset by differences have--in this great treaty--found common ground in their need to use the incredible force of the atom for peace, and not for war.

From this ground that we have won here together, then let us press forward --to halt and to reverse the buildup of nuclear arsenals;
--to find new ways to eliminate the threat of conventional conflicts that might grow into nuclear disaster.

In the name of our common humanity, let us insure our survival--so that we may achieve our high destiny on earth. Let us work for the ultimate self-interest of mankind: for that peace in which future generations may build a world without fear, and without want--a world that is fit for the sons of man.

In closing, Mr. President, permit me to pay my cordial respects to you. In your conduct of the affairs of this Assembly, Mr. President, you have won new honors for your country and for yourself.

Mr. Secretary General, we of the United States are very grateful for your contributions to the United Nations and to its universal goals of peace.

To all of the delegates here assembled, to all of you who have labored hard and fruitfully throughout this historic session, we extend our sincere good wishes; and to those who are about to leave our shores, we bid each of you Godspeed and a safe and pleasant journey home.

Thank you.

Note: The President spoke at 5:09 p.m. at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City shortly after the General Assembly voted 95 to 4, with 21 abstentions, in support of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In his opening words the President referred to the President of the General Assembly, Corneliu Manescu of Romania, and Secretary General U Thant.

The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty was signed on July 1, 1968, by representatives of 56 nations (see Item 349).