

On January 13th Norm Bowen, professor of political science at Cal State East Bay, spoke at the UNA-East Bay Dinner Forum on nuclear non-proliferation. The Forum was launched in mid-2009 to engage experts on a UN-related topic in a lively question-and-answer discussion with members over an inexpensive ethnic meal. See our web site or the calendar on the back page for upcoming topics. Below is a summary of Dr. Bowen's talk.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation: Prospects for 2010

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The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), ratified in 1970 and extended indefinitely in 1995, is an historic effort to prevent the spread of and eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear states agreed to relinquish their right to develop weapons in exchange for enhanced access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is charged with both the nuclear monitoring and the promotion of civilian nuclear technology in non-nuclear states. The nuclear weapons states committed (without a timetable) to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The NPT succeeded in markedly slowing the number of new nuclear weapons states, which had been expected to expand to twenty or thirty. It led to the abandonment of nuclear weapons (South Africa) or nuclear weapons programs (Argentina and Brazil) by some states. It helped to energize the regional Nuclear Weapons Free Zones movement within the United Nations. The two nuclear superpowers, the U.S. and the Russian Federation, have reduced their strategic nuclear arsenals by two-thirds under the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaties but still have over 2000 strategic nuclear weapons each.

Some new states have joined the nuclear weapons club since 1970. Several countries never signed the NPT and are not formally bound by it even though the nuclear weapons states vowed to try and prevent all states from obtaining nuclear status. Non-NPT states Israel, India, and Pakistan all have nuclear weapons. Only part of India's program is now under partial IAEA monitoring. No serious efforts have been made to impose sanctions or take other action against these states. Iraq was developing a clandestine nuclear weapons program in spite of IAEA monitoring before Israel destroyed a key reactor in 1981. In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, Iraq was discovered to have restarted its nuclear weapons program, which was then dismantled by the IAEA under the Security Council imposed disarming of Iraq that followed the war. Since then a stronger monitoring program has been developed. North Korea, which withdrew from the NPT in 2003, also developed nuclear weapons while under IAEA scrutiny and, in addition, has intercontinental ballistic missiles (but probably not the ability to miniaturize the weapons sufficiently to actually launch them). Negotiations continue to convince North Korea to return to the NPT framework and abandon the nuclear weapons program. Security Council sanctions on North Korea continue.

The country currently of greatest concern to the credibility of the NPT is Iran. Iran signed the NPT and has been the recipient of substantial civilian nuclear technology transfers, initially from the U.S. and more recently from Russia. However, Iran has admitted to previously conducting a secret nuclear weapons program, which the U.S. believed was completely shut down in 2003. As a result of Iran's admission to failing to live up to its obligations under the NPT, the UN Security Council held that Iran should no longer enrich uranium even for civilian purposes, a

right it held under the NPT. Iran insists on its right to civilian nuclear technology, including enrichment while at the same time denying that any of its nuclear activities is aimed at producing nuclear weapons. The enrichment program continues in defiance of the Security Council and the IAEA. The IAEA has proposed a compromise whereby the Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) that Iran has already produced would be removed from the country and returned as fuel rods for use in Iranian reactors. That would prevent the LEU from being further enriched and would place the fuel rods under IAEA monitoring. Iran has given mixed signals about its willingness to accept the IAEA plan. Removal of most or all of Iran's LEU would prevent or delay any effort to further enrich the fuel to weapons grade (an enrichment from 3.5% to 90%). The revelation of an additional enrichment facility and the Iranian threat to add as many as 10 more further complicate these negotiations. Iran insists that a diversification of its enrichment program is necessary because of the threats issued by Israel to launch air strikes, if necessary, to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons.

Iran insists that its enrichment program is for civilian nuclear use only. The IAEA has said that nothing Iran has done so far indicates an effort to produce Highly Enriched Uranium. Nor is there any indisputable evidence that Iran has restarted its nuclear weapons program. However, Iran has not satisfactorily explained its entire nuclear program. The IAEA asserts that Iran has the plans for a high enrichment program and also holds viable plans for building a nuclear weapon. The newly discovered enrichment facility also seems to be incompatible with a purely civilian enrichment program. In addition, the intelligence communities of the major Western powers and Israel are debating the authenticity of another document purporting to be plans for an ignition device for a nuclear weapon. Iran claims that it is a forgery. Authenticating this document would undermine the Iranian claim that it has terminated its nuclear weapons program. But, the debate is further complicated by the fact that a forged document relating to a nonexistent Iraqi nuclear program was the centerpiece of the Bush Administration drumbeat for war against Iraq.

Iran currently has over 3 thousand pounds of LEU all under IAEA monitoring. Any secret transfer of this material would be difficult to achieve. Additionally, Iran's LEU contains impurities that make it poorly suited to high enrichment. Finally, enrichment of LEU to weapons grade is a vast and time consuming process requiring thousands of additional centrifuges that Iran does not currently possess. Even if Iran were to decide to embark on a weapons program, a decision almost impossible to conceal, enrichment would take a year or more. Weaponization would take even longer.

Iran has proposed negotiations that would place the nuclear issue within a larger framework of regional security and would address the sanctions and diplomatic restrictions placed on it by the U.N., the U.S. and the European Union. The dire condition of the Iranian economy makes these goals even more urgent. Iran wants to be recognized as a legitimate regional power with substantial national interests relating to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many diplomatic observers believe that comprehensive negotiations that addressed the nuclear issue within the context of these broader Iranian concerns would be an appropriate strategy. The UNA-USA has been an active and visible proponent of this comprehensive approach. (See unausa.org The Non-Proliferation Initiative).

The arms control community applauds the new found commitment of the U.S. and the Russians to nuclear arms reduction. Outgoing IAEA chief Mohamed El Baradei declared that "Nuclear disarmament is now back at the top of the international agenda." However, he also noted that the IAEA monitoring programs for the NPT are chronically underfunded. Pressure needs to be placed on member governments to give the IAEA the means to do its vital work.

The U.S. and the Russian Federation have announced a new round of negotiations to reduce the number of allowable strategic nuclear weapons from 2,200 to 1,600 with a longer-range goal of 1000. Beyond that point, the other major nuclear weapons states, China, France and the United Kingdom, would have to be brought into the process. Without setting a timetable, President Obama reasserted his goal of eventually eliminating all nuclear weapons. Critics call the new nuclear weapons targets timid and the lack of a timetable disappointing. Progress on this point is important for overcoming the accusation that nuclear states are using a double standard in implementing the NPT.

In September, 2009, after a meeting with heads of state and government called by President Obama, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1887, which the President called "historic." SCR 1887 again asserted the intention to eliminate all nuclear weapons and to reduce the danger posed by existing nuclear weapons. It dedicated members to bring all nuclear states under the NPT and to prevent any withdrawal from the treaty. It also pledged improved security for nuclear materials by all U.N. member states and support for the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. Nuclear terrorism is believed to be the number one nuclear threat. Significantly, SCR 1887 also endorsed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, a treaty that the Bush Administration had refused to join.

President Obama needs to follow words with deeds and press forward implementing all the provisions of the NPT. Negotiated settlements with North Korea and Iran are essential. Bringing all nuclear weapons states into the NPT is desirable. A sharp drop in the total number of strategic nuclear weapons would also help. Successful completion of the 2010 NPT Review Conference is a worthwhile next step.