UN75 Nuclear Dialogue: Event Summary

On 16 March 2020, CFFP UK, UNA-UK, and Article 36 held a UN75 dialogue. The online consultation was chaired by Lord Stewart Wood and debated how to achieve ‘the future we want, the UN we need’ in relation to nuclear security.

The meeting brought together participants ranging from UK officials, members of the diplomatic community, academics and NGO representatives. The cross-sectoral expertise resulted in fresh perspectives and pragmatic policy recommendations on the future of nuclear security, all of which have been submitted to the UN75 reporting mechanism.

Held under Chatham House rules the consultation was an open and frank discussion split into three sessions:

1. Where Are We Headed?
2. Where Do We Want to be Headed?
3. How Do We Bridge the Gap?

Session #1: Where Are We Headed?

The meeting began by asking individuals the question: ‘With respect to nuclear security, do you think people in 2045 will be better off, worse off or about the same as today?’ The results indicated that only 16 percent thought the world would be better off; 38 percent felt the world would be worse off and the majority 46 percent believed the world would be about the same.
Session #2: Where Do We Want to be Headed?

With the majority of the group viewing the future as being the same or worse off, it was useful to ascertain where we want to be heading. Some individuals had strongly voiced that in 2045 when the UN turns 100, they hope nuclear weapons are seen as ‘unacceptable’ and ‘something in the history books.’ Another participant explained that in order for change to occur states must stop relying on the narrative that nuclear weapons are required for a ‘country’s safety and security.’

One attendee voiced the importance of understanding why countries such as ‘India or Pakistan want or feel that they need nuclear weapons’, taking into account history, colonisation, and economic positions. It was argued that understanding and then addressing these positions are important obstacles to overcome if we want to achieve a world free of nuclear arms.

Overall, it was generally viewed that the way to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons was to ‘rebuild trust between states who have nuclear weapons and states that do not’. However, there were individuals who suggested that until we have an alternative, it is difficult to build this trust or even think of a world without nuclear weapons and in fact until then they can be understood as ‘a necessary evil.’

Session #3: How Do We Bridge the Gap?

During this segment, moderators sparked a series of debates around the need to break the status quo as means of bridging the gap. It was argued that nuclear security as a field is dominated by those from a certain demographic or background and this mould needs to be widened in order to hear from a range of actors. This led to debates around the incompatibility of nuclear weapons with Feminist Foreign Policy, a framework that several nuclear-possessing states are engaging with.

One participant highlighted that language is important. For example in understanding the difference between ‘trust’ and ‘confidence’ in relation to nuclear weapons. In addition, it was suggested that having experts from all fields that are connected to nuclear weapons in ‘an inclusive and incorporative
manner... is important to pre-empt problems and provide more sustainable solutions.’

There was a consensus that global cooperation, in particular via the UN as a key institution to manage nuclear issues, was important in bridging the gap. Moreover an individual suggested that there needed to be greater adherence from states of the rules based international system. Building upon this point further, one participant poignantly highlighted the responsibility of states commenting: “What is the UN? It is a 194 member states’... we need them to come together. The UN secretariat can only do so much...the UN can suggest arms control but states’ must take the steps to enforcing them.”

Final Reflections From Participants

Individuals were asked a final question surrounding what the first step is to improve nuclear security given the current political environment. There were a plethora of responses from strengthening nuclear taboo and stigma with existing instruments including the TPNW; to more engagement with Russia, China, North Korea, South Asia. One individual had voiced the need for there to be better interlinkages to realise that nuclear weapons are inextricably connected to other global risks such as climate change, colonial legacies, and racial inequality.

It was refreshing to see many of the participants stressed their desire to see more meetings like this in person and online, to highlight a commitment between N5 diplomats and civil society to discuss these nuclear issues.

Next Steps

UNA-UK, Article 36 and CFFP believe that the risks posed by nuclear weapons to our world remain severe and must be addressed. With the 2020 NPT Review Conference postponed until 2021, we are in the process of producing a report to inform this meeting based on the discussion and ideas from this UN75 Nuclear Dialogue.