

2015 NPT Review Conference side event: Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Contributes towards Global Nuclear Zero – Pursuing a shift of security policy on nuclear weapons

Global and regional approaches to banning nuclear weapons

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Regarding the establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Northeast Asia, for many years we have held similar side events during the NPT review process here in New York, as well as in Vienna and Geneva. Today, as we see the Humanitarian Initiative towards globally banning nuclear weapons gain an unprecedented momentum, let me share with you some thoughts about the relationship between the global approach and the regional approach toward nuclear disarmament.

As we are all aware, since the 2010 NPT Review Conference—which expressed deep concern for the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and took note of the proposal for a Nuclear Weapons Convention in relation to international humanitarian law—three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons have been held in Norway, Mexico and Austria. The number of states supporting the Joint Humanitarian Statement has grown to 160 as of today, since its initiation in 2012. The growing humanitarian initiative is changing the discourse over nuclear weapons, from a national-security centered one to a human-security and global-security oriented one.

The International Pledge, initiated by Austria to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons has now been joined by almost 80 states. The New Agenda Coalition has proposed substantive discussions to be made at the Subsidiary Body of Main Committee 1, about legal approaches for the effective measures of the nuclear disarmament obligations under Article VI. All those developments show strong momentum toward starting a process to make a new international legal instrument to ban nuclear weapons this year – the year of the 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

Looking at Northeast Asian countries and countries engaged in the Six Party Talk process over nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula, namely, Japan, China, ROK, DPRK, Mongolia, Russia and the US, none of them have expressed support for the Austrian Pledge. Only Mongolia and Japan have joined the Humanitarian Statement. This shows that recognition of the humanitarian aspect of nuclear weapons has not prevailed in the very region that suffered from the actual atomic bombings seventy years ago. Rather, national security and state survival have been at the center of nuclear debates in the region, including those for developing nuclear weapons as a means of self-defense, retaining nuclear-weapons-usable material and capability, and maintaining and even strengthening the nuclear umbrella, or extended nuclear deterrence.

The lack of reconciliation over past history, the non-existence of a peace system to replace the prolonged armistice regime on the Korean Peninsula, and the persistent failure to build a common regional security mechanism in the region against the Cold War remnants, have constituted obstacles to the suffering of Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims and survivors from being universally shared among the peoples in the region. My organization Peace Boat has carried out many Global Voyages with more than a hundred Hibakusha to travel around the world to share their testimonies with peoples in the countries we visit. In the programs, what has struck me was not only the lack of knowledge and awareness of the issue in most of the countries, but also the persistent notion that it is the atomic bombing that freed people in the region from Japanese imperial rule. And even as of today, this notion has affected the people of neighboring countries of Japan in a way that prevents them from grasping the suffering of Hibakushas, and from identifying the issue as one of concern to themselves as well.

How can we overcome this? First and foremost, a broad initiative for reconciliation is needed under a strong political leadership. The 70th anniversary of the end of WWII this August is a remarkable opportunity for that sake.

Second, I would like to propose to have a Northeast Asian Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, as a regional follow-up to the past three international conferences. Such a conference can make clear cases regarding the unacceptable nature of the human suffering and environmental destruction of nuclear weapons, in a fact-based and objective manner, to convince both peoples and policy makers in the region. Just as the past three conferences covered simulation reports of nuclear weapon detonations in Norway, Mexico and Central Europe, a Northeast Asia humanitarian conference can facilitate discussions on what would happen in the case of any accidental or designed nuclear detonations – scenarios for cross-border horrifying effects. The risks should be calculated, and should also factor into account the possible escalation of a conventional arms exchange in light of the worrisome territorial disputes currently existing in the region, and the possibility of attacks against nuclear facilities in the countries of the region.

Banning nuclear weapons, whether globally or regionally, needs a clear notion that nuclear weapons are special and thus have to be distinguished from other weaponries. No matter how much States clamor for their own survival, legitimately, no case for nuclear weapons should be justified. To establish such a norm, the current humanitarian movement on a global scale should be effectively activated in the Northeast Asian regional context, making the topic extend beyond the narrative of Japan alone.

Finally, let me remind you that International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) recently published “Principles for a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty” and is advocating for a treaty that would not only prohibit nuclear weapons and provide for their elimination, but that also provides positive obligations for parties in order to ensure the rights of victims and survivors of nuclear weapons. Such a human-rights based approach can also be considered in pursuing a NWFZ treaty in Northeast Asia.