For various reasons not immediately relevant to this post, my access to the 2014 NPT PrepCom was courtesy of a diplomat stationed in one of the permanent missions to the UN. What neither she nor I realized when she agreed to get me a visitor’s badge was that technically I would have to be with her at all times. This was something of an inconvenience for her, but turned out to be a wonderful thing for me because it gave me access to the fabled delegates’ lounge:

View across the East River from the delegate’s lounge.

The lounge is spacious with floor to ceiling windows facing north and east. Recently remodeled and furnished in a Scandinavian style, its color scheme is playful with bright green tables and white leather chairs littered throughout. A bar where you can buy a cappuccino in the morning or grab drink with colleagues in the evening occupies the southeast corner of the hall. The lounge is known for its cheap drinks—a fact I heard repeatedly over the course of our visit to the UN.

Networking in the delegates lounge is a lot like my experience of networking on Capitol Hill. Information is the currency of the realm and the ability to access accurate information in a timely fashion is the
practitioner’s art. No delegation wants their Ambassador to be thrown off balance or taken by surprise. Everyone wants to make sure they have an advance plan for how to respond. Yet, revealing too much too soon about your own intentions will allow others to outmaneuver you. Therefore, even simple procedural information will be closely guarded at times, and getting it may require locating a friend in the delegate’s lounge who will share it with you off the record.

Interestingly, the conversations were not dominated by the PrepCom. It was, after all, the second week and if there were going to be any drama it would have already bubbled to the surface during the General Debate. The same diplomats preparing their ambassadors to speak on Cluster 3 issues were simultaneously working statements for the Security Council session commemorating the 10th anniversary of UNSCR 1540. One of the hottest topics for my friend was the crisis in Ukraine and how her government planned to respond.

Behind the curtain of diplomatic formality, delegates talked about the monotony of official statements the same way we did. A common theme in this NPT reflections series is how dull the plenary sessions actually were. Sadia described the official statements as “tedious,” Nina found the Cluster 3 meeting “monotonous at times,” and Matt was surprised by the absence of “political fireworks.” And those are charitable accounts. The recitation of nonproliferation platitudes about “the inalienable right to nuclear energy for peaceful uses” appeared to be torpor inducing for many people in the gallery—myself included. Countries have been chanting the same mantras for years. As one diplomat chided, only half in jest, “At least we bothered to update our statement from last year.”

Although the details of the NPT review process may change, the formula remains the same. The agenda is organized around the same three basic bargains or pillars: disarmament, nonproliferation and peaceful uses. And the political dynamic between the nuclear “haves” and “have nots” has not changed significantly since the NPT entered into force. The only major shift was the vote to indefinitely extend the treaty, a decision point that for better or worse happened to fall after the end of the Cold War.

Why Words Matter

The official statements in the plenaries are the last step in a carefully choreographed call and response. Details are planned and the agenda is carefully negotiated. Saying something truly new in this highly constrained environment requires ingenuity, courage, and a good deal of political capital, and it does not happen often. It is a highly constrained linguistic environment.

In contrast, in the United States there is a strong cultural bias toward viewing language as a realm of inherent freedom. As a society we formulate many of our policies and programs, including our nuclear deterrence and nonproliferation policies, based on the neoliberal axiom that an individual’s true preference is revealed not in what he or she says but in what that individual chooses to do. This is, of course, a complete fiction. Both the linguistic and the material worlds confront individuals with real constraints—constraints that matter. Yet the default assumption that talk is cheap is a powerful fiction
that we perpetuate. It pervades even the simplest of our observations and decisions and carries profound implications for US nuclear policy and the politics of the NPT.

US talk is, in fact, “cheap” in the realm of nuclear disarmament, but not because it is easily abandoned or changed. Rather, the US is caught in the position of constantly having to convince the world of the credibility of a commitment that it has no intention of keeping, but doing so comes at a great cost. As I have argued elsewhere, the perceived credibility of the US commitment to the goal of disarmament does not “cause” countries to proliferate, but it does weigh into their cost/benefit analyses—a fact that is oft repeated, but continues to fall on deaf ears.

The reason US talk about nuclear disarmament is “cheap” is because credible attempts at opening space for public debate about nuclear disarmament in the US have been repeatedly shut down, and the individuals who stepped forward socially ostracized by their peers. If it is not possible for powerful people to talk opening about nuclear disarmament without having their sanity questioned and losing their privileged positions, there is no way that the vision of ‘a world free of nuclear weapons’ will become a reality.

Instead, these individuals are consistently written out of the analysis of US political history, as if each time one of them comes forward he is the first person to have had the idea. Most recently there was the manifesto in support of “a world free of nuclear weapons” in the Wall Street Journal from the so-called Four Horsemen. (President Obama picked up the same theme in the speech he made in Prague in 2009, but demurred when it came to actually disavowing deterrence.) Accounts of the vision of the Four Horsemen almost invariably begin with their 2007 op-ed, as if it were the first time that credible individuals had come out in favor of nuclear disarmament. However, before the Four Horsemen there was long-time security hawk Paul Nitze. In 1999 he published an op-ed in the New York Times calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament. Before Nitze, in 1996, General George Lee Butler, the retired commander of US Strategic Command (StratCom) and General Andrew Goodpaster a retired Army four star, came out in favor of nuclear disarmament.

Butler’s change of heart was particularly striking because he was the first person to command the newly created StratCom. In a high-profile speech delivered to the National Press Club, Butler spoke from 27 years of experience with all aspect of US nuclear policymaking and force structure, an experience he came away from “deeply troubled” and “alarmed that despite all of the evidence, we have yet to fully grasp the monstrous effects of these weapons, that the consequences of their use defy reason.” A decade later he reflected on the experience:

While this quest is not unique to me, it was...surely unique for me to undertake such a role. It is not one that came easily nor readily. My sense of urgency and obligation grew in proportion to my access to classified information, my exposure to the risks of military operations and my alarm at the unbridled appetite for sustaining or acquiring nuclear arsenals notwithstanding the end of the Cold War. Nor...is it a role easily played. While not surprised, I was nonetheless bemused by the reaction to my views, which ranged from condemnation to adulation. I discovered following my speech to the National Press Club in late 1996 that it is indeed possible
to become simultaneously an icon and an iconoclast. On one memorable day, I received both a scathing rebuke from a former colleague, and a letter informing me I had been selected Sweetheart of the Year by the Grandmothers for Peace...Breaking ranks in the nuclear weapons arena is risky business.”

20 years later, General Butler’s courageous challenge to the system has faded in our cultural memory. He is one of many who have been dismissed as succumbing to the “Nuclear Retirement Syndrome.”

Butler’s challenge came from the top down and was a carefully considered act. He knew the potential consequences of his actions and was willing to assume them. Major Harold Hering, in contrast, confronted the system from the inside with no appreciation of the life-altering events he was about to unleash. As a missile crewman during the Watergate era, Hering began to worry about the authenticity of the nuclear launch order. According to journalist Ron Rosenbaum, Hering wondered, “How can any missile crewman know that an order to twist his launch key in its slot and send a thermonuclear missile rocketing out of its silo—a nuke capable of killing millions of civilians—is lawful, legitimate, and comes from a sane president?” He was not the only one with this worry. Reportedly even James Schlesinger shared his concern. He was secretary of defense at the time, and second in the nuclear chain of command. As Rosenbaum tells it, “Schlesinger was reported to be so concerned about Nixon's behavior that he sent word down the chain of command that if anyone received any "unusual orders" from the president they should double-check with him before carrying them out.” After asking his question, Hering requested to be reassigned to different duties. Instead he was discharged from the Air Force for “failure to demonstrate acceptable qualities of leadership.” Regardless of whether you agree or not with his worries about the procedures for authenticating launch orders, the punishment for asking the question was severe.

After his discharge, Hering took a job driving long-haul 18-wheeler trucks. Rosenbaum caught up with Hering in 2011 to find out what had happened with him in the intervening years:

It had taken him a long time, he told me, to absorb the "devastating" consequences of what he thought was strict adherence to duty. After cautioning me that he didn't want me to mention any family matters, he said, "I've been through some pretty rough times but have tried not to be bitter about it all...I thought my actions were proper, but felt shame." Proper. Shame. He was doing the right thing but had to suffer the ostracism of those who didn't understand the urgency of his question, who blindly sought to inculcate an unquestioning "follow orders" order of things.

These men, and many more like them, live in a political environment in which what you may or may not say about nuclear deterrence is so profoundly constrained that dissent is silenced through ostracism. Of course these constraints are a part of all of our lives. We all have to live with the consequences of our words. What we allow people to say (the ideas that get funded versus the ones that do not), have profound consequences. Those consequences are equal to if not greater than the physical death of any individual because powerful ideas live on long after our individual bodies have failed us.
On Humanitarian Consequences

The POSSE NPT PrepCom reflections series includes an exchange between Phil and Jeffrey about the value of nuclear weapons in which Phil asserts that the Humanitarian Approach is flawed because its advocates do not offer anything of value to replace nuclear weapons. While I do think that Phil makes a valid point, there is more to it.

The conferences on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are an attempt to break out of the oppressive monotony of the NPT review conference by reframing the debate. As one of the most eloquent proponents of the approach, Ambassador Kmentt is a driving force behind the initiative and will host the upcoming humanitarian consequences conference in Vienna. In a recent op-ed, Kmentt argued that reframing the nonproliferation debate begins with thinking differently about nuclear deterrence. Deterrence, he points out, is a circular concept. The nuclear weapon states feed on the threat posed by one another to justify maintaining their own nuclear arsenals. Therefore, “[n]uclear disarmament and a world without nuclear weapons will never be achieved unless this vicious cycle is broken.” Breaking out of that cycle starts by creating a space to discuss those items that have no place on today’s PrepCom agenda.

As I have argued elsewhere, advocates of the humanitarian consequences approach are at their most powerful not when they talk about the consequences of a nuclear war, but rather when they focus their attention on the one thing that nuclear deterrence theory denied: History. Nuclear deterrence theory is ahistorical. Based entirely on assumptions about human behavior and observations about the physical characteristics of weapons, nuclear deterrence theory has no empirical basis. The novelty of nuclear weapons made such an ahistorical approach easy to justify. In contrast, today we have years of history on which to draw and the conferences on humanitarian consequences are turning to that history for support, drawing on new information.

Phil’s question about the value of nuclear weapons and what would replace them is a good one, but his answer to it starts by accepting the very frame that the humanitarian approach questions. Phil is starting from a privileged place in so far as he has the weight of a certain historical narrative behind him—one that Jeffrey pithily deconstructs: “You are perfectly welcome to allocate causation as you wish among deterrence, norms and dumb luck.” (For the record, I choose D. None of the above) Phil assumes that nuclear deterrence works, asserting that the “recognition of value” is an “established assumption.” Yet, nuclear deterrence looked like much more of a gamble in the 1950’s and 60’s. At the time nuclear deterrence was nothing but an idea and one that classical realists argued against. Convinced that history had shown that deterrence would inevitably fail, Hans Morgenthau argued that the only solution was a world state. Phil’s assertion that the value of nuclear weapons is an established assumption is correct. In fact, it is the assumption that underlies the greatest social construction in human history, the historical dynamics of which we only begun to understand.

Conquering the common threat nuclear weapons pose to the world is tightly woven into the UN’s identity. The first resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly at its inaugural session in January of
1946 established a commission on the “problem raised by the discovery of atomic energy” and out front of the UN is a statue of St. George slaying the nuclear dragon:
However, the nonproliferation regime has not slayed the nuclear dragon. Instead, the dragon has been domesticated. Since the end of the Cold War, many of the dragon’s masters have become so complacent and comfortable with their companion that they have forgotten that it can turn on them as well.

By collecting and presenting historical data, the Humanitarian Approach is reinvigorating debate by bringing new sociological, technical, and historical knowledge to the conversation that was not available previously. Although there is not yet an answer, the initiative itself breaks out of a stale and unproductive cycle and creates a new freedom of discussion that is sorely needed.

Conclusion

The primary danger facing the project of nonproliferation as we know it today is that will succumb to the weight of its own tedium—a monotony that has been “indefinitely extended” into the future under the leadership of the United States. As currently structured, the collective commitment to work toward nuclear disarmament is the force that convenes NPT member states. It is the one interest that all states party all share in common. Without the credibility of that commitment to disarm, the forum will lose its raison d’etre. Therefore, the P5 must continue to show up and claim a commitment to the goal of disarmament, and the non-nuclear weapon states must continue to press for signals of that commitment. The show must go on, each side playing its part. The question is when the show is over will it be because of revolutionary steps towards as of yet unrealized vision or simply because one by one the non-nuclear weapon states just stopped showing up.