Analysis: NPT - Five Years of Grace

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Five more years.

That is the grace period once again given to Israel to avoid discussing Arab and international calls to open talks to create a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone.

This is the practical result after the Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty failed over the weekend to reach a consensus and ended without a final statement.

Once again, it was the US (together with the UK and Canada) that came to the rescue of Israel, taking it off the hook.

The month-long conference convened in New York City with more than 150 countries in attendance. It collapsed after the US rejected an Egyptian draft resolution, backed by the majority of the state members and participants, echoing decades of calls to dismantle any nuclear weapons that Israel may have, which the Jewish state neither confirms nor denies it possesses.

The final paper, drafted by Cairo and opposed by the US, would have called upon UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to convene a regional conference on banning nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological, by March 2016.

Egypt, however, also insisted that the conference be held with or without Israel’s participation, without prior agreement on an agenda and with no discussion of regional security issues.

Any reference to establishing a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone (MENFZ) is perceived as directed against Israel, which, according to international and regional perception, is so far the only possessor of such weapons in the region.

US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller announced on Friday that there was “no agreement,” and accused Egypt and other Arab states of demanding “unrealistic and unworkable conditions” in the negotiations.

“We have made clear throughout the process that we will not accept the efforts by some to cynically manipulate the [conference] or try to leverage the negotiation to advance their narrow objectives,” she told attendees.

The NPT Review Conference was the fourth since 1995 (they are convened every five years). The purpose of the conferences is to draft a new treaty since the current NPT, which entered into force in 1970, was intended for a limited period of 25 years.

According to the NPT, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, technology, knowhow and equipment that would enable states to build nuclear bombs is universally forbidden, and only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, Russia, China, UK and France – are permitted.

Some of the existing clauses of the NPT, and particularly the one just cited, are challenged by emerging powers such as India, Brazil and Argentina, which demand full equality and call on the five major powers to get rid of their nuclear arsenals.

Since decisions at the Review Conference have to be accepted by consensus and approved by all participants, the US rejection of the Egyptian draft led to the conference’s failure. While there were disagreements on other aspects of the NPT, the Middle East issue was the most divisive.

Israel, which (like India, Pakistan and North Korea) is not a signatory member of the NPT, for the first time this year agreed to attend the Review Conference in the capacity of an “observer.”

Unlike this time, however, at the 2010 Review Conference, the US did not oppose the Egyptian final draft and forced Israel to take part in nonbinding and preliminary talks with states in the region, brokered by a Finnish diplomat, about the terms and conditions of how and when to convene a conference to discuss the creation of MENFZ.

The talks, which in one round included the attendance of an Iranian diplomat, led nowhere because of unbridgeable differences between the sides and the disintegration in recent years of states in the region such as Syria, Iraq and Libya.

Over the weekend, Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu phoned US Secretary of State John Kerry and thanked him for his administration’s position and support.

The official position of Israel is that it doesn’t oppose in principle the convening in the future of a conference that will discuss the creation of a Middle East free of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery (missiles), but only when the conditions are ripe.

Israel demands that before that happens, all states in the region, including Iran, must recognize the right of Israel to exist, sign peace treaties with it and put in place concrete security arrangements.

The next Review Conference will be convened in 2020.