The new coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has already inflicted great damage on a number of nations and on the world at large, resulting not only in many tens of thousands of deaths but also in economic, financial and social crises. It also forced the international community to cancel or postpone a number of important meetings, including big international conferences. One such victim, unfortunately, is the 10th Conference to review the operation of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – a central pillar in the current architecture of nuclear arms control and disarmament.

The 10th NPT Review Conference was scheduled for April 27 to May 22 of this year. However, the designated President of the Conference, Gustavo Zlauvinen, recently announced that the Review Conference has been postponed to a date not later than April 2021, depending on the state of the pandemic. This was, of course, an appropriate and necessary reaction to the COVID-19 crisis.

Ironically, the postponement represents an opportunity to address mounting pressures within the NPT regime. The risks for the Conference and, ultimately, for the Treaty itself, have been multiplying. There is a large list of serious worries and problems: the renewal of the nuclear arms race; the crisis in the architecture of nuclear arms control treaties; the crisis in the relations among nuclear weapon powers; new setbacks with regard to the Iranian nuclear deal and the proliferation crisis in North-East Asia; and growing antagonisms between nuclear-weapon-possessor and non-possessor states. It is therefore essential that the parties to the NPT use the time between now and the start of the Review Conference to look for ways to ensure substantive progress. If nothing is done, the situation is likely to become even worse.

Over the next year, COVID-19 apart, many damaging, dangerous, or counterproductive things can happen in the area of nuclear disarmament and nuclear risks. To start with, the only remaining element of the US-Russia arms control system, the New START agreement, is going to expire. Will it be extended or replaced? Will there be any further discussion about promoting new arms control agreements? And how will the possible further disregard of Art. 6 of the NPT impact the NPT member states at large? Will there be an increase in the dangerous feeling of disappointment about the role of the NPT itself, 50 years after its entering into force? What will be the global impact, and the impact on regional situations, including Europe, of the decision by the US president to exit the INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) treaty?

While arms control frameworks are eroding or disappearing, the nuclear weapon states are vigorously modernizing their nuclear forces, including the adoption of advanced technology. Examples include new hypersonic missiles and a new generation of cruise missiles. More generally, states possessing nuclear weapons and states hosting nuclear weapons on their
territories keep reinforcing the message that nuclear weapons are important and legitimate instruments for their defense.

While the nuclear weapon states cling to their steadily modernizing force postures and increasingly reject arms control, much of the world is moving in the opposite direction. The clearest indication of this is the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted on July 7, 2017. Supported by 122 states in the UN General Assembly, it has 81 signatories and 36 ratifications (still short of the 50 ratifications needed for its formal entry into force but with the expectation that the treaty will gradually attract the required number of ratifications). This schism between the nuclear haves, committed to the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons, and the nuclear have-nots, most of whom supported a treaty banning nuclear weapons, represents a dangerous fault-line in the NPT and is sure to produce friction at the NPT Review Conference.

The coming year will continue to be marked by regional tensions and serious nuclear risks. A major concern is the greatly increased tension in South Asia between the two nuclear-armed states India and Pakistan. Also worrisome is the failure to make any meaningful progress in dealing with the nuclear risks in North East Asia. Further, the US decision to exit the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program (JCPOA) and the American implementation of secondary sanctions against institutions and companies that do not respect the reinstated US sanctions against Iran, has created a tense environment in which the risk of conflict seems very real. In the midst of this confrontational reality, there is a humanitarian catastrophe in the making because the sanctions against Iran are exacerbating the situation in a country that is also heavily hit by COVID-19.

The NPT’s one-year postponement also brings into play domestic political considerations in some key countries. For instance, in November 2020 there will be Presidential elections in the US and in 2021 there will be Presidential elections in Iran. There could be a new American president and there certainly will be a new Iranian president. The results of these internal political processes could have a large impact on the fortunes of the 2021 Review Conference.

It is highly desirable to use the time made available by the postponement of the NPT Review Conference to work on and hopefully to make progress on these issues that are sure to complicate and possibly undermine the conference. However, the overwhelmingly urgent crisis of the moment is the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, COVID-19 is not only the main (if not only) topic discussed by the international press, it is also the main topic discussed by the Governments and political institutions of most countries. So it is reasonable to expect that for some time the issues of nuclear disarmament and the NPT will be put aside. But if this trend continues over the coming year, it will be very difficult to have a “successful” conference.

Another potential barrier to progress in promoting restraint and reducing nuclear risk is the international friction and contention that may be caused by the pandemic. The medium- and long-term consequences of the pandemic are certainly yet to be understood, but it is possible that this crisis will cause or intensify conflicts, especially in the context of existing global and regional tensions. If this occurs, the pandemic will contribute to an environment that will have a negative effect on the prospects for nuclear disarmament, for progress in the NPT regime, and on hopes for reducing nuclear risks.

There are some positive signs in the midst of this terrible crisis. There undoubtedly have been initiatives of solidarity among nations in order to face the common enemy of mankind, i.e. the disease. Countries, in various and different ways, exchanged and are exchanging equipment,
knowledge and medical workers in order to deal with the disease. Such cooperation is particularly critical to assist poor countries that have more difficulties in getting proper equipment (such as personal protective equipment, respirators, etc.) and often do not possess the medical infrastructure that is needed to deal with the pandemic. In a striking reaction to COVID-19, the UN Secretary General called for a global ceasefire, given the critical situation of mankind in the times of the virus. There has been, for example, formally a provisional ceasefire in the war in Yemen and also in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Ukraine (although several countries did not support the ceasefire call). Global cooperation has been imperfect, but nevertheless this international solidarity movement is, in its own way, contributing to peace and collaboration around the globe.

Even if the picture is not completely bleak, the pandemic will have a number of adverse consequences that may make it difficult to manage the period ahead. The human cost of the coronavirus is considerable, including above all the extensive loss of life. But in addition, the very heavy limitations on the transfer of people both across international borders and within countries themselves have brought to almost zero the political and human interactions of the majority of people.

The pandemic will also, obviously, have profound and inescapably important economic effects. The total lockdown of many activities in most countries has created almost everywhere a dramatic economic crisis whose effects are still to be fully understood but will surely be massively negative. The economic crisis will certainly be a global one, even if we will have significant differences between various countries and various regions. Facing the severe economic situation, countries and regions will try to rebuild economic activity and will be naturally inclined to think to their own narrow, specific, nationalistic interests. Unfortunately, there will be a strong temptation to put aside the need to cooperate and to express solidarity with others. In fact, the common attitude of “blaming others” is already evident in many places; indeed, the US and China have blamed each other for the start of the pandemic. It will be difficult to cooperate in this tense and pressured situation, as already witnessed in Europe, where we have seen difficulties in finding an agreement on how to define shared instruments to promote a general economic recovery.

In short, the economic calamity will haunt international politics. Cooperation is desirable and probably also necessary, but will be hard to achieve. We have to expect that economic difficulties will bring about a climate where many different antagonistic attitudes could arise or could be enhanced. These antagonistic attitudes will be of particular concern in countries that have a previous history of hostilities or rivalry with other countries and/or where religious or ethnic or political antagonisms are strong. It is also possible that new hostilities will arise.

The precise consequences of the above considerations are of course yet to be seen. But we should be concerned that the new post-COVID-19 political climate may increase the risk of war in various parts of the globe. With about 14,000 nuclear weapons still in the hands of the nuclear weapon states, the risk of the use of these weapons (or other weapons of mass destruction) will still be with us.

If we want to look at a crucial example from the past, where the long-term effects of an economic crisis brought war, we should think back to the worldwide economic crisis after 1929 and particularly to Germany in the 1930s. In Germany, the crisis created a political climate where the extremist Nazi movement took over and the consequences, in terms of antisemitism and war, are well known. In the present times extremism has already shown a potential for growth when people look for “saviours” and strong leaders.
On the other hand, we should not forget one simple lesson from the current COVID-19 crisis: it has hit a lot of countries hard – big and small, some will suffer more, some less. But, in any case, the investments that some countries have been making in nuclear weapons, their new delivery systems and in military solutions for today’s security problems at large, have proved to be useless in terms of protecting their security and their people from this new unprecedented danger. The difficulties in addressing the impact of the virus on the population are also a reminder of the enormous humanitarian consequences that mankind would face in the case of even a “limited” use of nuclear weapons.

In conclusion, Pugwash’s goals are probably more critical than usual in the current challenging moment: helping bridge the divides in critical regions; supporting conflict resolution; and promoting nuclear arms control and disarmament measures globally and regionally. Now the public debate and the media are dealing predominantly with the dangers of COVID-19. But we should expect that in the coming phases of this crisis, and in particular as we move into the reconstruction phase, antagonistic attitudes will become more relevant and more at the center of the public debate. It is easy to foresee that in the future, the need to defuse antagonistic attitudes, strengthen instruments of international cooperation and, in particular, reduce and eliminate nuclear risks will be greater than ever.

A final comment is in order concerning biological weapons. As we know, no international monitoring institution has been established since the entry into force of the Biological Weapons Convention. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the big impact of a pandemic on the life of the world population. Even if it is clear that the virus of COVID-19 was not the result of the work of any laboratory in any state done for the purpose of spreading a pandemic, the idea of building a biological weapon may look now more “attractive” to some, after seeing the consequences of the present disease. The virus of COVID-19 is not, by itself, a “model” for a biological weapon since this virus has generated a pandemic, while a biological weapon should be “confined” to the territory of the enemy. But there are other viruses that could become more “effective” biological weapons. It is very important that an international monitoring system should be created in due time, so as to avoid a biological weapons spread in the future. On this point the international scientific community should give suggestions on how to proceed and Pugwash should help promoting such activity.

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