

Interview

Mikhail Ulyanov

THE CONFERENCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE: THE REGION'S COUNTRIES SHOULD BE THE MAIN ACTORS

Will the Conference on Establishing a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East be held in 2012? What is the essence of the Russian proposal on establishing the facilitator's Group of Friends? What are the next steps Russia is prepared to take if the deployment of the unilateral missile defense system is not halted? And what are the results of the First Session of the 2015 NPT Review Conference Preparatory Committee?

We have put these and other questions to the head of the Russian delegation at the First Session of the 2015 NPT Review Conference Preparatory Committee, Mikhail Ulyanov, who currently serves as the Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department on Security and Disarmament.

SECURITY INDEX: What is your assessment of the Final Document prepared by the Chairman of the First Session, Ambassador Peter Woolcott, and of the results the Preparatory Committee has already achieved?

ULYANOV: The Final Document prepared following the conclusion of the First Session is a review document; it reflects the opinion of the session's Chairman. In that document he tries to express his vision of the debate which took place. This is not a binding document in any way; neither does it represent a consensus, and I am sure that every country has some criticisms to voice about it. But producing a document that would please everyone was not actually the purpose of the exercise.

As for the First Session of the Preparatory Committee, I believe that it has produced entirely satisfactory results. The whole NPT review cycle has got off to a good start. This time around there were no arguments about the procedure. We discussed issues of substance rather than procedure, and there were no fierce propaganda tussles – although there were some debates, of course. I was favorably impressed by the discussion about establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. It was obvious to me that for many countries this was a crucially important issue, and that the progress of the entire NPT review cycle will in many ways depend on how events unfold in this particular area. The Russian position was favorably received by the majority of the participants. For our part we will work hard to make sure that the Conference on the Establishment of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East is held in 2012, in accordance with the goals set out in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. We believe that despite the obvious difficulties it is entirely possible to hold a successful conference.

SECURITY INDEX: The Middle East issue was expected to be one of the most contentious at the Preparatory Committee. How would you assess the performance of facilitator Ambassador Jaakko Laajava? There is not a lot of time left before the end of 2012, by which time the conference on establishing a WMD-free zone in the

Middle East must be held. What else must be done to make sure that the conference takes place?

ULYANOV: It is true that there is not a lot of time left before the deadline for holding the conference, i.e. before the end of 2012. Ambassador Laajava was appointed as facilitator of the conference seven months ago, which is quite a long time. Over that time he has done a lot of work. He and his team have held more than a hundred meetings with various participants of the process. In our opinion, we must now get down to preparing the draft of the Final Document, because putting these things on paper will discipline the mind and steer the discussion towards the specifics. It is now important to begin dialogue between the countries in the region, as opposed to discussions between individual countries and facilitator Laajava, or between Russia and the United States. What we need is some kind of joint brainstorming, a joint effort. We would welcome individual contributions from every country, including Iran, Israel, and any other nation. Now that the First Session of the Preparatory Committee is over, preparations for the conference must become multilateral to the greatest possible extent.

Israel and the Israeli position are often mentioned in this regard. We believe that if our Israeli partners analyze the situation without prejudice they may well conclude that participating in the conference would further Israel's interests to a much greater extent than declining to participate. If Israel decides not to attend, its losses will be large, with no gains whatsoever. If Israel is truly worried by the state of affairs in nuclear nonproliferation, its duty is to make its own contribution, albeit a small one, to the cause of strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime by taking part in the conference. Israel must be interested in maintaining a certain dialogue on the WMD problem, especially since it has repeatedly voiced concerns about the possible presence of biological and chemical arsenals in the region. That is why the 2012 conference could be a platform to discuss all these concerns. Turning down dialogue is almost always a bad decision. We hope that in the end, Tel Aviv will make the right choice.

SECURITY INDEX: What is your assessment of the statement by the U.S. representatives and of the report about the Middle East conference they have released?

ULYANOV: Our U.S. colleagues are emphasizing the obstacles to the conference, saying that the circumstances for holding such a conference are unfavorable. It would have been more useful for them to emphasize the things that must be done to overcome those difficulties. They have listed the obstacles in great detail, but the positive part has not been given much prominence. We prefer to focus on a positive program of the next steps to be made.

SECURITY INDEX: What is the essence of the Russian proposal on establishing the facilitator's Group of Friends?

ULYANOV: I wouldn't even call it a proposal, this is just an idea we have voiced. This is a way of making the whole process more multilateral. There are countries for which a successful outcome of the conference is especially important. First and foremost, I mean the Arab world. Naturally, we need to cooperate with them as

closely as possible so as to make use of the existing potential. Incidentally, this would also help us to take into account their opinion, which may not always coincide with Russia's or the facilitator's opinion.

The idea of establishing a Group of Friends deserves attention because neither the facilitator nor the depository states can pull it off on their own. That is why the joint statement by the three depository states stressed that the responsibility for the results lies with the Middle Eastern countries, and that they should be actively involved rather than passively observing the work of the facilitator or the depository states – otherwise the entire effort is doomed to failure.

SECURITY INDEX: Who would be the members of that group, and how many participants could there be?

ULYANOV: We believe that the composition of the group is for the countries in the region to decide. Theoretically all the countries in the Middle East could become members of the group if they so desire. Alternatively, the Arab nations could choose several countries from among themselves to act as representatives. I would like to reiterate that this is not a fully fledged or detailed proposal; this is just a recommendation which we would like other parties to consider. If they choose to follow this recommendation I believe that everyone will benefit.

SECURITY INDEX: Who could initiate setting up such a group?

ULYANOV: There are several options. It could be done by the facilitator, by Russia, or by countries in the region. It is too early to discuss this. The idea has met with a positive reaction, on the whole. Now we are going to work on implementing it.

SECURITY INDEX: On the last day of the PrepCom session you made a fairly tough statement to the effect that further nuclear disarmament is off the agenda as long as the unilateral development of the missile defense system continues. Does that not run counter to Russia's commitments under Article VI of the NPT?

ULYANOV: Russia has repeatedly reiterated at the highest level, as a long-term goal, its commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons. But, in accordance with UN documents, nuclear disarmament must proceed in a way that would maintain strategic stability and equal security. In a situation where the long-standing framework is being broken in a fairly radical way, we are obviously forced to reassess our policies on deterrence and disarmament. The situation continues to develop in an unfavorable direction, and Russia continues to warn about the possible dangerous consequences. At the same time, we are keeping the door open for dialogue on the missile defense issue, in the hope that the right solution will eventually be found.

This is a key issue for Russia now, because strategic stability is being stress-tested, and if that continues we will have to reconsider many things, including those related to nuclear disarmament. The then President, Dmitry Medvedev, who is now serving as the Russian Prime Minister, explained this in his statement of November 23, 2011. The statement mentioned the possibility of new circumstances arising in the future and forcing Russia to withdraw from the START treaty or to revise its position on

arms control as a whole. That was not a threat; that was a serious warning and a reflection of our assessment of the situation.

SECURITY INDEX: Russia has a history of various initiatives and proposals pertaining to Article IV of the NPT. Russian representative Vladimir Kuchinov, Advisor to the Director General of the *Rosatom*, gave a separate briefing on the subject during the PrepCom. What are the proposals and initiatives Russia put forward this time around?

ULYANOV: Our initiatives were reflected in the official statement made by the Russian delegation. I believe that it was a good statement; it was fairly detailed, and it reflected all the main areas of our peaceful nuclear energy cooperation with other countries.

Our latest initiative was aimed at strengthening the multilateral legal instruments in the area of nuclear safety – namely, the Convention on Nuclear Safety and the Convention on the Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident. Those initiatives were unveiled during a briefing held by *Rosatom* representatives on the sidelines of the PrepCom. The idea is to adjust certain provisions of the two conventions, taking into account the lessons learnt from the accident at the *Fukushima* nuclear power plant. The discussion of these adjustments by the international community is proceeding in a constructive spirit. At any rate, in August 2012 Vienna will host a meeting to discuss amendments to the Convention on Nuclear Safety.

A fairly large number of countries have expressed positive opinions about the Russian initiatives. I don't know whether they will be implemented in their entirety. Everything will be decided in accordance with the procedures for any amendments outlined in the convention itself. But work is proceeding apace, and I think it will continue. As for the early notification of nuclear accidents, the situation is a little bit more complicated because the convention itself stipulates a more complex procedure for amendments. Progress here will probably be slower. But work is already under way, and more than 10 countries have already expressed their official support. Such a result is not bad.