Argentina and Non-Proliferation

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Argentina is considered a nuclear threshold country but is not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This situation explains why questions are frequently raised about the real position of Argentina regarding non-proliferation.

For this reason, it would perhaps be useful to try to describe, as briefly as possible, the principal characteristics of the Argentine attitude on this issue. This is the purpose of this paper.¹

Argentina and the Non-Proliferation Treaty

Argentina was not a member of the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee and, therefore, did not participate in the drafting of the NPT. As a matter of fact, only two states really drafted the Treaty. All the others only expressed their views about the successive drafts, and the two superpowers took those views into account, sometimes, when preparing a new draft. The UN General Assembly considered the Treaty but, as everybody knows, the text coming from Geneva was not really debated and suffered only very minor changes, introduced by the authors themselves – the two superpowers.

At that time Argentina made public several important objections to the Treaty and abstained when the Treaty was finally supported (not “approved”) by the Assembly on 12 June 1968.

Since then Argentina has maintained a negative stance toward the NPT. It is highly important to note that this position has been kept by all civilian and military governments of Argentina up to the present time, whatever their different political ideologies. Moreover, the two main political parties of Argentina, those which are likely to govern the country in the future, hold a similar position vis-à-vis the NPT. This clearly shows that Argentina’s attitude on this issue is not the product of a particular view or interest but a national attitude, and that this attitude is not likely to be changed in the foreseeable future.

What are the reasons for this position? Some are very well known: the discriminatory nature of the Treaty; the legitimation of the possession of nuclear weapons in the hands of a few states; the obligations, restrictions and sacrifices imposed only on the non-nuclear-weapon states, particularly developing

¹ The author wishes to stress that he is expressing personal views, which are not necessarily shared by his Government.
countries, while similar sacrifices are not required from nuclear-weapon states; non-fulfillment by these states of their obligations regarding disarmament and nuclear cooperation; the irrelevance of the NPT on the question of nuclear technology transfers, when severe restrictions and denials are imposed by the supplier states (the 1977 London Suppliers’ Guidelines) which go far beyond the obligations assumed in the NPT by the developing countries, precisely in the hope of receiving free and full technical cooperation; the irrelevance of the NPT even as a source of security, considering that a party’s nuclear facilities can be destroyed on grounds that the Treaty does not guarantee their peaceful nature; the total prohibition of peaceful nuclear explosions by non-nuclear-weapon states (when those explosions were carried out by at least one nuclear-weapon state, demonstrating that they are practical and economical) while nothing has been done about compliance with the provisions of Article V of the NPT; and so on.

All these reasons — and others not mentioned — make the NPT, at least for Argentina, a highly unsatisfactory Treaty. It could be argued, of course, that, even recognizing the existence of all or most of the above-mentioned defects, the NPT has nevertheless been ratified by the great majority of the international community and that, in any case, the NPT is a source of international security.

Both arguments require some qualifications. It is true that a great number of states are parties to the NPT, but most of them have no significant nuclear development and, therefore, their pledge not to produce nuclear weapons is really symbolic and does not constitute evidence of the merit of the Treaty.

In the case of the developed, non-nuclear-weapon countries party to the NPT, most of them belong to or are closely associated with one or the other of the two powerful military alliances, one of which holds the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, that is, the possibility of using nuclear weapons, while the other, adhering to the position of no-first-use, certainly does not exclude the use of nuclear weapons if necessary. Many of these countries have nuclear weapons on their territories. The real extent and value of the contribution of these countries to a world free of nuclear weapons is, therefore, open to doubt. In Argentina’s case, it is also doubtful whether they have the authority — and the same can be said even more forcibly about the nuclear-weapon-states — to preach to a developing country about the need to become a party to the NPT and to accept a set of rules and conditions that would hinder the free development of its peaceful nuclear industry, all for the sake of world peace.

Another line of argument stresses the utmost importance of the NPT as a source of international security. It points out, in support of that assertion, the fact that since the signing of the NPT, no new nuclear weapon state has appeared, at least openly. Conversely, the states which have not ratified the Treaty are presented as being responsible for any insecurity existing in the world. I have personally heard this argument several times from delegates of some nuclear-weapon powers and their allies.

In answer to this, it seems that a state of international security simply does not exist in the world today. And one of the main, if not the main, reasons for such a state is the existence of about 60,000 nuclear weapons distributed