



Nine countries in the world possess a total of 14,575 nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia account for 92% of them. Since their peak in the mid-1980s, global arsenals have shrunk by over two-thirds.

Behind Closed Doors

How an international NGO in Vienna provides a safe space for diplomacy on nuclear issues

by **Stephanie Liechtenstein**

“Diplomacy,” said Winston Churchill, “is the art of telling plain truths without giving offense.” Britain’s wartime prime minister understood better than most how diplomats frequently needed to avoid straight talk in order to maintain good relations. This is especially true when diplomacy and dialogue are conducted in the public arena.

However, in order to be effective, the most important diplomacy often needs to be carried out behind closed doors, where issues can be discussed more openly and opinions changed without losing face. Which brings us to the sensitive and complex terrain of nuclear weapons and Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP).

American Laura Rockwood has been on the front line of these discussions since she became executive director of the VCDNP in 2015.

“Diplomats regularly come to the Center and ask us to convene meetings among different countries in a safe space,” she said, a place “where they can discuss controversial issues and rely on the fact that they will not be quoted.”

Located in the new Andromeda Tower just

outside the grounds of the Vienna International Center, the VCDNP is among the very few international NGOs in Vienna that have the freedom to convene opposing sides without the normal political baggage of international meetings. The Center has hosted numerous such talks, for example, between former officials from the US and Russia.

VCDNP is a relative newcomer in disarmament policy. Established in 2010 on the initiative of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, it is operated by the James Martin Center for Non-Proliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute in Monterey, California.

Besides hosting off-the-record talks, the VCDNP also organizes public meetings, provides independent analysis, and trains and educates diplomats.

“Diplomats are often expected to become experts very quickly when they are posted to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBT),” Rockwood explains. VCDNP courses help them become familiar with the complex subject matter quickly.

Recent developments have once more underlined the importance of diplomacy in the nuclear arena.

“Nuclear weapons possess a destructive power that cannot be compared to any other type of weapon – whose use would lead to the annihilation of hundreds of thousands if not millions of people,” says Ulrich Kühn, senior research associate at the VCDNP, the University of Hamburg, and NY’s Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “Therefore, all states are responsible for seeing that those weapons are reduced or never used.”

OF TREATIES & DEALS

One means of reducing and controlling nuclear weapons is through arms control treaties. For example, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) signed by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, eliminated all short- and medium-range nuclear missiles and launchers during the Cold War.

So when US President Donald Trump announced on Oct. 20 that he was planning to withdraw from that treaty because of alleged Russian noncompliance, he prompted an outcry from nuclear experts worldwide. “If the US carries out its threat to withdraw from the INF Treaty, I can see a nuclear arms race coming up soon in Europe and East Asia,” Kühn says.

To many experts, the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) heightens the risk of war. “I consider the current situation in Iran more dangerous than North Korea,” says Professor Heinz Gärtner, former director of the Austrian Institute for International Politics (OIIP), who lectures widely on these issues. “Once Tehran realizes that it no longer profits from the JCPOA, it may slowly start to increase its nuclear program. This could, in turn, give the US a pretext to initiate a military conflict – maybe just in time for the next presidential elections.”

With it, comes a return to Cold War concerns. And it will be the VCDNP and other NGOs, Kühn believes, that will have to take the lead on these issues.

The VCDNP has hosted several recent high-level gatherings on nuclear-related topics including the impact of the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal, a potential role for Europe in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and on how so-called “nuclear-weapon-free zones” can better cooperate.

“Our main aim is to get people talking to each other,” stresses Rockwood. After 28 years at the IAEA, she understands how important it is “to give people a safe environment where they can speak freely.”

This role lies at the heart of diplomacy: that “diplomats, experts, scholars and civil society meet and talk to each other,” says Gärtner, but cautions: “What is missing is stronger ownership from the Austrian side.”

This has not always been the case: On the contrary, the Austrian Foreign Ministry has long considered nuclear disarmament, the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and ultimately a world free of nuclear weapons a foreign policy priority. Austria has also been among the chief supporters of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT treaty).

And as home of the IAEA and the CTBT, Vienna itself has been a center for the study of nuclear policy, and a neutral meeting place for nuclear arms control talks. In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter and Soviet Secretary General Brezhnev concluded the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II) in Vienna.

“Austria thus has a vested interest in these topics and should use VCDNP more actively to promote its foreign policy initiatives,” urges Gärtner.

There couldn’t be a better time. ☺



PUBLIC DEBATES

“I AM THE GOOD DICTATOR”

3.12.

The work of Ambassador Wolfgang Petritsch, who served as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1999 until 2002, will be analyzed at a high-level panel discussion.

18:00, Bruno Kreisky Forum
19., Armbrustergasse 15
kreisky-forum.org

MIDDLE EAST JOUR FIXE ON THE CONFLICT IN YEMEN

3.12.

Guðrun Hairer, Middle East expert and senior editor at *Der Standard*, will discuss the conflict in Yemen with Alexander Weissenburger from the University of St. Andrews.

19:00, Diplomatic Academy
4., Favoritenstraße 15a
da-vienna.ac.at

HOW GENDER MATTERS IN AND FOR THE ARMED FORCES

3.12.

International experts will address the effects of the presence of women in the military system and the challenges of gender equality and anti-discrimination.

17:30, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP)
9., Berggasse 7
oiip.ac.at

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NICARAGUA

6.12.

International experts will discuss the consequences of the current violent protests and conflict in Nicaragua and look into the question how Europe can help.

18:00, International Institute for Peace (IIP) 4., Möllwaldplatz 5
iipvienna.com



CONFERENCE & CLUBS

DEBATE COMPETITION

3.12.

Show your debating skills and join this event jointly organized Le Cercle and the DA’s Debating Society.
18:30, Diplomatic Academy
4., Favoritenstraße 15a
da-vienna.ac.at
facebook.com/lecercleDA

IAEA INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON MALNUTRITION

10-13.12.

The purpose of this symposium is to strengthen understanding of how to tackle the double burden of malnutrition by sharing recent research findings and experiences.
Vienna International Centre (VIC)
22., Wagramer Strasse 5
iaea.org

INTERNATIONAL CLUB WITH AMBASSADOR WOLFGANG ISCHINGER

11.12.

Ambassador Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference, will discuss current international affairs and present his latest book, *Welt in Gefahr (World in Danger)*.
12:00, Foreign Policy and United Nations Association of Austria (UNA-Austria)
1., Reitschulgasse 2
oegavn.org



ENJOYMENT

MOVIE PREMIER: A DARK PLACE

The Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, together with the International Press Institute, will screen the documentary *A Dark Place* on the online safety of women journalists, as part of the “This Human World Film Festival.”
19:00, Stadtkino
1., Akademiestraße 13
osce.org

WALDHEIMS WALZER

The movie by Ruth Beckermann featuring the life of former Austrian President Kurt Waldheim will be shown at Votiv Kino, followed by a debate with the director, former Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, and Austrian Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttmansdorff.
19:30, Votiv Kino,
9., Währinger Straße 12
votivkino.at

REFUGEE NEWS, REFUGEE POLITICS

The book *Refugee News, Refugee Politics* edited by Giovanna Dell’Orto offers original research and insights into the intersecting influences of journalism, news discourse, public opinion and policymaking on one of the most polarizing issues of our time.
19:00, Bruno Kreisky Forum
19., Armbrustergasse 15
kreisky-forum.org

GUIDED VISIT TO THE OPERA

Le Cercle invites you to a guided French tour of the Viennese State Opera with director Dominique Meyer.
10:30-12:00, Vienna State Opera
Opernring 2, 010 Wien
Registration under:
facebook.com/lecercleDA