

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

Written by Rizwana Abbasi

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The present international security environment seems less favorable to nuclear disarmament. All the existing mechanisms directed to promote disarmament and arms control are in despair. For example, the dismantlement of the existing arms control treaties between Russia and the West, arrival of newer technologies and renewed arms racing problems between US and Russia, US and China, China and India, India and Pakistan, turmoil in the Middle East and nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula introduced renewed stability challenges for broader non-proliferation mechanisms. Currently, states' reliance on modernization of deterrent force has increased while their emphasis on disarmament has decreased. Against this backdrop, the US has introduced a new initiative on creating an environment for nuclear disarmament (CEND) which aims at initiating dialogue among states to comprehend the global security context, states' underlying security concerns, their bilateral threat perceptions and space to gauge a degree of trust in order to create an environment favorable to nuclear disarmament. Instead of focusing on numerical arms reduction and instantaneous elimination of nuclear weapons, the US-led CEND adopts an incremental approach on easing global tensions to promote security environment for nuclear disarmament. The contention is that the CEND can play a lead role in plugging gaps in the existing nuclear non-proliferation regime thereby making it relevant to twenty-first century realities. Further argument is that the broader arms control culture will lead to a stabilized security environment for a renewed consensus on disarmament.

Underlying Causes for CEND

Skeptics' View

The skeptics[1] may believe that the US-led CEND is backed-up in the run-up of the 2020 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) in order to create some momentum for its success and perhaps to accommodate non-nuclear weapons states' grievance on non- fulfillment of disarmament commitments as per the NPT article VI. Indeed, the discussions on CEND would provide a platform for states to justify their current deterrent force modernizations, halted progress on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. More so, the US will be better placed to justify the abrogation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) treaty which prohibits it from acquiring and fielding more missiles and weapon systems. Finally, the CEND may lead to justify and reinforce the voices within the circles of the Trump administration that are not in favor of the extension of the New START treaty.

What Makes CEND Plausible?

The disarmament mandate is already enshrined in the preamble of the NPT that refers to the easing of international tensions and strengthening of trust among states in order to facilitate nuclear disarmament. Nevertheless, the evolving challenges highlighted below have undermined such a mandate underpinned by the NPT that makes the dialogue on CEND more relevant and plausible.

First of all, from the outset, the NPT has been an inflexible treaty that has failed to address states' four underlying concerns (a) bridging divide between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states (b) creating balance between non-proliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear technologies (c) the status of new nuclear weapons states that are outside the NPT (d) stabilizing deterrence at the regional level through restraint in order to connect regional states to the

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global disarmament endeavor.

In addition, the contemporary global political system is entering a multipolar order thereby shifting large and small powers' focus away from the Atlantic and Europe to Asia, thereby challenging the relevance of the western-centric non-proliferation treaties. For example, territorial conflicts have created intense security-dilemma driven arms competition between states such as the US and China (South and East China Sea), border issues between China and India, India and Pakistan that in turn has created an arms control crisis between Russia and the West. For example, the existing arms control mechanisms prohibit the US from accumulating power and stationing more batteries in Asia against growing China. More so, states in broader Asia such as the US, China, India and Pakistan have undergone an increasing up-gradation of existing asymmetries in conventional forces, inducting new non-nuclear technologies such as missile defense, anti-satellite weapons and conventional counterforce modernization. The modernization of nuclear platforms: up-gradation in weapon grade fissile material stockpile, high-technology hardware induction, ballistic missile and force structure, induction of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) and Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) technologies and surveillance means such as ISR satellites, SU 30 aircraft, maritime based Unmanned Air vehicle (UAVs), Cruise Missile, aircraft carriers and Global Prompt Strikes (GPS) are disturbing developments in Asia. These arms racing trends have created dangerous risks of accidental war, miscalculation, problems of strategic instability and disarmament crisis.

Furthermore, states alliance politics, broken channels of communication, conventional force disparity and frequent border skirmishes in the regions (case in point is South Asia) can aggravate negative threat perceptions of one against the other. Threat perceptions usually are a function of power asymmetries that in turn trigger intergroup conflicts. Employment of hybrid warfare, states' interference of others' territories through proxies, insurgencies and non-states actors, political rhetoric like propaganda, hate speech, and competing or irreconcilable narratives breed heightened threat perceptions, driving a vicious cycle of dangerous conditions under which misunderstandings could escalate to unprecedented levels of confrontation between the nuclear powers (case in point is India and Pakistan in South Asia).

Moreover, a lack of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and the absence of regional arms control arrangements have curtailed space for arms restraint. This in turn has pushed regional states such as India and Pakistan in South Asia towards the adoption of offensive war-fighting strategies and counter-force postures. More so, the CBMs between states have been largely influenced by the insurgence movements, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia.

Finally, the US political decision on a Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver, offering a non-NPT state such as India an outreach to global fuels and reactors without having it to freeze production of weapon grade fissile material, sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), follow the IAEA's full scope safeguards or adhere to a meaningful restraint regime has damaged the rule-based broader non-proliferation order. Such special arrangements within the regime have: a) aggravated regional asymmetries; b) minimized space for talks on arms control between regional rivals; c) destabilized regional centric-nuclear deterrence. Thus, the CEND's mandate should focus on resolving these challenges highlighted above on the framework suggested below. For example, a renewed political commitment based on the suggested guidelines below can be made to normalize political relations among states by initiating a multipronged dialogue process among states. The CEND should seek to preserve arms control culture, get states to manage bilateral conflicts, foster pace for CBMs, and resolve problems of bilateral threat perceptions by mitigating growing asymmetries.

Multilateral/Global Approaches

Preserve Arms Control Mechanisms: CEND should not impede the existing arms control and risks reduction dialogue between the US and Russia. The arms control talks will mitigate mistrust and moderate arms racing problems between the two countries. Notably, arms control talks during the peak of the Cold War led to a stable and predictable geo-strategic environment. The negotiations on Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaties took place in the midst of severe tensions between the US and the Soviet Union during

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

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1969-1972 that slowed down arms racing trends, thereby creating a window of opportunity for détente between the two rivals. Initiated in 1987, the INF treaty restrained both the US and Russia from developing nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The treaty resulted in strategic stability between the two states, thereby becoming a pillar of European security architecture. Signed in 1991, the START-I was the first treaty to provide for deep reductions between the US and Russia. The treaty played an indispensable role in ensuring the predictability and stability of the strategic balance which was eventually replaced with a new START treaty in 2010. These treaties need to be preserved so that they can act as a catalyst to initiate bilateral arms reduction mechanism between rival states at a regional level.

Universalization of the NPT: In a time of geopolitical transition, it is pertinent to reevaluate how nuclear order will be sustained during the twenty-first century. Sustainability of the NPT is indispensable to the stability of the future security environment. The NPT has to become relevant to endure the deep divide between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states over nuclear disarmament and strike a balance between nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear energy in an evolving world. A discriminatory nuclear supplier group waiver needs to be withdrawn by the NSG members in order to devise a fresh criterion. The problem of states' nuclear status outside the NPT can be addressed through the NSG membership under a revised mechanism suggested here.

Bilateral/ Regional Approaches

Regional Conflict Management: CEND should call upon regional states open CBMs between the highest levels of military and political leaderships on the settlement of the bilateral disputes at a bilateral level or through third party mediation. These steps should be undertaken by the rival states in order to achieve deterrent stability and avoid risks of accidental wars: a) demilitarizing their shared borders, thereby reducing the frequent ceasefire violations; b) promote shared identities through the flow of cross-border trade and economic cooperation to mitigate mistrust; c) promote *shared mechanism* that focuses on irritants to address the insurgences and cross-border movement of non-state actors. These steps may encourage the rival states in the direction to reach a compromise on the settlement of their bilateral disputes.

Promote Dialogue to Understand Threat perceptions by mitigating asymmetries: CEND dialogue should encourage states to pursue a strategic dialogue between military leaderships towards policies of nuclear restraint and mitigating asymmetries by adopting budgetary constraints. Shared identities can mitigate negative threat perceptions through promoting a culture of harmony at a regional level.

Promote Nuclear Confidence Building Measures (NCBMs): NCBMs should be made more effective through civilized discourse between political-to-political and military-to-military leadership in order to mitigate the nuclear risks that new technologies continue to pose.

Risk Reductions: It is essential that CEND opens a series of dialogues on measures to avoid accidents and enhances military predictability. These measures should further include: a) effective implementation of the bilateral hotlines to make military-to-military communication effective; b) transparency and agreements on non-deployment of nuclear-capable ballistic missile systems and missile defense systems in all the regions, thereby making states to build training centers to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation; c) conclude agreements on the non-deployment of weapon systems in outer space, sea and land; d) promote restraints on increased readiness of arsenals; e) avoid measures that lower down the nuclear threshold and **increase crisis instability**.

Nuclear Transparency

All nuclear weapon states' (specially the US, India and Pakistan) nuclear doctrines are deliberately kept ambiguous; perhaps this helps them achieve nuclear efficiency and sufficiency. Revisions in nuclear doctrine should be consistent with a policy of minimum deterrence. Other transparency measures may involve adopting and sharing of a list of targeting plans or even declaring the quantity of warheads in their arsenals. Enhanced transparency in nuclear doctrine and posture would simultaneously further stabilize deterrence and build upon other improvements in bridging the trust deficit through dialogue.

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

Written by Rizwana Abbasi

Bilateral Nonproliferation Agreement

Oblige regional states sign a comprehensive bilateral nonproliferation agreement agreeing to: a) establish a bilateral moratorium on the non-testing of nuclear weapons; b) work together to slow down their fissile material production; c) initiate discussions for a bilateral agreement on a separation plan for all nuclear facilities, which would include opening up all civilian nuclear facilities to the IAEA verification; d) link the terms of this non-proliferation agreement to membership to the NSG for non-NPT states.

Unilateral Measures / Great Powers Actions

The US should adopt a policy of discouraging smaller states from pursuing missile defense capabilities; avoid aggravating power imbalances at a regional level by incentivizing one state against the other. The US as a mediator should play a lead role in initiating an official dialogue process between regional nuclear rivals to manage their conflicts, mitigate the nuclear risks and preserve global peace and stability. The above incremental approaches may construct a surface for realization of CEND.

Conclusion

The contemporary global environment has created a disarmament crisis thereby challenging the relevance of the existing nuclear non-proliferation mechanisms. The arms control crisis between US and Russia, security competition among states in Asia, the nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, security challenges in the Middle East and emerging technologies have made nuclear disarmament difficult to achieve. In this context, the US-led CEND could play a leading role in order to comprehend states' rivalries and conflicts, their security concerns, bilateral asymmetries and threat perceptions that compel them to achieve technological efficiency and sufficiency. Adopting multipronged global, regional and national approaches the CEND can play a leading role by initiating dialogue on managing states' bilateral conflicts, fostering pace for CBMs, and mitigating growing asymmetries and managing their threat perceptions that in turn would preserve arms control culture. Thereby the CEND could make non-proliferation regimes consistent to current realities and create an environment for global nuclear disarmament.

Notes

[1] Author's discussion with academics based in Pakistan.

About the author:

Rizwana Abbasi received her PhD from University of Leicester, UK specializing in International Security and Nuclear Non-proliferation. Presently she is a fellow of East West Institute, USA and Associate Professor in the Department of International relations at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. Previously Rizwana was associate professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Bahria University, Islamabad. Formerly she was placed as associate professors in the Department of International Relations at National Defense University, Islamabad. She was a Stimson Centre visiting fellow earlier. Rizwana was a post-doctoral research fellow and has been teaching at the University of Leicester. She was also a research fellow at the University of Leeds. She is a graduate of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS), Hawaii, and USA. Her latest book is Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace (Oxford: Routledge, 2019). She has also authored: Pakistan and the New Nuclear Taboo: Regional Deterrence and the International Arms Control Regime (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012).