

Achieving the Vision of a World Free of Nuclear Weapons
International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament, Oslo, February 26 – 27 2008

Confidence Building in Regional Conflicts Involving Nuclear Dangers

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Introduction

Every unsolved regional conflict implies a challenge, not only to the directly concerned actors, but also to the global community. This threat is more evident when opponents in the conflict already “play nuclear”, or when players see nuclear weapons as an alternative to revert regional (or global) power imbalances.

Perceived threats related to regional conflicts have been, throughout the world, a powerful motivation to open nuclear weapons options, and their consequent developments. They have been also for the states, the justification to keep those programs alive and healthy, by allocating them enormous amounts of resources, able to be invested in much more acute people-related needs.

The irony about nuclear weapons is they are for states like a trap: difficult, but attractive, to get in, much difficult, and painful, to stay in; and extremely difficult to get out.

Dangers underlying regional disputes go beyond the risk of deliberate or unwanted use, which likelihood could be considered relatively low; the same tensions inherent to the conflict increase the collateral risk derived from potential uncontrolled transferences towards states but, even more risky, towards no-state/no-law actors. In this sense, there is an increasing awareness of difficulties related to provide an adequate protective environment for materials, technologies, and weapons of concern, at any time, and under any condition.

Taking into account the significance of the threat, an effective path towards a world free of nuclear weapons should include creative strategies to prevent and resolve regional conflicts, in order to reduce risks of use, to stop new developments, and to discourage potential new players to get in the trap.

In this sense it is important to include nuclear confidence building, as a part of the strategies to deal with regional crisis.

Confidence building means reducing tensions and suspicion among states or groups, making their behavior more predictable. It technically involves measures related to interchange of information, and people to people contacts, which help make less likely a conflict break through due to mistrust or misunderstanding among the parties. From a more general point of view, confidence building implies actions which could lead to increased mutual trust.

Among measures related to nuclear confidence building, this document primary focuses on the analysis of the “neighbor-to-neighbor control” model, based on the current Argentina-Brazil nuclear relationship. It also explores the applicability of the model to different regional conflictive situations, involving nuclear dangers.

Taxonomy of Regional Conflicts

Regional conflicts can be of very different nature. There are many valid alternatives to profile them, but a simple four-dimension approach, is used here for illustrative purposes, with the goal of giving some order to what is broadly known on the matter.

Taking into account the interactions among groups (states) in the conflict, the dimensions in this approach are:

- a. *Perceived level of threat*, generated by opponent groups, while trying to cover their needs and interests. (on an extreme, the existential threats by one to others, which could affect even the survival)
- b. *Group diversity* related to the contrast among actors' identities (race, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, etc.).

- c. *Intolerance*, as a strong element of each group's culture, which might lead on the extreme to believe that an antagonist group must not exist, or be changed, or eliminated.
- d. *Myths and beliefs* built up by groups of power (leaders or traditional elites), in order to legitimate their own personal goals and interests. A descriptive example which have driven nuclear weapons programs on countries with a relative low level of human development, relates mastering in nuclear weapons technology to modernity, national pride, prestige, international supremacy, or membership to the First World.

While the scope of conflicts is ruled by territorial parameters and number of players involved, their probability of occurrence, their driving forces, and their potential severity- from a mere rivalry to a high-intensity war- could be obtained from the analysis of these four dimensions.

The first three ones are self-explanatory as drivers to long term conflicts, as they represent the interaction of the deepest aspects of every actor's essence. They are related to long term group conducts, for example, ancestral hates or trends to recursive controversies.

The fourth aspect is imposed by leaders, individuals or groups, through their available means, like media and education. Myths and beliefs are likely much more volatile and subject to changes on political leaderships and, therefore, able to be replaced by new different and even opposed ones.

Once installed, those myths and beliefs may even become a key part of the culture and identity of societies. They are dangerous provided they are able to distort the perception of human groups (transitory or permanently), and may feed strong feelings which could support baseless conflicts, even when no relevant cause existed.

The history of the Argentina-Brazil relationship on nuclear and security matters offers good examples of this concept.

Argentina-Brazil Nuclear Relationship

America's Southern Cone has been a peaceful region from many years ago. In particular, Argentina and Brazil have kept a long tradition of peace and tolerance, but also of a certain mutual distance since the middle of the Nineteen Century, with neither mutual security threats, nor territorial conflicts, nor involvement on third parties disputes.

Even with diverse size, and national and cultural identities, including different languages, none of those issues have been sources of serious divergences. Both countries have developed highly educated leading classes and, scientific-technical elites, which aspired since many years ago at mastering on advanced technology, including nuclear, and particularly at closing the nuclear fuel cycle.

If applied to this case, the outcome of our pattern of analysis would show for the first three dimensions, a *low level of perceived threats, and a benign and tolerated diversity*. This can be translated as “no root causes for regional conflicts”. Anyway, a manifest mutual nuclear rivalry and mistrust grew up during the seventies and eighties, mostly fuelled by governing military elites, striving for supremacy over the Latin American Region (*the fourth dimension as driver to conflict*).

This led “in extremis” to the development in Brazil of three “parallel” military programs one by each armed force, with the ultimate goal of acquiring nuclear weapons, or at least to keep the option available, according to information disclosed lately by the subsequent democratic government. Concerning Argentina, its ambitions about closing the nuclear fuel cycle were even seen with suspicion by the international community, as well as its reluctance about being a state part of non proliferation treaties, but there was no evidence of the existence of a covert nuclear program in the country.

To trace a quick parallelism including nuclear development and political situation, while Argentina started its nuclear activities with the creation of CNEA (National Atomic Energy Commission) in 1950, Brazil started only a few years after.

Both countries had an early stage where the United States' aid played a key role, mostly in the fifties and sixties. In 1968, Argentina made the strategic choice of natural uranium and PHWRs, and started its nuclear power plants program closing a contract with West Germany. As a result of it, the first power plant, Atucha I, outside Buenos Aires, began to operate in 1974.

Brazil, in the mean time, adopted the enriched uranium line and LWRs, and got its first power plant, Angra I, from a cession agreement with the United States, in 1971. Shortly after, in 1975, the country signed a wide scope agreement with West Germany, never fully accomplished, which included several reactors, development of uranium enrichment through jet-nozzle technology, and a cession of a finished reprocessing plant. This agreement became for years the basis of the official master plan of Brazilian nuclear development for peaceful uses.

In 1977 Argentina, launched its National Nuclear Plan, with the goal of mastering the whole fuel cycle. In order to pursue this goal, one year after, in 1978 started an own development of a plutonium separation plant, the LPR project, near Buenos Aires and, in 1983, announced the production of enriched uranium in Pilcaniyeu, using the gas diffusion technology.

In 1987, Brazil announced uranium enrichment by ultracentrifugation at the Navy Aramar Research Center, while went on advancing with the idea of nuclear propulsion reactor together with the development of a nuclear submarine.

Summarizing, main characteristics of seventies and eighties were significant nuclear investments, the named nuclear rivalry, the high capability achieved on nuclear developments, the wish to claim at any time total nuclear autonomy of decisions, an

consequently, the position of non-signature of nuclear treaties, justified on their structural inequity among states.

With the arrival of democratic governments and the consequent change in political leadership, Argentina in 1983, and Brazil two years later, the myth of a regional supremacy through nuclear weapons, progressively lost momentum and gave place to a more realistic view of each nation's interests and possibilities. It led to a strict focus on peaceful uses and eventually, to a positive resolution of the rivalry.

To this period followed another one of increasing efforts focused on restoration of mutual confidence. Key milestones were the start up of the MERCOSUR (Southern Cone Common Market), together with Uruguay and Paraguay, in 1985, and its official launch in 1991 with the Asuncion Treaty. Only a few months later, the Argentina-Brazil bilateral agreement, which committed the use of nuclear technology exclusively for peaceful purposes and prohibited all kinds of activities related to nuclear weapons as well. It also set up the SCCC (Common System of Accounting and Control of Nuclear materials) and the ABACC (Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials) to manage the system, and to put in practice the mutual verification process and the application of full scope safeguards. In December of 1991, the IAEA became a partner. The original agreement turned out to be the Quadripartite Agreement, which entered into force in 1994.

Since its start up, more than 1,800 inspections in 68 facilities have been taken place within a framework of mutual confidence and cooperation.

Meanwhile, both countries go forward with their nuclear programs, including the maintenance of current capacities and the addition of new projects.

Argentina's strategy is focused on completing its third power plant, Atucha II, and positioning the country as a relevant nuclear exporter of radioisotopes and of specialties

like the OPAL (Open Pool Australian Light-water reactor) a multipurpose nuclear facility, for advanced nuclear and material-science research and radioisotopes production.

Brazil, increasingly involved on the production of enriched uranium, mostly through its first industrial ultracentrifugation plant located in Resende, near Rio de Janeiro. It is also reactivating the Angra III project, in order to complete its third nuclear power plant, and goes ahead with its developments intended to the nuclear submarine as well.

Furthermore, a set of very relevant joint projects has been launched in February 22nd with the signature of a bilateral agreement to enhance the strategic and economic partnership. It includes the development of a joint uranium commercial enrichment plant, a power reactor, and some other nuclear ventures.

Taking into account the results, Argentina-Brazil mutual nuclear control scheme, even perfectible, has been, so far a virtuous process with positive results for both directly involved states and, by extension, for the global community. Putting this statement in practical terms:

- Reverted a complex past of rivalries and mistrust, increasing confidence
- Provided mutual encouragement for the signature of NPT (Argentina, 1995, and Brazil, 1998), and Tlatelolco (Argentina and Brazil, 1994).
- Facilitates the contact of professionals and the interchange of information.
- Correctly orients human and financial efforts to projects relevant to each state
- Protects the autonomy of nuclear decisions, within the Art IV, NPT.
- Being a successful case, the experience positively influenced other different sides of the bilateral relationship, and the whole region. Declaration of Ushuaia, of MERCOSUR like a free WMD zone, 1998.

Applicability to other regional conflicts

The success on the implementation of the Argentina-Brazil agreement can be attributed to the natural and spontaneous cooperation of both actors in order to implement mutual controls.

From our example, at the time when the agreement was achieved, the myths and beliefs which had caused the severe rivalry between both countries had lost relevance due to the inner political changes, and this made possible the acceptance of the new mutual rules.

An immediate consideration would be that a low conflict environment increases the chances of a successful application. So that, this kind of relationship could be an adequate option to enhance nuclear non-proliferation through a mutual support among neighbors, when conflictive situations are external to the region, or do not involve major underlying causes.

When the conflictive situations are severe, a detailed analysis and profiling would be necessary to determine the potential of application of nuclear confidence building measures, and therefore of mutual control models. Unfortunately, most of current regional conflicts lay on this category.

In those cases, the confidence is usually completely broken, or could never have existed before, and spontaneous acceptance of mutually imposed rules or voluntary actions will not likely happen. Confidence building becomes, then, a too difficult long range process which could be useful only as a complementary strategy. Disarmament and non-proliferation goals will not be easily accomplished without a main strategy based on the skillful intervention of key players, like nuclear weapons states, and/or multilateral organizations. Concerning the first ones, they are able to act on multiple dimensions through their leadership and influence, but their role should be perceived as legitimate.

This will require from them measures of confidence building towards the inner circle of the conflict (direct involved actors) and towards the whole international community, for example an active role towards the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and, more generally, the accomplishment of their nuclear disarmament responsibilities (Art. VI - NPT), and the “thirteen points”, agreed in 2000. That way, they would lead by example and opening roads to reduce the overall level of mistrust.

In general terms, a methodology for conflict prevention and resolution should include the identification of driving forces or root causes of disputes and the definition of measures which allow take the four dimensions to the “positive side”. It means to giving a specific treatment to each one of them, in order to reducing or eliminating the underlying incentives of conflict, and more specifically of proliferating behaviors. This could be done by the same players when conflicts are essentially “benign” and them together with recognized third parties, leaders and mediators, when the points of controversy are much more significant.

Conclusions

Strategies to build nuclear confidence and, in particular the neighbor-to-neighbor control, proved to be useful tools for disarmament and nonproliferation efforts, involving regional conflicts.

They should not be seen as a magical recipe to be equally applied to every regional conflict.

A realistic approach on conflict prevention and resolution shows that it will be necessary a specific analysis of driving forces on a case-by-case basis, to act over any dimension.

In cases of “benign” conflicts (or rivalries), with no major root causes present, the same directly involved players might be able to find their own model of confidence building to cope with a conflictive situation.

In cases of deeper conflicts, and mostly if they involve nuclear dangers, these strategies will be a complement of other main efforts involving key external players like nuclear weapons states and multilateral organizations. To exercise a credible leadership, useful to resolve conflictive situations, they will need to build confidence and legitimacy, through visible gestures towards the global community.