

Achieving the Vision of a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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Regional Conflicts & Their Impact on Reducing Nuclear Dangers

V.R. Raghavan*

Background

The debate on nuclear issues is now centered on the spread of nuclear weapons and on threats emanating from regional conflicts. There are four kinds of dangers in the present scenario. One is the danger of proliferation where nuclear weapons are non-existent. Second, where nuclear weapons are present and pose the threat of a nuclear exchange because of a regional conflict. Third, is the acquisition of nuclear weapons and technology by non-state actors. Fourth, the security of weapons in responsible hands is another dimension, which has led the world to a “nuclear tipping point”ⁱ. While the debate on nuclear weapons and arms control has found political space, the debate on nuclear disarmament has not met with corresponding salience. In this environment, the call for the elimination of nuclear weapons is a welcome development which needs to be sustained.

Regional Conflicts

Two decades ago deterring regional conflicts was an important national defence objective of the U.S. which had resulted in a debate on whether nuclear weapons should be used to obtain that objective. The context of regional conflicts has changed substantially leading to global powers now attempting to manage, rather than deter, regional conflicts. There is also recognition of exogenous limits to great power management of regional conflicts. “Preventive diplomacy is now seen as a better tool for crises management in regional conflicts. It has correctly been said that global powers discount the opportunity cost of timely prevention thereby allowing conflicts to reach a critical stage.”ⁱⁱ The emphasis has shifted from prevention to the management of regional conflicts. A greater emphasis is accorded on stabilising regional deterrence relationships.

The fear of the undeterred non-state actor/terrorist has pushed many realists to altogether reconsider the desirability of retaining nuclear weapons.

Regional conflicts have intensified over the last few decades. They have been made more complex by the introduction of nuclear weapons dynamic. The nature of regional conflicts has transformed from conventional wars to fighting sub-optimal and proxy wars. Nevertheless, victory is still sought in an era where total victory is a recipe for continued conflict. There are central and marginal elements to regional conflicts, and each needs a different emphasis and approach. Such circumstances where either one or more adversaries are threatened with existential threats that could range from either regime change or to an adversary being helped by major powers over another, have led to pressures of security fears. This combined with the desire for power and prestige propels nuclear proliferation. Thus, “regional nuclear confrontations involves brinkmanship, i.e. a competition in risk-taking in which the side that is more risk acceptant and that can credibly make sufficiently devastating threats has the upper hand”ⁱⁱⁱ.

A new dimension of regional conflict is of existing nuclear weapons in countries facing extreme internal instability. Such countries, vulnerable to extremists gaining access to these weapons, pose serious international security challenges. On the other hand, the centrality of nuclear weapons in the nuclear doctrines of major powers, and their continuing reliance on nuclear weapons states is also a reality. This detracts from delegitimising the need for nuclear weapons, apart from reinforcing the compulsion to possess them.

South Asian Experience

The South Asian experience offers some pointers towards attaining the objectives of a nuclear weapons free world. The arrival of nuclear weapons in the region initiated a disposition to take increased risks by escalating sub-optimal conflicts. It was believed that nuclear weapons offer a firewall against a full conventional military response. The Kargil conflict fought between India and Pakistan in 1999, barely months after the Indian nuclear tests in 1998 was the outcome of such erroneous belief. A military standoff on

the India-Pakistan border followed in 2002. This had been triggered by a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. The international response to the risks of a nuclear exchange and realization that the will of the nuclear adversary can be gravely misjudged had a salutary impact on South Asian policy makers. That a war between nuclear adversaries cannot be a unilateral choice without regard to its international consequences, is a significant new awareness in South Asia. There is thus, a greater understanding of the limits of nuclear weapons in resolving regional disputes.

There is a peace process in place between India and Pakistan; a ceasefire on the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir has held for nearly four years. There is significant increase in people to people contacts across the borders and the LoC. A military conflict is furthest from the perceptions of the people and leadership of both nuclear powered opponents. India and Pakistan have both formally recognized each other's need for nuclear weapons as strategic assets rather than a war-fighting instrument. Nuclear confidence building measures, albeit limited in nature, are in existence and more are being negotiated. There is also a continuing effort by both countries to improve nuclear delivery means, build credible nuclear command and control facilities and increase the size of nuclear arsenals. Yet, there is an acceptance between India and Pakistan of the need for resolving the regional conflict through negotiations. These are momentous outcomes consequent to the presence of nuclear weapons within a regional conflictual situation.

Regional conflicts and their adverse impact on nuclear proliferation should be viewed in the context of the prevailing international nuclear weapons environment. This has been a contributing factor in the proliferation push. A nuclear roll back in countries that possess or intend obtaining nuclear weapons, is directly related to the cost-benefit equation in the security calculations of such states. Clearly therefore, "regional adversaries face an incentive to acquire nuclear weapons, especially to ensure the survival of their regimes from external threats".^{iv}

The Future

The following measures can offer a better and safer future in zones of regional conflict. Once they are energetically put into place, the foundations of a world without nuclear weapons would be made more secure.

- (i) The stabilizing of regional conflicts and making them more amenable to a shared outcome amongst adversaries is imperative. This would require that neither side to the conflict should receive unequal and an unfair advantage or support from the major powers. The creation of an environment where a military or quasi-military solution is made unattainable by limiting military aid and economic support would be an added factor.
- (ii) A concerted international effort needs to be generated to deny non-state actors access to nuclear weapons and technology.
- (iii) The initiatives of this Conference would be greatly furthered if the stalled functioning of the CD, the 13 Steps idea, the ratification of CTBT by major powers is expedited. The recommendations of the Canberra Commission and the WMD Commission Report 2006 provide ample ideas that require transformation into concrete measures.
- (iv) The delegitimizing of nuclear weapons should be the first priority in moving towards a world without nuclear weapons. Delegitimizing would lead to a major global message that nuclear weapons are no longer considered as critically needed security instruments. It is necessary to remove the use of nuclear weapons from the doctrines and operational concepts of nuclear weapons states. It will be a shorter route to first reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in military doctrines and national security policies to zero. Once that happens, the journey to zero nuclear weapons will follow, which needs detailed technical and procedural negotiations amongst nuclear weapons states.
- (v) The adoption of a No First Use policy would be an important measure to build assurance and confidence in reducing dependence on nuclear weapons.

*** V.R.Raghavan is Director, Delhi Policy Group and President, Centre for Security Analysis, Chennai. <genraghavan@yahoo.com>**

ENDNOTES

ⁱ “Toward a Nuclear-Free World” by George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008; Page A13

ⁱⁱ James Goodby, *Regional Conflicts: Challenge to U.S. Russia Cooperation*, OUP, U.S., 1995

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean Wilkening and Kenneth Watman, *Nuclear Deterrence in a Regional Context*, RAND Report, 1995 [Accessed online on 14 February 2008 at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/MR500.pdf]

^{iv} Ibid.