

ISA S Insight

No. 86 – Date: 9 December 2009

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Towards a World without Nuclear Arms: Can 2010 be a Year of Hope?

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Abstract

The first decade of the twenty-first century began with bleak prospects for non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons. A set of unilateral actions by big powers led some to conclude that ultimate protection only lay in the acquisition of nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan expanded their arsenals, and North Korea joined the club. Iran ratcheted up what it called its 'peaceful nuclear programme'. The 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) failed dismally, with nuclear 'haves' emphasising non-proliferation, and the 'have-nots', disarmament.

Then the picture began to change with Mr Barack Obama's election victory as United States (US) President in November 2008. He renewed US commitment to both non-proliferation and disarmament. The key players agreed to bring the United Nations (UN) back to centre stage in the deliberations, a complete reversal from the earlier position. Two important meetings are scheduled for 2010 – a summit in April in Washington, and the next NPT Review Conference in May. These have generated hopes for progress next year.

The paper argues that 2010 can only be a year of hope if the global leadership can adequately respond to the challenges. A series of steps and measures for them to consider have been identified. The risks of failure have been underscored.

It has been argued that the time has come for a forward movement from the doctrine of deterrence involving mathematical and quantitative analysis of destructive capabilities to a set of norms embodying a 'culture of peace', signalling the graduation of humanity to a higher level of civilisation. It proposes a convention banning all nuclear weapons, which for now can only be an aspiration, but one around which there should be consensus rendering it a universally-agreed goal.

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Introduction

It has been long since advocates of a world without nuclear weapons have had any reason to cheer. Over the past decade things appear to have gone from bad to worse. The entry into force of the arduously negotiated Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) could not be effected for want of a requisite number of ratifications.² India and Pakistan tested a number of devices each in 1998, and a decade later North Korea joined the ranks. The 2005 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty was an unmitigated disaster.³ The Bush administration's interventionist actions in Iraq and Afghanistan fuelled the notion that a surefire way to protect oneself from bigger powers was to acquire nuclear capability by hook or by crook. While it is true that deterrence held, and no conflict occurred involving nuclear weapons, with the increase in acquisitions by a larger number of states, the mathematical probability of a disaster, even unwitting or unintended, was enhanced.

There was another burgeoning concern. Some of the new nuclear powers may have regimes that are weak or unstable. This has increased the fears of insurgents or extremist non-state actors toppling such governments and acquiring either state power and therefore control over such weapons, or some devices by themselves. The debate on whether the Pakistani arsenal is vulnerable to the *Al-Qaeda* or the *Taliban* is a case in point. Also, such prospects may sharpen the determination of the insurgency if there is such reward to be had for them at the end. The situation becomes complicated also because such threatened governments may hesitate to call in external intervention for fear of being seen to be accepting erosion of national sovereignty, even if they themselves are unable to tackle such insurgencies on their own, particularly when such insurgents would have no qualms about marshalling the international support of their ilk in advancing their goals.

Anyhow, the picture with regard to non-proliferation and disarmament looked bleak indeed as the years wore on. This was exacerbated by the fact that the formal Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) appeared to be ignoring the disarmament aspects of the debate and focusing instead on non-proliferation, while the Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) were doing just the opposite. The situation was further complicated by the arrival on the scene of two countries, India and Pakistan, with fairly advanced nuclear weapon capabilities demanding seats at the table, but being denied it for fear that this might encourage others to take that route (North Korea? Iran?)

The Picture Changes

This picture began to change with the intellectual acceptance by the most significant player, the US, that both non-proliferation and disarmament needed to be addressed simultaneously, and the time to do it was now.

² The CTBT, meant to complement the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and designed to advance the cause of its goals by promoting a global norm that would prohibit all modes of testing nuclear weapons, was opened for signature in 1996. It has not entered into force as it has failed to obtain the ratification of 44 key states. While 180 states have signed the Treaty, of the required 44 states, 35 have ratified it and nine have not. Three have not become signatories at all.

³ The US had largely ignored the event. The differences between the nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots' were much too great, and both sides thought it better not to have a final document at all as they determined that a bad conclusion was worse than having no conclusion at all. The author, then the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United Nations in New York, was a participant at that Conference.

The person to whom credit is owed for this is President Barack Obama, who, soon after assuming office in January 2009, followed up on his election pledges by laying out in Prague in April his vision of ‘a world without nuclear weapons’.⁴

He also stewarded a resolution in the UN Security Council on 24 September 2009 in which all the council members, including the five permanent members (P5), each one an NWS, to the NPT.⁵ The return of the issue to the UN, as this action obviously implied, both pleased and encouraged the world body to plan positive actions in this regard in the future.⁶ The fact of President Obama’s receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize should be a spurring factor in this regard to outweigh any criticism of the Nobel Peace laureate ratcheting up the war in Afghanistan by dispatching 30,000 more US troops.

So the stage is set for the two key meetings on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation next year in 2010 – the summit on the subject that the US is planning in April 2010, and the NPT Review scheduled to take place immediately thereafter in May at the UN. Both the Administration officials and their ‘new’ partners at the UN Secretariat are committed to working to render these meetings successful, holding out hope, and leading analysts at least to see the glass as half full! Naturally success would be contingent upon the achievement of progress on at least two fronts, the CTBT and the NPT.

Future of the CTBT

There are three main reasons why a country would want to test its nuclear weapon. First, if it has acquired the weapon for the first time, it may deem necessary to announce this fact to the rest of the world, so that the potential adversary would take note, and be deterred. Second, if it is already a NWS, then the test would largely be focused on improving the weaponry in terms of kill-power, precision, deliverability, and survival under a situation of counter-attack.⁷ Finally, a country may do so to seek recognition and prestige as a higher power, and thereby stake its claim to play a greater role in shaping global affairs in consonance with its perceived national self-interests.

These are powerful incentives. The only way to wean away states from these would be to counter each of the above through the creation of norms and legislations, and a strong

⁴ *Real Clear politics*. http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/obama_nuclear_proliferation.html (accessed on 6 October 2009).

⁵ For a more detailed analysis, see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “Non-Proliferation versus Disarmament: A Destabilising Dichotomy”, ISAS Working Paper No. 94, 21 October 2009, p. 7.

⁶ The author’s meeting with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, 24 November 2009, during which the latter expressed his satisfaction at this development.

⁷ Acquisition of capabilities by new states, or a state-to-state spread of nuclear weapons is known as ‘horizontal proliferation’, whereas improvement of existing arsenals, usually undertaken by NWS is known as ‘vertical proliferation’. Earlier generation of nuclear powers see the former as more destabilising, while others argue that the latter is also both immoral and dangerous, as it enhances the propensity to use by appearing to be able to limit collateral damage with greater precision. Because the US has not developed any newer weapons since 1992, they have evolved a programme to check reliability and maintenance of nuclear arsenals without testing, known as ‘Stockpile Stewardship’. Since the need for testing was obviated, this would normally draw the US close to the CTBT. But under the Bush Administration a new programme was introduced known as the ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead’, to expand on ‘Stockpile Stewardship’ and seek to enable the development of newer weapons within 18 months, and construct newer designs within four months, but without physical testing and using computer simulations, thus remaining largely within the letter, but NOT the spirit of non-proliferation norms.

negative public opinion with the aid of the civil society, academics and experts among others. For instance, with regard to the first point, testing may oblige the potential adversary to follow suit rather than submit to awe, as it happened in the case of Pakistan vis-à-vis India. Secondly, getting the powers to realise that seeking qualitative improvements can lead to a race in the area where each would strive for a higher level of superiority as between the US and USSR during the Cold War era, and currently among the US, China and India. Finally, and this is a major challenge, to create an international climate, whereby both new acquisitions and qualitative improvements would attract international opprobrium, backed by practical steps to deny them advantages, such as seats at significant tables including the Security Council, unless the states display sufficient conformity with the generally agreed norms, whether they are formal signatories to the relevant agreements or not.

To date, 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted by eight countries, some in the atmosphere, some underground, and others underwater. In the past, radioactive elements from the tests not only polluted the atmosphere, but also led to direct casualties, as in the case of a Japanese boat, oddly named “Lucky Boat”, which was not lucky at all when its crew was killed by fallout in 1954 from a hydrogen bomb test in the Pacific. The then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru floated a proposal for a “standstill” agreement a few weeks after the incident. Indeed, it was he who had made “the earliest and the most notable public calls for the cessation of nuclear testing.”⁸ As a result of such moral pressures eventually a Partial Test-Ban Treaty (PTBT) was agreed upon banning tests in the atmosphere, underwater, and in the outer space. It was flawed in that it allowed for underground tests, which continued for decades, and seemed to address the problems of only ‘horizontal proliferation’, in line with the wishes of the bigger powers.

When the NPT was negotiated in 1968, and extended indefinitely in 1995, the CTBT was the result of the ‘package deal’ connected with the extension. But for reasons stated earlier, sadly, it is yet to come into force.⁹ But the prospects are improving. The UN Secretary-General, encouraged by the burgeoning global sentiments, included nuclear test banning goals in his ‘five-point’ disarmament proposal announced at the UN on 24 October 2008.¹⁰ Hans Blix, the well-known expert on the subject and chair of the International Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Commission said in 2006:

“The Commission believes that a US decision to ratify the CTBT would strongly influence other countries to follow suit. It would decidedly improve the chances for entry into force of the treaty and would have more positive ramifications for arms control and disarmament than any other single measure. The US should reconsider its position and proceed to ratify the Treaty. Only the CTBT offers the prospect of a permanent and legally binding commitment to end nuclear testing.”¹¹

⁸ Keith A. Hansen, *The Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty: An Insider’s Perspective*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, California, 2006), p. 5

⁹ The author was involved in the relevant negotiations as the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, and thereafter as Vice Chairman of the first ever Bureau in Vienna of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

¹⁰ Ban Ki-moon, ‘Five Steps to a Nuclear Free World’, *Guardian.co.uk.*, 23 November 2008, accessed on 4 December 2009.

¹¹ Cited in Sergio Duarte, ‘The Future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty’, *UN Chronicle* Volume XLVI, No.1&2, 2009, pp. 34-35.

The pressure, not just on the US but also on all responsible international actors, is growing. Also, the consequences of inaction are becoming starker. All eyes will be focused on the events next year with the hope that these will not become missed opportunities, since the price of failure increases by leaps and bounds every year.

Future of the NPT

The cornerstone of all nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts remains the NPT, negotiated in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. It rests on three pillars – horizontal non-proliferation; vertical non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament; and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The signatories were of two kinds – first, those who possessed the weapons at the time of signing, the NWS; and those who did not, the NNWS. The NNWS were to forego acquisition in return for assistance in developing the capacity to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The NWS were to accord such support, and at the same time seriously pursue nuclear disarmament, starting with a cessation of tests. The CTBT complemented it in 1996. The NPT to be reviewed every five years, was indefinitely extended in 1995.

What was to be a partnership between the NWS and NNWS soured quickly. The NNWS saw it as “discriminatory”, and tilted against them. The NWS did not keep their part in engaging in serious negotiations for disarmament. They did not assist in the transfer of knowledge for peaceful uses of nuclear energy (mostly for fear that it could be used for proliferation by some countries). Also, they did not provide any assurances that they would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the NNWS.

While it is true that the actual number of weapons, of which 130,000 to 140,000 were built, were eventually reduced to 25,000 or so, still enough to blow up the planet many times over, the chasm in understanding between the two groups did not close. Indeed some countries, such as India, Pakistan and North Korea acquired the capability overtly and Israel, covertly. Iran began its ‘peaceful’ nuclear programme with such zeal as to arouse considerable Western suspicion, and there were some rumours pertaining to Myanmar. A number of Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates suddenly began to evince keen interest in ‘peaceful nuclear power’, much in the stated Iranian mode.

The delay in progress regarding the goals of the treaty led to complications as it afforded time for some to effect acquisitions, and thereafter claim their place at the table as formally recognised NWS. While the current NWS were chary of granting their wish, these countries, India and Pakistan, were militarily too powerful to be ignored, or to have any global regime developed without their positive assent, and indeed explicit support. The failure of the 2005 NPT Review conference did nothing to generate any optimism.

Yet, just in the case of the CTBT there has been a sudden spike in confidence mostly flowing from the altered American position. Specifically speaking to the NPT, Obama said, “Countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy.”¹²

¹² Cited in, Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Next Steps to Universal Nuclear Disarmament’ *UN Chronicle*, No 1&2, 2009, p. 45.

On the face of it the remarks may seem a trifle rhetorical at worst, and aspirational at best. There is no reason to believe that on his part there will be any lack of sincerity. But good wishes by themselves will be insufficient to secure the desired goals. The challenge before him and the rest of the international community would be to devise a set of measures that would allow for enhanced security for all states without the need to recourse to nuclear weapons. How can this be done? The rest of the essay will focus on seeking an answer to the query.

Prognosis for 2010

As the curtain comes down on the current year and we enter the final year of the decade, there appears to be more reasons for hope than when we entered the decade and the century. The traumatic experience of 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq bode ominous signals for humanity's future. It seemed for a while that Samuel Huntington's deadly forecasts were about to come to fruition.¹³ That was the bad news.

The good news, however, is that these apprehensions have generated among most nations an urge to positive action. By far the foremost important political change in the global scene has been the election to the most powerful position of the globe of President Barack Obama, which happened, and this is also significant, against the matrix of the 'rise' of China and India. All indications point to the fact that President Obama seems to be moving towards building of bridges and designing of consensus. He faces great challenges, nevertheless, and to date, his performance has resembled a Sisyphean struggle.¹⁴

He must carry the world, of course, but beginning with his own country where there appear to be some holdouts, particularly in determining how much the US can actually afford to disarm without seriously eroding its capacity to protect national interests.¹⁵

A good backdrop has been created for the scheduled Summit of April, and thereafter the NPT Review Conference of May in 2010. In July 2009 the US and Russia were able to agree to cutting stockpiles to below 1,700 warheads. Despite the impressive show of military prowess by China at the parade to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Revolution on 1 October 2009, that country appears to have become a 'willing partner' in strategic bilateral talks with the US. In November this year, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh became the first 'state visitor' of the Obama Administration, and in course of the visit, President Obama tactfully praised Indian leadership as "expanding prosperity and security across the [Asian]

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993. In this famous essay Huntington argues that the faultlines of civilisations are the battlelines of the future. In the emerging cultural conflict he advises the US to forge alliances with similar cultures wherever possible. However, he concludes that, and this message is often lost among the audience, in the final analysis all civilisations will have to learn to tolerate one another.

¹⁴ In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, a King, was destined to roll a huge boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down, and to repeat it throughout eternity. The difference, of course, in the analogy is that Sisyphus was labouring under a curse, and Obama is carrying out a responsibility. Also, in the latter's case, the effort will not, hopefully, take an eternity!

¹⁵ There are those who assert that the US must always retain the right 'capabilities' to prevent negative conclusions being drawn by adversaries. See, Keir A. Leber and Daryl G. Press, 'The Nukes We Need: Preserving the American Deterrent', *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2009.

region.”¹⁶ Indeed given India’s stated unhappiness over the lack of recognition of its nuclear status, as also the case with Pakistan, it would be extremely key to integrate these two countries into the global non-proliferation regime. The US, it seems, is at last beginning to act as Coral Bell would have it, that is to recognise its own pre-eminence and yet to conduct its policy in a way as it were still living in a world of many centres of power.¹⁷

It would be extremely important at the May NPT Review Conference to demonstrate that the original nuclear powers are committed to disarmament, and indeed that the ‘discrimination’ between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ that the Treaty entails is purely temporary. The Review conference must be able to initiate serious steps towards future convention banning nuclear weapons altogether just as has been done in the case of chemical and biological weapons. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization must be seen to be taking tangible measures to eliminate the use of nuclear weapons from its strategic doctrines. The Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament must be encouraged to reach the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) forbidding the production of new fissile materials, for that is the major ingredient that non-state actors aspiring to create nuclear weapons would like to lay their hands on. There should be a series of regional meetings with the aim of creating concentric circles of nuclear weapon free zones covering the entire globe.¹⁸ This is particularly true of Asia, where the new nuclear powers lie, and who remain outside the pale of the current NPT. Henceforth, the UN should be brought to the centre stage of these initiatives, and its Secretary-General adequately empowered and resourced.

Conclusion

Obviously these goals will not be easy to achieve. But that these are goals to aspire to is now widely acknowledged. That in itself implies a modicum of progress. Long ago the Greek sage Aristotle had said that all men’s well being depend on two things – one is the right choice of target, of the end to which actions should tend; and the other lies in the actions that lead to the end. These wise words are still valid today, as they were then.

The steps and measures that have been enumerated in this essay earlier are important ones that must receive priority of the global negotiators. However, experts cannot achieve this alone. Global leadership at the highest levels must become engaged. The time has come to move forward from the doctrine of deterrence to a culture of peace, from the mathematical calculations of quantitative destructive powers to moral norms that would imply humanity’s graduation to a higher level of civilisation. A convention banning nuclear arms altogether would demonstrate that. The prospects of the spread of such values are stronger now than ever before. Bold leadership will be called for to provide these ideals a legislative framework.

¹⁶ John Pomfret, ‘Obama welcomes Singh, hails India’s leadership role in Asia’, *Washington Post*, 25 November 2009.

¹⁷ See, Coral Bell, ‘American Ascendancy and the Pretense of Power’, *The National Interest*, No. 57, Fall 1999, pp. 55-63.

¹⁸ The Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, as defined and recognised by the UN, is an agreement, with mechanisms of verification and control of its obligations, whereby a group of nations ban the development, use or deployment of nuclear weapons in a given area. Currently there are nine of them: Antarctica (covering that region); space (covering outer space); Tlatelolco (covering Latin America and the Caribbean); sea-bed (covering all sea and ocean floors); Rarotonga (covering the South Pacific); Bangkok (covering the ASEAN countries); Mongolia (covering that state); Semei (covering Central Asia); and Pelindaba (covering Africa). There is nothing as yet that covers India, Pakistan, North Korea, Israel, or with an eye to the future, Iran, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia.

As Henry Kissinger has urged that [positive] prospects must not be allowed to vanish because those that have the ability to prevail shrink from what their opportunities require.¹⁹

With regard to nuclear weapons it must be remembered that if some have them, others will want them also. To try and deter this normal and logical predilection from happening through sanctions and threats of force will only still their resolve. We have seen that sanctions do not work as there are always detractors that do not comply. Force will not work for no one possesses that overwhelming might as the capability to wreak unacceptable levels of damage to adversaries is much widespread now. Also it is important to bear in mind that a disarmed world by itself will not lead to the kind of order we may seek, and a lightly armed world will not be necessarily more peaceful than a heavier armed one.²⁰ But at least the world would not be threatened by an Armageddon. Recognising these simple truths can make a vast difference in meeting our aspirations. We will not achieve all this in 2010. But perhaps we can, indeed we must, make a beginning.

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¹⁹ Henry A. Kissinger, *Does America Need A Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Edition 2002), p. 318.

²⁰ For an elaboration of this idea, see, Hedley Bull *The Anarchical Society : A Study of Order in World Politics*, (London, The Macmillan Press Ltd , 1977), p. 238