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War-head Worries: Asia's Expanding Nuclear Arsenals

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For some time, nuclear arsenals all across the world have been the focus of global policy makers' attention. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has come up with a report on 3 June 2013, which has stressed that nuclear arsenals of the Asian countries – such as China, India, and Pakistan – are expanding while the older nuclear-weapon states, such as the United States and Russia are scaling down theirs. It has described this phenomenon as “disturbing” given that peace in Asia is still “fragile”, that “decades old suspicions linger, and economic integration has not been followed up with political integration”.

The implied criticism of the Asian states is a trifle unfair, to say the least. The “scaling down” referred to is the reduction from 10,000 to 8,500 nuclear war-heads on the part of Russia, and from 8,000 to 7,700 on the part of the United States. In comparison, the existing figure for China, viewed as a strategic competitor of the US, is a mere 250, though up from 240 in 2012. For India, a far more significant player on the global scene today than either France or the United Kingdom, the numbers are stated to be 90 to 110, as compared to 300 of France and 225 of the UK. Pakistan, which seeks a deterrent vis-à-vis India, is said to have around 100 and 120 war-heads, less than half of the UK's and around one-third of France's. Israel presumably has 80, compared to none for its Arab rivals.

It is true that peace in Asia is “fragile”, and that here “decades old suspicions linger, and economic integration has not been followed up with political integration”. But those facts

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also apply anywhere else in the world. The mutual suspicions between the US and Russia, though far less than during the Cold War period, have not withered away, and Europe, often held up as the model of political organisation, has not been able to match its economic integration with the political, and there is absolutely no certainty that it will be able to.

Also, it is not the growth in number of weapons alone that is destabilising. The modernising of the arsenals, adding of greater precision, can be equally upsetting to the nuclear equilibrium. This is happening in the case of the older nuclear-weapon states. By rendering the ordnance more sophisticated, and the targeting more precise, the propensity for use is enhanced. For instance if one is able to take out only a specific 'hard' military target, one is more liable to use it, than if the only option is the capability to strike 'soft' targets like cities, that would inflict an unacceptable level of damage on the opponent, widening the chances of a total retaliation.

In fact greater 'targetability' could make 'nuclear war-fighting' or 'limited nuclear warfare' conceptually possible, a most disconcerting thought. Indeed that was the sum and substance of the 'Schlesinger- doctrine', named after its enunciator, a past US Secretary of Defense, which has happily gone out of vogue, but can always be revived, particularly as newer strategic situations evolve or arise.

One must also bear in mind that advanced nuclear-weapon states can afford to manage their arsenals without testing through higher technology such as 'stock-pile engineering'. Also they can disarm, with the ability to rearm quickly should the need arise, and put a dismantled war-head back in place. A newer nuclear-weapon state is more likely to cling on to what it has. Management of nuclear stockpiles can be very challenging, and those that have given up existing stockpiles such as South Africa or some central Asian republics have done so only partly out of pristinely noble motives!

Unfortunately nuclear-weapon proliferation has its own incontrovertible logic and inexorable dynamics. The level at which perceived deterrence with a protagonist is achieved tends to be forever rising. Also, since deterrence includes the capacity to absorb a 'first-strike' and then to be able to respond in kind – the so-called 'second strike capability' – there is always the need to be able to conceal weapons so that they cannot all be acquired as targets and destroyed in one-go. This would mean the building of stronger, deeper, and dispersed storage silos, as much hidden as possible! Better still, the shifting of war-heads into submarines (increasing the requirement of nuclear-capable craft of this kind) which are less able to be targeted. So proliferation, in different forms, is a continuum that goes on and on!

Meanwhile, at the only inter-governmental forum mandated to negotiate on non-proliferation issues, the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament (CD), discussions on the Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) are being held up due to Pakistan's opposition (for any decision, consensus is necessary). Pakistan argues that the cutting off of supplies would discriminate against it, as India would continue to receive such materials through bilateral agreements with members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Even with the caveat that such

procurements could only be used for civil purposes, Pakistan apprehends that it would release India's existing stockpiles for weapons-production.

The most important fact to bear in mind is that all nuclear weapons are equally dangerous and unsafe in all hands that hold them, the old nuclear-weapon states or the newer ones. Partial disarmament, or scaling down, is no answer and no option for complete and total disarmament. The axiom about nuclear weapons has been that if some have them, others will want them also. In the decades to come, there will be systemic changes across the globe, some segments of it will rise and others will go into decline. The rising powers will want to match their burgeoning clout with appropriate strategic capabilities, and so long as nuclear weapons remain a marker of importance, they will tend to seek them. So, it is for those that are strong today to take the lead in this, so that the strong tomorrow will see no need for it. This is truly the gauntlet that the leaders of the contemporary world must pick up.

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