

PIR Center Library Series

**RUSSIA-U.S. NUCLEAR
NONPROLIFERATION DIALOGUE:
LESSONS LEARNED AND ROAD AHEAD**

With preface by Dr. William Potter

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CONCLUSIONS

Vladimir Orlov, Sergey Semenov

We are now more than half a century away from the first Soviet-U.S. exchanges on the matters of nuclear proliferation. The two countries' cooperation in constructing the edifice of the NPT alongside the negotiations of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was one of the first cases of great power cooperation during Cold War. Moscow and Washington managed to overcome their geopolitical and ideological differences to advance their shared interest in averting the dangers posed by various Nth countries scenarios.

The bilateral interaction has undergone certain evolution. Logically, the fifty-plus years of bilateral exchanges may be divided into the following periods:

1966 – 1991: Superpower Cooperation

This period began in 1966 when the Soviet Union and the United States managed to overcome their disagreements (or, rather, agreed to disagree) on Articles I, II of the NPT. Such convergence was not easy since it required Moscow and Washington to make palpable concessions and forego parts of their political agenda for the sake of achieving the NPT. With its own ups and downs, the epoch of the two superpowers' cooperation lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At that time, the cooperation between Moscow and Washington was predicated on the following premises:

- In the mid-1960s the Soviet Union and the United States began to feel that the international system and the bilateral confrontation had to be stabilized. Further proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear know-how would have added additional unknowns to the security equation of that time. Moreover, the threat posed by proliferation was perceived as an acute one: Moscow and Washington had specific scenarios they wanted to avoid. The Soviet Union wanted to prevent the West Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons by any means (including through a multilateral alliance). The United States, in its turn, kept a wary eye on various Nth countries.
- The acquiescence of the other side with the proposed rules of the game was necessary to uphold the nonproliferation regime given that the world was divided into three blocks: capitalist world led by the United States, the socialist camp by the Soviet Union, and the third world where Moscow and Washington competed for influence.
- The two countries had equal 'sticks and carrots,' equal heft to punish for noncompliance with the nonproliferation regime and equal benefits to offer for compliance.

One should not nurture illusions that the cooperation became self-sustained after the instrumentation of the NPT. It took another acute crisis prompted by India's peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974, Pakistan's nuclear aspirations, and further proliferation of nuclear know-how (especially, in light of West German aggressive marketing campaigns) for the Soviet Union and the United States to come together again. At this time, alongside other nuclear exporters of importance, they managed to institute the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which is as relevant today as it was at the moment of its creation.

The creation of several institutions led to the need for closer policy coordination between the superpowers within the NSG, IAEA, and at NPT Review Conferences. As William Potter notes, several ad hoc formats were created to discuss safeguards, export controls, and other nonproliferation-related business. Formal and informal exchanges within these formats created some modicum of mutual trust between the Soviet and American officials in charge of nonproliferation issues.

The exchanges on the South African nuclear program are particularly telling in this regard. In 1977 the Soviet Union provided its American counterparts with intelligence information and satellite imagery, pointing at the preparations for a nuclear test in South Africa. The subsequent discussions at the ambassadorial level and the U.S. demarche to the South African authorities are believed to have forestalled the test. In terms of the bilateral dialogue this means that the level of mutual trust was perceived as adequate to exchange sensitive information.

The factor of mutual trust was instrumental in retaining at least some elements of the bilateral nonproliferation dialogue after the unravelling of the détente in 1979. Even under the Reagan administration, known for its hawkish policies, the nonproliferation-related exchanges continued. It is also worth mentioning the successful outcome of the 1985 NPT Review Conference, which owes to the 'no polemics' approach adopted by Moscow and Washington. A successful RevCon was seen as creating positive background for the resumption of the bilateral dialogue on arms control.

Gorbachev's 'new political thinking' was conducive to the further progress in the dialogue on nuclear nonproliferation issues. A series of landmark bilateral agreements and non-binding measures reduced the risks of nuclear conflict and made an exceptional contribution to the fulfillment of NPT Article VI objectives.

The period also witnessed closer policy coordination on yet another state of proliferation concern – the DPRK. In 1986, the Soviet Union forced Pyongyang to join the NPT in exchange for the construction of a nuclear power plant. The CIA estimated that the move was designed to bolster the Soviet influence in the country. In 1987 the United States got intelligence information revealing the military character of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. Accordingly, Washington began

consultations with Moscow on the matter. DPRK also became a topic of consultations on regional issues between Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Secretary of State Baker in 1990. More technical details were discussed at the level of permanent representatives to the international organizations in Vienna.

The bottom line is that by 1991 Moscow and Washington elaborated mutual trust to discuss the issues of concern in confidence. The two countries appreciated the degree to which the other was informed, the capabilities of each other's intelligence services, and the ability of the partner to influence nonproliferation developments. Due to their unique standing, the Soviet Union and the United States were indispensable partners in the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

1991-2000: Rise and Fall of U.S. Patronage

The collapse of the USSR, however, brought about significant changes to the previous patterns of bilateral cooperation. First and foremost, the element of 'equality' was shattered. Russia lost the international influence of the Soviet Union. In the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities the Russian Federation moved from being a peer partner to one of many. The economic crisis further increased the Russian dependence on major international financial centers. Moreover, in the view of the United States the former Soviet Union states and the Russian Federation, in particular, became a nonproliferation concern given lax security conditions at the nuclear facilities.

These factors could not but affect the perception of Moscow in the U.S. policymaking circles. But the pattern of the U.S. policy shifted to partnership with the elements of patronage. Russia did not become an unimportant state, but it became to be seen as a difficult partner, which, however, can be persuaded with the help of sticks and carrots. As a result, it was to a greater extent Washington that was determining the agenda of cooperation. Moreover, the U.S. side was perceived to become less and less receptive to the Russian concerns.

The period should not be viewed as completely negative. While it is true that the balance was heavily tilted in favor of the United States, the 1990s witnessed new forms of cooperation, which benefited Russia. American assistance should not be regarded as designed to somehow denigrate Russia or steal sensitive information. It is true that the United States first and foremost pursued its own interests. Yet, it is one of the rare cases where our interest overlapped though for different reasons. A testament to the fact that Nunn-Lugar program was in the best of the Russian interests is the unchanged support of the 12th GUMO for the program in spite of the changes in its leadership in the 1990s and some initial questioning of the utility of the program by Gen. Valynkin. HEU-LEU program and others were among the mutually beneficial projects, which allowed to maintain the Russian nuclear potential in the most difficult times of the economic crisis.

Notwithstanding the changed pattern, some significant breakthrough were achieved in the international arena. A great success of bilateral coordination is the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 and the successful conduct of the 2000 NPT Review Conference as well as the negotiations of the CTBT.

For the first time in the history of bilateral cooperation on nonproliferation, presidents were directly involved in nonproliferation discussions: as discussed in Chapter 13, presidential-level conversations were instrumental in breaking impasses over Ukraine, Iran, HEU-LEU, etc. Such high-level engagement had its pros and cons, but it certainly brought additional momentum into the dialogue.

Yet, such patronage had its limits. As Russia was recovering from the internal economic and political crises and restoring its international standing, it no longer felt that patronage was an adequate form of cooperation. However, the evolution of the international setting, the accession of France and China to the NPT as legitimate nuclear-weapons states further reduced the relevance of a privileged Russia-U.S. partnership on nuclear nonproliferation issues.

2001-2008 Consolidation of Unilateralism in U.S. Approaches to Nonproliferation

The period of 2000-2008 is most difficult to give a clear-cut characterization. On the one hand, this period was a period of enormous opportunities for the bilateral nonproliferation dialogue. The new challenge, the threat of WMD terrorism, which became particularly conspicuous after the 9/11 terror attacks, led to the establishment of completely new mechanisms: UNSCR 1540, GICNT, GNEP. A 123 Agreement was signed between our countries. The successful implementation of numerous projects within the CTR program translated into a bilateral expert-level dialogue of unprecedented depth and scope.

On the other hand, the enormous credit of confidence was squandered. Not only did the unilateralism prevail in U.S. nonproliferation policies. The entire U.S. nonproliferation agenda came to be seen as false-bottomed. What on the surface was presented as ‘nonproliferation-related’ policies, in essence, were attempts to change regimes in hostile countries, preserve U.S. dominance in international affairs, and achieve absolute security for the United States at the expense of other members of the international community. Such a framing of the issue did not leave any significant room for an equitable bilateral partnership on nuclear nonproliferation issues.

Of particular importance is the shift towards new fora in the U.S. nonproliferation policy. The premium was put on ad hoc platforms, which would not strive to achieve global consensus and instead would align other members of international community under the U.S. banners. In this context the maintenance and preservation of key institutions was relegated. The most eloquent proof to that is the 2005 NPT Review Conference, which ended up in failure.

Among the crucial milestones in this regard, one may cite:

- The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, which only fueled the Russian perception of vulnerability;
- The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq in circumvention of the United Nations Security Council;
- The 2008 Russian operation in Georgia, on which two narratives exist. Their detailed analysis is beyond the purposes of this book, however, the main outcome was the loss of mutual trust in the bilateral relations.

As a result of this period the bilateral cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation seems to have lost its confiding character. The perception in Moscow was that its sincere attempts to build a better relationship with Washington were to no avail. Washington just did not attach the same degree of importance to its relations with Russia. The issues of proliferation came to be politicized

2009-2015 Reset & Error 404

The subsequent reset of the bilateral relations under the Obama administration created some momentum, which, regrettably, was not sustained. The negotiation of the New START Treaty created a positive backdrop for the success of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. At the same time, the decisions included in the final document of the 2010 RevCon were not necessarily underpinned by the real willingness to deliver.

Among the important milestones of the period is the termination of cooperation within the CTR with nothing else coming as a replacement. As is evident by open sources and official comments, there were plans to reformat the CTR into a truly equal partnership designed to reduce threats in third countries. However, there are not so many countries with WMD capabilities where the CTR-like program would have been applicable. A notable example is Syria. In 2013 Russian and the United States negotiated the chemical disarmament of the Syrian Arab Republic. However, that agreement did not translate into broader cooperation as Russia appears to have been unwilling to invest serious resources into the material implementation of the agreement. The overlap of interests was not as sizeable as it had been previously. The United States' objective was to prevent the Syrian chemical arsenal from being used against the civilian population or falling into the hands of non-state actors. The Russian objective was to prevent U.S. strikes against Syria. Moreover, the aftermath of the Syrian chemical disarmament has reduced the appetite for bilateral cooperation in this area since the two countries perceive each other as playing politics in this field.

The period is titled 'Error 404' because the two sides failed to find an adequate 'ideology' for their further cooperation on nuclear issues. Their visions of the future were no longer aligned. Mutual trust was at its lowest levels and continued to decline. The dialogue on strategic stability and

nonproliferation was still sporadic in character and it is unclear if there really was room and demand for such dialogue.

Against this backdrop, U.S-Russian nonproliferation cooperation became case-by-case. If there is an acute threat to the nonproliferation regime, our countries would cooperate like it was the case during the JCPOA negotiations. At the same time, the political momentum and trust to move to some sort of broader partnerships were lost. Perhaps, at that period U.S.-Russian nonproliferation cooperation finally lost its privileged status: the two sides started to perceive it the way it should be perceived: just one of the tools in the national security toolkit.

2016-present: Distrust & Rhetoric. What's Next?

The toxic climate of the bilateral relations following the 2016 elections only gave additional arguments to the opponents of the dialogue. The two countries no longer perceive each other as trustworthy confiding partners. The Trump administration unilateral policies aimed at the dismantlement of the nonproliferation and arms control architecture further confirmed the view that the United States could not be trusted as a partner, that one could not rely upon a country that unstable. The same goes with the United States: for not strictly nonproliferation-related reasons Russia is not regarded as a trustworthy partner.

One should not fall into the temptation of writing off the Trump administration's nonproliferation policies as a nightmare that is over. The fundamental objectives of the U.S. foreign policy remain the same, what will be different under the Biden administration is the style. The Israel lobby will still weigh in the American decision-making on the JCPOA or the WMD/FZ in the Middle East. The aspiration to impose restraint on Iran's missile program and regional activities is still there. The Trump administration was heavily tilted towards only stick approaches. The precedent Trump set is something few people around the world would love to see again. Therefore, with Biden in the White House, the carrots may be expected to be more attractive for U.S. counterparts in the world.

Even against this backdrop there are objective premises for U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation. Little in this field can be done by Moscow or Washington without each other's consent or acquiescence. And beyond any doubt the two countries will benefit from such cooperation, because neither Russia, nor U.S. are interested in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Russia and the United States still have a lot to cooperate on in the nuclear nonproliferation domain, their differences are not insurmountable.

In the disarmament pillar the two countries still share the basic philosophy, that of proper security environment needed for nuclear disarmament. The CEND initiative is not perfect, and its future is not preordained. Nonetheless, its core message will be relevant for many years ahead, and only cooperation between all the relevant stakeholders and, most notably, Russia and the United States

will be conducive to such an environment. Moscow and Washington are also interested in preventing further polarization within the NPT, and doing so is impossible without their constructive cooperation.

One may argue that the long-term threat posed by the existence of TPNW is that at some juncture some states may decide to withdraw from the NPT, protesting against the perceived lack of disarmament. However theoretical and far-fetched such a scenario may seem, it is a good occasion to restart cooperation on preventing withdrawal from the NPT.

The existence of TPNW, at the same time, can theoretically contribute to solving one of the most acute disputes in U.S.-Russian nonproliferation dialogue – NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. If pro-nuclear disarmament sentiments prevail in the countries hosting U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil, prompting them to join TPNW, the United States will have to withdraw their nuclear weapons from Europe (see the chapter by Nikita Degtyarev for more detail).

As discussed before, divergencies in the nonproliferation cluster are neither absolute. Once the United States returns into JCPOA, further cooperation on Iran will be possible. IAEA safeguards will neither be an apple of discord. As a recent joint study by Russian and American experts suggests, IAEA should clarify its internal procedures regarding the implementation of the SLC.

At the same time some officials in Moscow are concerned and resentful that such cooperation is only possible, when Washington think it is in its best interest to cooperate.

Is it in Russia's interest to cooperate with the United States? The answer is positive. Such cooperation, however, should be driven not by the assumptions regarding the importance of U.S.-Russia dialogue, its special role in global security. Rather, the main driver of interaction is the still shared vision that the two countries want to avoid deepening division lines in the nuclear nonproliferation realm. Lack of bilateral engagement would do nothing to advance this vision.

But such cooperation should not be strictly bilateral: as the Trump presidency years have shown, the multilateral solutions tend to be more resilient.

There would be no comeback of the past patterns. Russia would probably like to return the patterns of the 1960-1970s when the bilateral engagement was crucial to the nonproliferation regime and took place on equal footing. The United States would probably like to return to the experience of the 1990s when so many things, in their view, had been accomplished. But those patterns are the children of their times and are hardly viable nowadays.

The potential of U.S.-Russian engagement has not exhausted itself. However, the balance has indeed undergone tremendous changes since the late 1960s. Now, the Russia's strength is more

about carrots: Russian has a lot to offer in terms of peaceful uses of nuclear energy solutions and its ability to find compromises in international deal making. The United States has been more reliant on sticks – the sanctions-based approach to advance the goals of the nuclear nonproliferation. Their contribution to the area of peaceful uses has become less noticeable, but is still relevant. Such a balance is conducive to solving the international nuclear nonproliferation issues.

Thus, the bilateral cooperation is still viable and has its applications. The main obstacle is the lack of mutual trust: each side views the counterpart's political agenda as double-bottomed. This is natural given the current climate in the bilateral relations and there are no universal solutions to that. The only possible answer is to talk and to consult with each other. One should not nurture illusions that such dialogue will merge into a new reset, improve the overall state of bilateral relations. But it would fully unblock the potential of the bilateral dialogue as an instrument in the toolkit of nuclear nonproliferation policy.