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NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AS A BELIEF SYSTEM

How does the current situation in the disarmament and nonproliferation area present itself from a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) perspective and address the visible disconnect that we see in the discourse on these issues? While these are some of my personal reflections I have been dealing with these issues for quite some time and I am confident that they may be along the lines of what quite a few NNWS are thinking. When I am talking about nuclear-weapon states (NWS), I will focus primarily on Russia and the United States and not address the other NWS or nuclear armed states.

Despite a successful 2010 Review Conference and despite the reductions in nuclear weapons (NWs) numbers between Russia and the United States, such as through the recent New START, it is disappointing for NNWS to see how little movement has been made since the end of the Cold War to change the approach to NWs in any fundamental way. NWs and the deterrence logic are today seen by many as a high-risk and high-stake poker game that humanity was incredibly lucky to escape from unharmed in the period of ideological competition between two hostile blocks during the Cold War. It is difficult to accept that the concepts of deterrence, mutually assured destruction, and the logic of nuclear strategic stability have simply been transferred into the twenty-first century and that the chance to remove this sword of Damocles from above our heads is not being seized with far more urgency.

During the Cold War, the nuclear stand-off may have been seen and accepted by NNWS as inevitable. But how is it that essentially the same nuclear standoff is still in place and, despite reductions in numbers, thousands of warheads are still on hair-trigger alert, and that big population centers are still being targeted? Considering and understanding the practical difficulties related to a nuclear disarmament process, it is deeply disappointing that NMs have not been fundamentally reassessed, that their use has not been clearly taken out of nuclear doctrines, and that no agreement has been reached to put NWs in storage out of operational deployment and off high alert. Russia and the United States appear to continue to feed on each other's threat and enemy perceptions to justify the possession of NWs and the maintenance of a large NWs infrastructure, even though the ideological confrontation is gone. It is striking how the NWs logic is continued even though the prime justification for the Cold War nuclear confrontation has disappeared.

The existence of NWs is no longer justified by the (perceived) need to deter an attack by a mortal ideological opponent. Nuclear deterrence looks today as if it has become an end in itself. There is no longer the need to deter against someone but simply the need for deterrence as such. There is thus a deeply disconcerting perception among NNWS that the United States and Russia (followed by the other NWS) are trapped in a highly dangerous Cold War thought-system which renders them incapable of addressing and solving the NWs issue in a fundamental way, let alone giving up NWs.

Some refer to deterrence as a "belief system." And I think this is very true. No one actually wants NWs to be used or conceives that they will be, but the belief in their value as the ultimate guarantee of security persists. NWS have been unable and/or unwilling to challenge this belief system.



The logic of nuclear deterrence is posited and of course still argued coherently. Strategic stability, strike, and counter-strike capabilities etc. are all logical and compelling, yet it is a fundamentally absurd belief system. It is absurd because of the high stakes and the unacceptable humanitarian effects that one failure of the belief system—accidental and deliberate—would cause. It is absurd to trust that nuclear deterrence will remain stable and provide security in the long run with an increasing number of nuclear armed actors. The reasoning that governments are rational enough to handle nuclear deterrence and that nuclear deterrence works because it makes governments act rationally is essentially the most dangerous circular argument in human history.

I believe that NWS have largely failed to provide convincing arguments to state against whom deterrence, from their point of view, is necessary today and justified. In the case of Russia, we see the continued drive for nuclear parity with the United States. But, with ideology gone, what is the reason for this and what is the real underlying threat perception? What is the role that Russia sees for itself in the world of today that requires this nuclear parity? The same question must go to the United States as well as the other NWS. Where is the threat today that justifies NWS as a response other than the existence of nuclear arsenals in other states that are maintained because of a similar deterrence belief?

While nuclear deterrence arguments may be given as the main reasons for the retention of NWS, this is, however, only part of the story. There is a strong psychological element associated with NWS. The power status of states possessing NWS, the status quo of the post-World War II world order, former status as global powers, such as in the case of the UK and France, and perceived admission to global power status, such as for instance in the case of India, these are all aspects that have been linked to the possession of NWS. In my opinion, this is a tragic misjudgment by NWS: that they have not used the moment of the end of the Cold War to diminish the role and status of NWS. This neglect is one of if not the key driver for the proliferation of NWS. If we then hear, as we have a few times in the NPT Preparatory Committee, arguments from NWS that cite the existence of proliferation as reason to retain NWS, we are faced with another circular argument that is used to remain firmly in the belief system that justifies the retention of NWS.

NWS may have in theory embraced the long-term aim of a world without NWS, such as the United States through President Obama's Prague speech and in the outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. However, there are some serious question marks—to say the least—in the minds of an increasing number of NNWS as to the sincerity of NWS for real nuclear disarmament rather than a readiness to commit to limited arms reduction and control measures.

I would therefore say that there is a serious disconnect between the lines of argumentation of NWS and the way many if not most NNWS look on the issue. NWS have come to symbolize a system that is deeply unfair and the reasons given for the continued retention or for unwillingness to fundamentally address the approach to NWS are seen as either irresponsible or anachronistic or both.

Given the devastating consequences of NWS, most NNWS today see it as unacceptable that such an existential threat to all humankind continues to be handled by a few states as a national security matter. The notion that it is the right and legitimate interest of all states to be actively engaged in global security matters and nuclear disarmament is not just an empty phrase. I firmly believe that this is a consequence of globalization and an understanding of interconnectedness, which will only increase further.


What we see instead are flawed multilateral processes that are dominated by obvious tactics to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. The NPT is maybe the best but not the only example of this. The consequence of all this is an increasing erosion of legitimacy of existing legal frameworks.

I would therefore argue that NWS should take much more seriously the views, concerns, and expectations of NNWS that I have tried to outline. The tactics of playing for time within the NPT and the other multilateral fora may not work for much longer. I would argue that this NPT review cycle is of crucial importance. It will largely determine to what extent the NPT is a credible framework for nuclear disarmament. And there is also a race against time. The global regime can either be maintained and maybe even strengthened and the spread of NWS stopped. Or the legitimacy of the NPT and the entire regime will be so undermined with the potential consequence of more and more actors seeking to develop NWS. NWS have the prime responsibility to prevent this but they need to realize with urgency that in the final consequence they cannot have it both ways.

So I propose this “idea” for Russia, which is to become a leader on this issue and live up to its disarmament commitments in a credible way and implement the 2000 13 disarmament steps and the 2010 action plan. In addition, I hope Russia would enter into open and transparent discourse on the NWS issue in a broad sense, including the validity of nuclear deterrence in the twenty-first century, threat perceptions that exist today justifying nuclear deterrence, the proliferation risk that this behavior generates and all of this measured against the risk of inflicting unacceptable harm and unspeakable humanitarian consequences to all humankind.

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Now, I know that most Russian arms control experts would smile and basically say: “nuclear disarmament, yes, nice but get real.” I would counter this by saying that the military security approach towards NWS that appears to be so dominant in Russian discourse today is not cast in stone in Russia or in any of the other NWS. Civil society will also play an increasing role in Russia, some elements of which we are already seeing today. Pressure for greater transparency and scrutiny of governmental action and priorities will also increase in Russia, coupled with an unstoppable trend for more global interaction and global empathy.

So ultimately, I am optimistic that the discourse on NWS will change in Russia as well as in the other NWS. Instead of resisting and acting counter to the clearly expressed global aspirations, I hope that elites in NWS will increasingly embrace this thinking themselves. 

NOTE

* This article has been prepared on the basis of a statement by Ambassador Alexander Kmentt at the seminar “Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament: Ideas from Russia, Ideas for Russia,” held by the PIR Center and the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation on May 8, 2012.

