

Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East: A Significant Step Towards an Eventual Nuclear Weapons Free World*

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Introduction

The Middle East has been described as one of the most volatile and violent political systems since the end of the Second World War¹. In a conflict-ridden area with a history of mistrust and animosity, where chemical weapons were used in the past, the prospect of renewed use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) is possible.² For these reasons, a WMD-free zone in the Middle East is not only an aspirational goal, but a matter of urgency.

The end of the Cold War brought in tectonic changes and this has affected the international landscape. However, during the last twenty odd years, the world appears to have forgotten about thinking and working toward a non-nuclear and non-violent world. Perhaps this was understandable since the prospects of a catastrophic nuclear exchange suddenly appeared remote. The pursuit of nuclear disarmament across the world seemed less important.

Events during the last couple of decades have changed the world dramatically. Tragically, one aspect that has not altered is the persistent threat to survival of mankind due to nuclear weapons.

Desirability of a Nuclear Weapons Free World : A Safer and Saner World or More Turbulence?

The threat of an all-out nuclear war does not appear to be on the near horizon, but as more countries have the desire for and the capabilities to create nuclear weapons, it is ever more important for states to determine a way to create Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs) in pursuit of a nuclear-weapon-free world³. The critics of the NFWF base their arguments on the premise that a world without nuclear weapons will encourage sub-conventional and conventional wars and this in turn will lead to an increasingly turbulent world. In other words, they maintain that nuclear weapons have deterred sub-conventional and conventional conflicts and that without nuclear weapons, the region and indeed the world will become more turbulent or its logical corollary, namely, nuclear weapons create a less turbulent environment. This merits detailed examination on both counts.

Nuclear Weapons Deter Sub-Conventional and Conventional Conflicts. Studies of the past conflicts reveal the fallacy of the argument. Nuclear weapons have not succeeded in desisting a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) in engaging in conflict with a Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) using conventional means only. For example, Vietnam or Korea. Neither has it succeeded in stopping conflicts between the NWS, for example the Ussuri conflict in 1969, which took place between China and the erstwhile USSR. At the height of the Cold War, there have been about 100 armed conflicts.⁴ There are ample documents to substantiate that several US Presidents seriously considered using nuclear weapons.⁵ Therefore, attainment of a NFWF is definitely desirable for the survival of the human race.

Nuclear Weapons Create less Turbulent Environments. This logic too appears to be flawed; since the Middle East has been plagued with violence and is, paradoxically, home to an opaque nuclear power as well as home to a threshold nuclear power state. There is a strong school of thought that advocates possession of nuclear weapons as the only method of preventing conflicts. This school quotes George Washington who surmised long ago, *"To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace."* They argue, not without reason, that it is a historical fact that in every age provocative nations, barbarians, and now terrorists (whether state sponsored or otherwise) have sought to gain a greater advantage over the civilized world. In the age of nuclear weapons, one bad actor could hold rest of the world hostage - literally if not figuratively. All of which points out to the difficulties in formulating a defence policy. Any successful defence must plan, not only for the obvious threats, but also for that one terrible exception.

On the face of it, this appears to be a strong and persuasive argument but the danger in it is that it is a sharply escalatory curve. Taking the argument to its logical conclusion, if nuclear weapons are indeed the ultimate guarantee of a nation's security, more and more nations will become nuclear. If this is the reality, is it desirable? Conflict in the post-Cold War era has acquired new characteristics: these are not classical inter-state conflicts; they are fuelled by identity based factors and issues of economic and social justice; and there is drastic increase in the role of non-state actors. Weapons of mass destruction fashioned for inter-state conflict and their associated strategic deterrence doctrines, premised on state behaviour, have little relevance for the new reality⁶.

The heart of the matter is that nuclear weapons are unusable as weapons of war. Though the nuclear bomb initially seemed to have the potential for war fighting, compellence and deterrence; its special characteristics soon effectively reduced the three options to only one - deterrence. They are useful to deter use of nuclear weapons by other nations. If that is the only limited role of nuclear weapons, the world will be infinitesimally better off without them and a NFWF will be a far less turbulent place. More serious critics focus on these problems-the growth and potential breakout of latent NWS, the future of extended deterrence, the enforcement of disarmament, and the potential instability of small numbers- that concern *mutual* nuclear disarmament. These legitimate concerns must be addressed in a credible manner, if significant progress is to be made toward the goal of a NFWF. To address these problems adequately, the current nuclear disarmament effort must be transformed from a debate among leaders in the NWS to a coordinated global effort of shared responsibilities between NWS and NNWS⁷.

Establishment of a NWFZ in the Middle East : Prospects and Challenges

The idea of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East is not a new one and it was introduced in the UN General Assembly(UNGA) in 1974 by Egypt and Iran. After the 1974 resolution, the UNGA had been adopting the resolutions. From 1979, following the Iranian revolution, Egypt started sponsoring the resolution alone. In fact from 1980 onwards, most of the resolutions on this question were adopted by consensus, which included all the Arab states, Iran and Israel.

Israel, which was in favour of a NWFZ, tabled its own resolution in 1980, which stated that it was imperative for the member nations of the region to have direct talks with each other and called upon each and every nation to participate in such talks. However, Israel dropped its own draft after a lack of support for the same.

In 1990, the concept of a Middle East NWFZ was expanded to include all weapons of mass destruction in a proposal mooted by Egypt. The status quo situation continued till 1995 when the issue once again gained centre stage attention at the NPT Review and Extension Conference. One of the important reasons that made possible the indefinite extension of the treaty was adoption of the Resolution on the Middle East, co-sponsored by Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States⁸. The Middle East remains the region with the greatest concentration of states that are not party to one or more of the international treaties dealing with WMD: the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).⁹ Moreover and more ominously, WMD (specifically chemical weapons) have been used in the Middle East.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority of countries in the region have some form of WMD-related research, development or weaponisation programme.¹¹

Prospects. This reality is an enormous challenge but is also the very reason that the Middle East is the region that receives the most international attention as a potential WMD free zone. Elsewhere in the world, NWFZs have been successfully negotiated and adopted, and additional such zones are being systemically pursued. But in the Middle East the goal of a NWFZ has been linked to a WMD Free Zone in all the relevant official circles. This is because of the strategic link that states in the region have made among the various WMD,¹² with biological and chemical weapons perceived as the “poor man’s nukes”, despite the significant difference in scale of mass destruction between nuclear weapons on the one hand and biological and chemical weapons on the other hand.

Nevertheless, the most recent developments in this sphere shed light on the implementation of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East. The 2010 NPT Review Conference agreed to convene a Middle East conference to make practical progress toward establishing a Middle East Zone Free of weapons of mass destruction in 2012. Irrespective of the role, international community may play in the Middle East, the importance of peace process initiated by Middle East countries for the denuclearisation of the region can not be ignored. The possibility for a peace agreement to materialise overnight is unlikely and nor should there be an attempt to rush the process.

Challenges. The creation of NWFZ in the Middle East has been stalled due to the non-compliance by a couple of states. While it is fairly well known that Israel has a small but effective nuclear arsenal, Iran is also widely suspected to being covertly nuclear.

There are also following differences between the Egyptian and the Israeli drafts :-

- (a) The Egyptian draft resolution does not elaborate a mechanism for a discussion on the establishment of a NWFZ or even suggest that a formal agreement to create such an NWFZ should be negotiated and signed by the regional states. Rather, it implied that the Middle East should simply comply with the stipulations of the announced zone. The Egyptian proposal also did not define the obligations that these states would be taking towards each other: instead it referred to their commitment towards the zone.
- (b) The Israeli proposal, in contrast, emphasised the need to negotiate the terms of such a zone through direct talks between the state parties. Israel’s focus on the negotiation mechanism may have resulted from the conviction that it should not surrender deterrent effect of its nuclear potential unless there is an Arab acceptance of Israel’s existence in the region.

Israel’s justification for its nuclear policy and programme stems from its geographical location and its relations with its neighbours. Being surrounded by Arab states on all sides, Israel sought the nuclear option as a deterrent to possible Arab attacks and in the interest of national security. However, over the years, relations with the Arab countries have improved. Yet, Israel continues to maintain its ambiguous stand on the existence of its nuclear weapons. This policy of opaque nuclear proliferation eliminates the possibility of establishing a transparent verification mechanism in the region, which is an important prerequisite for the establishment of an NWFZ¹³.

Israel has always maintained that it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the region, reports of their threat to do so in 1973 and during the Gulf War notwithstanding. Moreover, it has been in favour of establishing an NWFZ in the region, arms control and general disarmament evident from the fact that it has already signed all international treaties barring the NPT. However, it believes that if a lasting peace is not established in the region which is brought about by direct talks between the countries, any arms control treaty or NWFZ would be impractical and futile.

Attainability of a NFWF

The elimination of nuclear weapons is called for in Article 6 of the NPT, so it is not a new goal. The way forward is to negotiate a treaty that would commit the nations of the world to nuclear disarmament by a certain date. This approach was championed by the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi 20 years ago, and it has long had many adherents in the UN Conference on Disarmament. The problem lies in convincing countries to act in a way that makes a nuclear-weapons-free world possible.

Starting with the 2007 *Wall Street Journal* article by four former US statesmen—George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn—and followed by endorsements from similar sets of former leaders from the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Australia, and Italy, the support for global nuclear disarmament has spread¹⁴.

In his 2009 Prague speech, President Obama maintained that “*the basic bargain is sound. Countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy.*” It is recognised that, unlike earlier NGO movements and advocacy, which were

vulnerable to allegations of naiveté, it is now the political class itself, led by the US President himself, which is advocating “global zero”, providing much more gravitas to the idea¹⁵.

India and a NFWF. As is well known to all, India is now a NWS. Further, it has affirmed its intention to maintain a credible minimum nuclear deterrent. In his statement to Parliament on 29 July 2005, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, said:

“Our commitment to work for universal nuclear disarmament, so passionately espoused by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in the long run will remain our core concern.”¹⁶

Subsequently, replying to a debate in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) on 17 August 2006, the Prime Minister said:

“Our commitment towards non-discriminatory global nuclear disarmament remains unwavering..... There is no dilution on this count. We do not accept proposals put forward from time to time for regional non-proliferation or regional disarmament. Pending nuclear disarmament, there is no question of India joining the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons State, or accepting full-scope safeguards as a requirement for nuclear supplies to India, now or in the future.”¹⁷

The present juncture of a world without acute rivalries among the NWSs is the right juncture to initiate an earnest dialogue under the aegis of the United Nations at the Conference on Disarmament.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that WMD pose a threat to the very existence of mankind. The jury still seems to be out on the fact whether nuclear weapons bring about a safer world or whether they bring about more turbulence. However the reality is that all nations are unanimous in their opinion that nuclear weapons need to be eventually abolished. Towards this end, efforts are underway to declare various regions as NWFZs.

The Middle East remains a highly volatile region and it has been home to violent political systems since the end of the Second World War. The intention to have a NWFZ in the Middle East has been a cherished dream of the nations of the region since almost last four decades. International efforts towards a NWFZ in the Middle East can be fruitful only when backed by a solid and sustainable consensus of all states.

As is evident from past history, India is committed to global, non-discriminatory disarmament. It has always maintained an unwavering position with respect to the establishment of a NFWF. The forums are there and many of the pathways, notably that of delegitimisation are well known to all. Towards this end, the move towards a NWFZ in the Middle East is a welcome step.

Endnotes

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