Nuclear Proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament – a View from India*

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The article traces the considerations that are shaping India's policy for peaceful nuclear use. The article also delves into the security calculus, and the national interests that drive the country's endeavour to continue to make a bid for universal nuclear disarmament.

Introduction

As a state's material power and wealth increase, so does its interest in shaping its strategic environment. Its increased interests in its near neighbourhood and in its extended strategic realm take the shape of bilateral, multilateral and collective security arrangements. But before such security collectives can be worked out, a nation's stand on certain issues of international concern must be properly delineated. In the present scenario, nuclear proliferation is second only to terrorism as an issue of concern on the global scale.

In fact, the recently concluded 2010 NPT Review Conference has brought the issue of nuclear proliferation back into the foreground. Although India's relationship with the NPT itself is fraught with controversy, India's relationship with nuclear proliferation and the call for universal disarmament go back a long way. The Indian argument has always been that the distinction made by the NPT between nuclear weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) is insufficient in addressing India's position as a state with known nuclear weapon technology. For the foreseeable future, as a non-signatory of the NPT, India's status as a NWS remains elusive. While the classification of India's strategic programmes might be disputed, India remains one of the most important rising powers with nuclear power capabilities.

Indeed, as the dominant regional power of South Asia and as an increasingly important global player, India is likely to be called upon in the near future to take on an important role in the realm of nuclear politics. In this context, India's views on nuclear proliferation and on nuclear disarmament are increasingly crucial. Given the unique nature of India's nuclear power status, it is important to further refine her stance on these issues. Often, India's stand is cloaked in opaqueness for no particular reason. This paper attempts to demystify the Indian view of nuclear proliferation and disarmament.

Historical Background

In 1953 the first Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru co-sponsored a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) calling for a "standstill agreement" on all nuclear testing. India believed that this would be a precursor to achieving universal nuclear disarmament. Unfortunately, the polemics of the Cold War prevented the realisation of this resolution.

It was only in 1996, long after the end of the Cold War, that a draft of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was finally voted on in the UNGA and received overwhelming support. However, domestic compulsions and other considerations of some nations prevented the CTBT from gaining universal approval.1

India's Relationship with Nuclear Proliferation

The changing global order has affected the non-proliferation regime in many ways. The NPT has been the most affected part of that regime. Indeed, the fruition of the Indo-US nuclear deal was symptomatic of the winds of change that now beset the non-proliferation agenda. In many ways, the deal was a harbinger of forward-looking changes to the regime itself. When the deal was first announced, it met with intense debate and unrestrained criticism. Arms control organizations decried the deal, despairing at American double standards and Indian opportunism. The non-proliferation community tried every argument to play out the failings and the dangers of the deal. However, the deal went full steam ahead and intense political campaigning brought it to culmination.2

But the deal has opened up a Pandora's Box of questions. The non-proliferation regime has come under close scrutiny and many of its faults will remain open to public debate long after the days of the deal. Will the regime be jettisoned for a more efficient framework? Will it remain the basic structure of counter-proliferation and be supplemented by additional arrangements for non-members? Whichever path is chosen, the non-proliferation regime has had to undergo severe revision. The effects of this were visible in the scepticism faced by the 2010 Review Conference. India has been at the heart of it all, having plunged the US into an unprecedented course of action that has changed the non-proliferation landscape forever.

At the same time, domestic debate about the deal and about India's nuclear ambitions soared. A healthy and robust public discussion about the political, scientific, energy-related and economic consequences of the deal is still under way. As a watershed in India's non-proliferation history, the Indo-US nuclear deal is unparalleled. Not only were India's credentials in the matter open to widespread scrutiny outside of India, but also within India there were many factions opposed to the deal (some of them still do not toe the line) and it became quite clear how democratic the process was going to be. In fact, the parliament was itself deeply divided on the issue and for the first time in long years, the balance of power within the country shifted on account of a foreign policy issue.

But proponents of the deal within and outside the country argued that India was a "responsible power" which only needed this deal to facilitate its projects on nuclear energy for peaceful use. In an energy-deficient country like India with an exponentially growing energy demand, this is a valid argument. It is also an argument that finally tilted the balance in favour of the deal. India insists that its proliferation record boasted of vertical proliferation for peaceful purposes and of no horizontal proliferation activities. As a "clean" country, it has no parallel in the region which also hosts China and Pakistan. India asserts that even as a non-signatory of the NPT, it has always adhered to two out of the three main pillars of the treaty – a curb on proliferation and the movement towards disarmament. It is now demanding the third pillar – the right to the development of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. In the past, India's civilian nuclear energy programmes that generate power for peaceful purposes have been severely limited by the non-availability of nuclear technology. However, the recent Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver entitles India to trade in nuclear fuel and technology for peaceful uses. This waiver is viewed as an immensely important development that recognizes the rights that India has despite being a NPT outsider. Although allegations and counter-allegations followed on the issue of India's proliferation record, it is on the whole clear that India is a responsible nuclear power with aspirations to energy sufficiency.

Additionally, the claim to non-proliferation was further assuaged by the Indian acceptance of IAEA safeguards on its facilities. Under the terms of the Indo-US nuclear deal, all the facilities being supplied with nuclear fuel and/or technology from the US were to be placed under IAEA safeguards that would verify that they are not diverting nuclear energy from peaceful uses to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. Thus, it was established by repeated claims and actions that although India was against the NPT, it actively supported and encouraged non-proliferation. While others

saw this as an inherent contradiction, India has always maintained that the NPT and non-proliferation can be mutually exclusive. India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee said during a visit to Tokyo in 2007, "If India has not signed the NPT, it is not because of its lack of commitment for non-proliferation, but because we consider NPT as a flawed treaty and it does not recognise the need for universal, non-discriminatory verification and treatment." Nevertheless, some argued that the US-India nuclear deal, in combination with US attempts to deny Iran civilian nuclear fuel-making technology, may destroy the NPT regime, while others contended that such a move would likely bring India, a NPT non-signatory, under closer international scrutiny.

India is not a member of the NPT and technically has no role to play in the treaty. Rather, the NPT is so rigidly structured that there is no scope to accommodate India in the treaty. In fact, with the NSG waiver, India is now in a category of its own, different even from the other three non-signatories, whose strategic programmes do not have the same acceptability. But transparency has never been an issue associated with the Indian nuclear programmes. Since the second round of nuclear testing at Pokhran in 1998, there has been a lull in the momentum towards further testing and a decided shift towards trade in nuclear energy and technology for peaceful purposes. In this scenario, it was ever more important to emphasize India's long-standing commitment to nuclear disarmament.

Nuclear Weapon-Free World: Utopia or Reality?

Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty requires NPT parties to pursue negotiations on an end to the arms race, nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament. However, in the post post-Cold War situation, this objective has not been achieved and many states still possess a large arsenal of arms while other states are developing their own. Despite being a non-signatory to the NPT, India took the initiative towards nuclear disarmament and proposed the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan of 1988, named after late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.3

The Action Plan was introduced by the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the Third Special Session on Nuclear Disarmament of the UN General Assembly in 1988. Marking the tenth anniversary of the plan, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that the Action Plan was a comprehensive exposition of India's approach towards global disarmament. Ten years before the nuclear explosions of Pokhran II shook the world, it is interesting to note how the Nehruvian concepts of 'atoms for peace' and 'global disarmament' simultaneously constituted India's nuclear policy. In fact, Rajiv Gandhi had referred to nuclear deterrence as the "ultimate expression of the philosophy of terrorism". It remains to be seen if the Action Plan can still inspire constructive multilateral initiatives for global nuclear disarmament.

The post-Cold War also brought about a paradigm shift from competitive to cooperative security. As decades of hostilities were replaced with dialogue, the unlikely fallout was the weakening of the movement for global disarmament. No longer threatened by the shadow of a bomb, the momentum for universal disarmament suffered a serious setback. In this scenario, India proposed the Action Plan that on the one hand played with the possibility of a global zero, but equally importantly raised the issue of the "third nuclear wave" and the dangers of the new nuclear environment where the prospects of nuclear violence by non-state actors become more real with each passing day.

The probability of a nuclear weapon-free world and the non-violent world order that will be required to sustain it have always been an issue of deep intrigue in India. Vice President Hamid Ansari has often suggested that the answers lie in investigating the logic of realism, as the current disarmament process is rendered impotent by a political context it cannot change.4 As nations live in a system of sovereign states, is it feasible to pursue a goal that is essentially human in nature and does not fit into the Westphalian nation-state-centric framework – "would a higher priority be accorded to the survival of the state if the survival of humanity were at stake?"

In India, we believe that even before the philosophical nuances of nuclear abolition can be further debated, the idea flounders on two basic issues – the desirability of achieving such a state and the feasibility of doing so. The diplomacy of nuclear disarmament requires verification, confidence building and regional restraint. Assuming that the scope for progress in the short term is relatively modest, pragmatic logic places emphasis on the possible, not the desirable. In the post post-Cold War scenario, the contemporary security calculus gives hope for neither. In fact, the workings of the global nuclear industry place so much emphasis on non-proliferation controls and ownership patterns that the call for disarmament does not find its natural place. As a process, disarmament is by nature incremental; is it then so difficult to achieve that it is eventually less desirable? Is that the reason why disarmament seems less and less probable in the near future?

However, the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan is in the end consistent with as much as six decades of work inside and outside of the UN to advance the internationally agreed goal of general and complete disarmament. To prevent it from languishing in the corridors of power, the revival of the plan lies in raising other fundamental questions pertinent to the contemporary politico-nuclear scenario. Has the argument for disarmament ceased to be relevant for the survival of the human species? Condoleezza Rice is often quoted as saying that for the first time since the treaty of Westphalia, the prospect of violent conflict between great powers is ever more unthinkable. But as nations learn to compete in peace, will transnational, borderless entities increase problems of insecurity? These are issues to be pondered over. Thus, while momentum for disarmament is building in the west, led by countries such as the US, the UK and Norway, the emergence of Asia's role and of coalitions across the world such as the Group of Eight, the Six-Nation Initiative and the Mayors for Peace initiative also have interesting potential.

Looking to the Future

Finally, attention should be drawn to what seem to be three immensely critical issues – evolving state behaviour, the role of the armed forces in a reformed security calculus, and India's commitment to no-first-use (NFU).

In the Third Wave, terrorism benefiting from horizontal proliferation encouraged by irresponsible state behaviour is an ever more real risk. In fact, the divide between the so-called responsible nuclear powers and the supposedly irresponsible nuclear agents, actual or potential, is completely artificial. The focus on the enormous threat and danger posed by nuclear terrorism specifically and by non-state terrorism more generally is a risky discourse that seeks to shift focus away from what is the primary problem – that of state terrorism in both its nuclear and non-nuclear forms. Where irresponsible states are implicitly involved in sponsoring, aiding or camouflaging terrorist activity of any kind, nuclear terrorism is at its riskiest. It is thus crucial that the differences between state and non-state actors need not be made irreversible, and where a state is seen as complicit in terrorist activity of any kind, and with a special emphasis on nuclear terrorism, that state be brought to task.

This also impinges on the role of the armed forces of a state in its security and the protection of its territory, property and people. Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal in his book 'The Vision of the Armed Forces of India circa 2020' has suggested that the most efficient combination of manpower and technology would have to be implemented carefully and judiciously. He emphasizes that the nature of threats to India's security are such that Army 2020 would have to be designed to function in an amorphous security environment, with capabilities to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict from low-intensity conflict to nuclear warfare.5 This is a real issue that we are dealing with – the urgency of further equipping India's armed forces and upgrading their warfare capabilities in the event of real war or proxy war, which is much more of a reality in India. Indeed, India's rise to regional power

status and beyond also depends on threat perception, force structures and the war preparedness of India's armed forces.

In the same vein, global stability will be hugely aided by the finalisation of a universal NFU commitment. While security assurances of the NNWS will significantly reduce the attraction of nuclear weapons, a universal acceptance of NFU by nuclear weapon possessors will remove the possibility of a nuclear exchange between NWS too. The acceptance of NFU will enable de-alerting, de-mating and de-targeting, all three steps that are critical for reducing the existential dangers that accompany nuclear weapons. India's draft resolution 'Reducing Nuclear Dangers', which has been tabled in the UN General Assembly every year since 1998, highlights the fact that the hair-trigger posture of nuclear forces carries an unacceptable risk of unintentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons. The conclusion of a universal NFU treaty will not only reduce the dangers of an accidental launch, but also heighten the chances of no-use of nuclear weapons. Once the centrality of nuclear weapons in security calculations has receded, the gradual delegitimizing of nuclear weapons per se will be a far more achievable objective. Fallouts from the discrepancies of the non-proliferation regime will also be neutralised in this way.

Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership

At the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC on 13 April 2010, the Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh announced the establishment of a "Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership" in India. It will be a state-of-the-art facility based on international participation from the IAEA and other like-minded nations. The Centre will comprise four schools dealing with Advanced Nuclear Energy System Studies : Nuclear Security, Radiation Security, Radiation Safety, and the application of Radio isotopes and Radiation Technology in areas of healthcare, agriculture and food. The Centre will conduct research and development of design systems that are intrinsically safe, secure, proliferation resistant and sustainable.6

Conclusion

In conclusion it is emphasised that the rise of India's standing in the regional or global order need not be exclusive of India's involvement in the furtherance of a collective and cooperative regional mandate. In the post-cold war world, alliances have given way to strategic partnerships, a concept most befitting India's posture. Such partnerships will foster goodwill, with a direct effect on trade and commerce. As such, the vision of a powerful India stems from an all-inclusive trajectory of progress that does not preclude the interests of other regional powers. In this era of political globalisation, India's rise to a regional and global power can only be founded on the principle of first among equals. We understand and recognise that, and view our continued and deepening commitment to non-proliferation and disarmament as a priority.

Note by the Author

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