

The Japan Times

Tuesday, April 8, 2014

Can a nuclear-weapons state champion disarmament?

BY [RAMESH THAKUR](#)

Forty-four years after the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into force, the world still finds itself perilously close to the edge of the nuclear cliff. The cliff is perhaps not quite as steep as it was in the 1980s, when there were more than 70,000 nuclear weapons compared to today's 17,000, but going over it would be fatal for planet Earth.

Authoritative road maps exist to walk us back to the relative safety of a denuclearized world, but a perverse mixture of hubris and arrogance on the part of the nine nuclear-armed states (China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) exposes us to the risk of sleepwalking into a nuclear disaster.

For nuclear peace to hold, deterrence and fail-safe mechanisms must work every single time. For nuclear Armageddon to break out, deterrence or fail-safe mechanisms need to break down only once. This is not a comforting equation.

Deterrence stability depends on rational decision-makers being always in office on all sides: a dubious and not very reassuring precondition. It depends equally critically on there being no rogue launch, human error or system malfunction: an impossibly high bar.

According to one U.S. study reported by Eric Schlosser last year, more than 1,200 nuclear weapons were involved in significant incidents from 1950–68 because of security breaches, lost weapons, failed safety mechanism or accidents resulting from weapons being dropped or crushed in lifts.

Nuclear weapons were invented to cope with Germany, used to defeat Japan and deployed most extensively against the Soviet Union. As their primary strategic rationale disappeared with the end of the Cold War, Washington's evolving nuclear policies acquired greater regional specificity. In East Asia, for example, U.S. nuclear weapons and doctrines are designed both to deter China and North Korea and reassure allies like Japan, South Korea and Australia. The world remains at a loss on how to persuade, coax or coerce North Korea to step back into the NPT as a denuclearized member in good standing.

Paradoxically the very fact that nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 is powerful evidence that their sheer destructiveness makes them virtually unusable. A second paradox is that while the progress in the dramatic fall in their numbers since the 1980s has occurred through bilateral agreements and measures between Moscow and Washington, their irreversible elimination will have to rest on a legally binding international convention. To be meaningful, this will have to include all nine nuclear-armed states.

The prospects for such a treaty would be significantly greater if it were to be championed by a credible country from among the nine nuclear powers. India should step forward to be a champion of phased, regulated and verifiable global nuclear disarmament governed by a universal, nondiscriminatory nuclear weapons convention.

This would be in keeping with the legacy of Indian initiatives on nuclear arms control and disarmament, including the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan of 1988; with the fact that India was the most reluctant nuclear weapons possessor of all nine nuclear-armed states; and the incongruent reality that its official nuclear doctrine lists global nuclear disarmament as a national security objective.

Inaugurating a conference on April 2, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reaffirmed that "as a responsible" nuclear armed state, "India supports the idea of a nuclear-weapons-free world

because we believe that it enhances not just India's security, but also global security." He insisted that "there is no paradox in a nuclear weapons state like India being a strong advocate of a nuclear-weapons-free world." India was the only country to demonstrate a nuclear-weapons capability in 1974 and then exercise restraint for nearly a quarter century before regional and global events "obliged us to test in 1998 and declare ourselves a nuclear weapon state."

On March 9, former Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), widely expected to win the elections currently being fought, wrote a somewhat silly, if not hysterical, letter to Singh demanding that his address to the conference be canceled and that the conference itself be postponed until after the elections.

Sinha accused Singh of being the head of "a lame-duck government" and the conference of being "ill-designed and ill-timed" because of the general elections. For good measure, he added that his perusal of the agenda showed the speakers to be mainly "known anti-India ... nonproliferationists" who "have not only been bashing India but have been working against our interests."

Sinha should sack the aide who provided him with this information. There were indeed some among the speakers who are strong advocates of nonproliferation and were never reconciled to India's nuclear weaponization. No seminar on the challenge of nuclear weapons can be balanced and credible if it excludes this point of view. Most speakers were strong and passionate nuclear abolitionists, directing their arguments at all who possess and seek security through nuclear weapons that add hugely to the security dilemmas and dangers of the whole world.

Mercifully Singh ignored the letter as part of the silly season of campaign politics. In his address, Singh called for practical measures to "reduce nuclear dangers by reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines." Because an increasing number of voices are demanding that the sole function of nuclear weapons, as long as they exist, should be to deter a nuclear attack, all the nuclear armed states should join together to establish a global no-first-use norm, he said.

It is simplistic to dismiss "no first use" as merely declaratory, easily ignored in wartime. A universal no-first-use policy by all nine nuclear-armed states would have considerable practical import with flow-on requirements for nuclear force posture and deployment — for example, de-alerting (taking warheads off hair-trigger alert), de-mating (separating warheads from delivery systems) and de-targeting. This strengthened norm of nonuse would then lay the groundwork for further gradual reductions in the number of nuclear warheads held by the various nuclear armed states and their eventual elimination through a nuclear weapons convention.

Ramesh Thakur is director of the Center for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Australian National University, and coeditor of the recently published four-volume reference set "Nuclear Politics" (2014).
