

Why Nuclear Disarmament Appears Difficult?

There was a time when a nuclear India was grappling with the negative fallout stemming from Pokhran II, international pressure was constantly mounting over her to end her defection from the rest of the world and join the extant nuclear regime, namely the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). But India has continued digging her heels in and she has persistently refused to budge from its principled stand, i.e., she would not renounce her nukes until total disarmament is in sight.

An anti-nuclear lobby has existed since the inception of the dreaded nukes on the 16th of July, 1945 (Trinity tests of Alamogordo, New Mexico) with the scientists, who devised them, themselves being divided over their use. The nuclear tests by India and Pakistan during the late 1990s had led to renewed demands for their total elimination. But is a total nuclear disarmament possible in the teeth of resistance from the five acknowledged nuclear powers led by the USA? Or, is a total nuclear disarmament even advisable? Perhaps no, if one explores the issue a bit deeply, one finds that total nuclear disarmament as demanded by certain countries like India and 'neo-eliminationists' including major think tanks and experts, would remain a will-o'-the-wisp for some more time to come.

Nukes would continue to be relevant because of the pay-offs (read advantages) they promise in a world which is still characterised by mistrust, suspicion, civil wars propelled by increased urges of ethnicity and infra-nationalism, terrorism, religious fundamentalism a la Taliban and ISIS and some rogue states desiring to unsettle the extant status quo.

If anything, the presence of nukes has pre-empted the dreaded Third World War. If they were to go suddenly, it might unleash many pent-up irredentist and imperialist urges of a few nations or groups, thereby precipitating an international crisis of a huge dimension in the form of the Third World War that we have all striven to avoid. Even if nukes were not there, the conventional weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are so dangerous today as to annihilate the entire world many times over, something we have always accused only nukes to be capable of. The human

existence and the liberal values are also threatened. The 'end of history' (a term coined by Francis Fukuyama) symbolising the victory of liberal-democratic forces would become meaningless and Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' might be knocking on our door.

Observers feel the primary purpose of nuclear weapons today remains deterrence of the potential peace-breakers as they feel conventional weapons may not be able to induce the shock and potential decisiveness of nuclear weapons. Today, nuclear forces also contribute to the deterrence of states that possess the full spectrum of WMD including biological and chemical weapons. Despite vast technological improvements, it is not possible to detect and completely destroy a remote, deeply buried site from where such WMD may be launched. It was a stern warning by a nuclear US of severe retaliation against the use of chemical and biological weapons by Iraq during the Gulf War that latter refrained from using them.

The argument proffered by the neo-eliminationists that the presence of nukes might lead to their accidental use due to the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion can be countered in their own terms. If there really exists a danger of accidental use of the nukes owing to the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion, what is the guarantee that the same unwholesome atmosphere would not lead to someone's defection and breakdown of the consensus on nuclear disarmament.

In the absence of an adequate and equitable verification regime ensuring mutual assured safety vis-à-vis mutual assured destruction, certain moves like 'de-targeting', 'de-alerting' and 'de-activating' the nukes would also be of no consequence as they can be reversed in a matter of seconds. It is believed that most of the de-alerting measures are easily and quickly reversible with little, if any real time warning. Consequently, such moves could really be counter-productive leading to greater instability and mistrust.

In fact, to argue that certain states will give up their nuclear ambitions if only the USA and others declared nuclear weapons states would go to zero nuclear weapons is a wishful thinking. With motives for the acquisition of nuclear weapons being complex and varied ranging from security to prestige, radical nuclear disarmament by the Big Fives might promote proliferation by emboldening states like Iran, Iraq and North Korea to seek their sinister goals of coercion and aggression through the instrumentality of nuclear weapons. They may also strive towards a relative parity with big powers through nukes.

So, acquisition of nukes by them might remove a restraint over them to do something like attacking and annexing a neighbour as Iraq did to Kuwait on the 7th of August, 1990. And, a denuclearised world in that case would be incapacitated to take any action to foil such moves. The substance of the argument here is that even if we have total nuclear disarmament, the technology for manufacturing nuclear weapons would always be there which might fuel some states' ambition to play a larger than life role in international politics, oftentimes even risking international peace and security.

It is felt that drastic reduction might also have a deleterious effect on the security calculations of the US allies who have long depended on the American nuclear umbrella. In an uncertain future, perhaps in the face of an aggressive China or resurgent Russia, the insecurities perceived by the US allies could compel them to develop their own nuclear deterrent capabilities in the absence of a credible American nuclear force. It is believed that

the defection of even one major ally like Japan could have profoundly negative implications for global stability and the US security interests.

Supposedly, a principal American rationale for maintaining a credible and effective nuclear weapon posture is based on the need to provide a hedge against a reversal in her relations with Russia and China. Even as the world is pondering over total nuclear disarmament, Russia and China are busy modernising their nuclear forces. While China is constantly overhauling and modernising her missiles and warheads, Russia's nuclear modernisation includes not only new missiles, but elaborate and extraordinarily hardened command and control facilities. Russian doctrine today places more emphasis on nuclear weapons than did Soviet doctrine as evidenced by Moscow's reversal of its long-standing no-first use policy.

Chinese and Russian resistance to suggestions for greater transparency in matters relating to nuclear weapon facilities adumbrate to the barrier, both technical and psychological, frustrating complete nuclear disarmament. There is no realistic basis for confidence that these barriers can somehow be surmounted. So, the large and dangerous gap exists between wish and the reality. It is obvious from the foregoing discussion that a total nuclear disarmament may not prevent their proliferation among state and non-state actors.

It seems that, at least, in the foreseeable future there is no possibility for a complete nuclear disarmament as long as an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion exists. In such an atmosphere, nuclear weapon would provide a hedge not only against nukes themselves, but also against the use of conventional WMD, thus keeping the discontent and conflicts at a level that is manageable. Perhaps these are the reasons that also explain the US reluctance of an unconditional and time-bound nuclear disarmament as demanded by India.

Salient Points

- International pressure was constantly mounting over India to sign the CTBT and the NPT after Pokhran II nuclear test.
- An anti-nuclear lobby has existed since the inception of the dreaded nukes on the 16th of July, 1945 (Trinity tests of Alamogordo, New Mexico).
- The nuclear tests by India and Pakistan during late 1990s had led to renewed demands for their total elimination.
- The presence of nukes has pre-empted the dreaded Third World War.
- The conventional weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are so dangerous today as to annihilate the entire world many times over, something we have always accused only nukes to be capable of.
- The primary purpose of nuclear weapons today remains deterrence of the potential peace-breakers
- The neo-eliminationists argue that the presence of nukes might lead to their accidental use due to the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust.
- Motives for the acquisition of nuclear weapons being complex and varied ranging from security to prestige, radical nuclear disarmament by the Big Fives might promote proliferation.
- Even as the world is pondering over total nuclear disarmament, Russia and China are busy modernising their nuclear forces.
- In the foreseeable future there is no possibility for a complete nuclear disarmament as long as an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion exists.

Glossary

Adumbrate: to outline or sketch