**Global Nuclear Disarmament in Disarray**

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As we venture deeper into the 21st century, the once-idealistic notion of global nuclear disarmament has become outdated in the face of escalating global volatility. Recent events have only served to exacerbate tensions and intensify the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. Notably, in February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the suspension of his nation’s participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START); the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement. This has prompted a strong response from the United States, which has ceased exchanging data on nuclear forces. Such developments highlight the increasing fragility of the future of nuclear disarmament and raise doubts about the effectiveness of arms limitation treaties such as the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Outer Space Treaty (OST), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the New START doctrine.

Rose Gottemoeller, the chief negotiator for New START, has warned that the failure of the treaty between the world’s two nuclear superpowers highlights that the world is on the cusp of another nuclear arms race. As of early 2023, approximately 12,500 warheads were still in the possession of nine countries, leaving the possibility of nuclear disarmament in the future questionable.

The path towards disarmament appears to be strewn with numerous obstacles. In 2019 the United States walked away from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and later in 2020, it also withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, which dealt a heavy blow to the progress made in eliminating an entire class of nuclear missiles. Likewise, recent developments in Russia’s deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus have raised the spectre of nuclear conflict, leading the United Nations to issue a warning that the risk of nuclear weapons being used is higher now than it has ever been since the Cold War.

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The situation is further compounded by the growing nuclear arsenals of countries like Israel, which is expanding its nuclear facilities, coupled with intentions to equip its submarines with nuclear weapons. This has raised concerns about the potential for a nuclear conflict in the Middle East. Similarly, North Korea’s progress in acquiring a nuclear weapon and willingness to use nuclear weapons pre-emptively is worrying. Such actions by both Israel and North Korea hinder disarmament efforts.

Furthermore, China’s complaint at the UN regarding the AUKUS deal highlights the loophole of NPT as under this treaty it is not allowed to transfer fissile material and nuclear technology from a nuclear-armed state to a non-nuclear state. This has brought to the forefront a host of concerns surrounding nuclear proliferation.

A similar trend is evident in South Asia, where Pakistan is particularly concerned about India’s growing nuclear arsenal. India has signed agreements such as the Indo-US 123 agreement, which involves the procurement of uranium enrichment and trade of nuclear components with the US. This agreement marks a departure from the NPT policy.

Furthermore, India has been steadily enhancing its nuclear capabilities. In 2021, it conducted tests of the Agni-Prime (Agni-P) missile, followed by the testing of Agni V in 2022, which is a land-based nuclear-capable Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). India’s nuclear triad, which allows for launching nuclear weapons from land, air, and sea, is firmly in flow. Moreover, India has acquired advanced weapon systems such as the S400 defence system and long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles, indicating a trend of vertical proliferation which raises questions about the effectiveness of nuclear non-proliferation regimes.

In contrast, Pakistan has been proactive in its efforts to contain nuclear proliferation in South Asia. In the past, Pakistan proposed the Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR), which includes three crucial elements: missile and nuclear restraint, maintaining conventional balance, and reinforcing elements of conflict resolution. Pakistan’s permanent representative to the UN has time and again reiterated that Pakistan’s offer for SRR remains on the table, aiming to promote peace and stability in the region. Given the growing threat of India, SRR would effectively curb arms build-up. Certainly, Pakistan should continue to project its commitment and constructive role towards nuclear non-proliferation in South Asia.

Overall, the current global strategic environment is ripe for an arms race, creating prospects for vertical as well as horizontal proliferation. Mearsheimer astutely pointed out that structural changes in the global order are compelling states to adopt offensive measures to safeguard their interests. The shadow of uncertainty hangs over the world due to ongoing events, escalations, and provocations that are spurring a renewed arms race. At this critical juncture, diplomatic engagement, cooperative initiatives, and confidence-building measures must take centre stage to prevent further escalation. The challenges at hand are formidable, but they must not deter the world from seeking viable solutions.

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