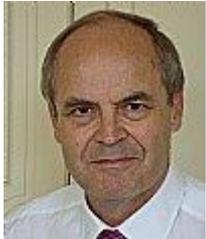


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## Nuclear Arms Control and Reductions in Jeopardy



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Discussions last month in Astana, during a five day meeting on “Nuclear Dangers” hosted by the Kazakh government, gave rise to some sobering findings.

A recent vote in the UN General Assembly had lifted the spirits of many of the participants in this conference. On 7 July 122 States – over 60% of the UN membership – voted for the adoption of a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, to complement existing treaties that ban the possession and use of chemical weapons and biological weapons.

Discussions in Astana brought home to these participants the reality that none of the nine states that currently possess, collectively, a total of some 15000 nuclear weapons (US, Russia, UK, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea) has shown the slightest interest in incurring an obligation to eliminate nuclear weapons from their arsenals by becoming a party to the new treaty.

At best the new treaty has created a non-binding international norm that Non-Nuclear Weapon States can deploy to browbeat nuclear-armed States into moving faster in a direction to which five of them claim to be committed, towards the world “free of nuclear weapons” for which President Barack Obama called in Prague in April 2009.

Equally disappointing for many participants was a stock-taking of the nuclear relationship between the United States and Russia. Those two countries have a record of nuclear arms control and reduction dating back to 1963.

Their most recent bilateral agreement, New Start, achieved in 2010, commits them to reducing deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1550 by 2018. Implementation of that agreement has been proceeding to plan, but whether the Trump administration will agree to extend the agreement beyond 2021, when it is due to expire, has become uncertain.

Participants also heard that a decades-old US/Russia dialogue on nuclear matters is in abeyance and that the NATO/Russia Council has not met since 2013. Sam Nunn, a former Democrat Senator for Georgia and former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, criticised NATO’s decision to suspend the Council to show disapproval of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. It is precisely in times of crisis that the Council ought to be meeting, he argued.

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Yet another strand of the US/Russian nuclear relationship is also in trouble. Washington believes that Moscow has deployed a ground-launched cruise missile in contravention of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces agreement, one of the products of a golden age of US/Russian arms reductions. Russia denies the charge and points to US deployments of Ballistic Missile Defense launchers in Romania and Poland as breaches of that agreement. In the US Congress pressure is growing for US repudiation of the INF treaty. This could well lead to a revival of the threat to Western Europe from Russian non-strategic nuclear-tipped missiles.

Meanwhile, in the context of a \$1.3 trillion modernisation of its nuclear arsenal, the United States is developing a Long-Range Stand-Off cruise missile to deliver nuclear warheads to distant targets. These missiles, incorporating Stealth technology, will be launched from a new generation of Stealth bombers. Moscow will perceive these weapons as increasing Washington's ability to carry out a highly destructive first strike on Russian targets, and Moscow will want to respond by improving its own first (and second) strike capabilities, both nuclear and non-nuclear. An existing strategic balance between the United States and Russia will be put at risk.

This risk could have been somewhat mitigated if President Obama had pledged that the United States would never be the first party to a dispute to resort to nuclear weapons ("No First Use"). Conference participants heard that Obama wanted a No First Use pledge to be part of his legacy. US allies in NATO and the Far East, who want the United States to be able to threaten first use in their defense, joined forces with domestic opponents to talk him out of it.

Compounding apprehensions about the future, a 20 year-old Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty still has not entered into force. There is no majority in the US Senate for its ratification. China, Israel, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan and India say they are waiting upon US ratification to embark on or complete their own ratification procedures. A global moratorium on nuclear testing has held since 1998, however – the special case of North Korea apart.

That special case was high on the conference agenda. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian and American experts addressed it. None held out hope that diplomacy, intrinsically desirable, would induce the North Korean leadership to wind back their nuclear weapon programme, or even freeze it. All expected North Korea to react to a US strike on nuclear and missile facilities by annihilating Seoul.

Other aspects of the nuclear proliferation agenda offered a brighter prospect. Participants heard that Iran is respecting its 2015 nuclear commitments; four international summits on Nuclear Security, between 2010 and 2016, have reduced the risk of terrorists acquiring weapon-grade material or actual warheads; nuclear-weapon-free zones cover Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific.

One other agenda item merits a mention. Participants discussed the implications for "nuclear deterrence", and "strategic stability" based on nuclear deterrence, of emerging non-nuclear military and cyber technologies. They agreed that this topic requires detailed study. There appears to be potential for advanced conventional and cyber weapons to threaten a perceived virtue of nuclear weapon systems, their invulnerability, but also to replace nuclear weapons as a source of strategic deterrence and stability.

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