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How long can WMDs be linked to proliferation, solely?

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A hard-won suspension of the Iranian uranium enrichment programme now have been put in place, as a result of intense negotiations and strong international pressure – not least by the US. The head of the UN's nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, welcomed the decision as "a good step in the right direction". The Iranian nuclear challenge may have been resolved - for now.

Iran, North Korea, Libya are all hot spots for nuclear proliferation, connected in part by Abdul Qadeer Khan and his readiness to provide nuclear technologies outside international export controls. All of the above cases, with their different shapes and challenges, have contributed to draw worldwide attention to new nuclear dangers and a profound revival of the term "weapons of mass destruction", or "WMDs" for short. The phrase was timidly introduced some 60 years ago, and given, somewhat paradoxically, limited deliberation during the Cold War years of Mutually Assured Destruction.

It is now back in full, but, do bear in mind, exclusively in the context of proliferation. Ultimately, WMD has become a label of state behaviour, intimately linked with the rise of new concepts like "rogue states", "axis of evil", and the "second nuclear age". The possible demand for WMDs by states, as well as non-state actors, is governing international security relations. Seemingly, the other side of the WMD coin has no relevance. To leading nuclear-weapon states, global disarmament obligations are no longer a real issue.

To others, nuclear non-proliferation is a two-way street, where progress only can be achieved through mutual nuclear security. Case studies for a number of countries suggest that security concerns provide an especially important motive for pursuing the nuclear option. Prioritisations on the disarmament arena inevitably colour non-proliferation advancements, and vice versa. Genuine disarmament and control of exiting excessive stocks of fissile material within the existing nuclear-weapon complexes could, moreover, be vital to prevent acts of nuclear terrorism.

Time has come to revisit the findings of the 1996 Canberra Commission: "Nuclear weapons are held by a handful of states which insist that these weapons provide unique security benefits, and yet reserve uniquely to themselves the right to own them. This situation is highly discriminatory and thus unstable; it cannot be sustained. The possession of nuclear weapons by any state is a constant stimulus to other states to acquire them".

On this background is the current one-sidedness puzzling – and dangerous. Sizeable nuclear arsenals in leading nuclear-weapon states and an emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policies are an inherent incentive for nuclear proliferation. Yet, there is a profound belief in some circles that nuclear non-proliferation not only can but also should be decoupled from nuclear disarmament. A combination of offensive and defensive, nuclear and non-nuclear, capabilities is considered essential by the US in order to meet the security requirements of the 21st century.

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For long, arms control has been aimed at limiting the number of weapons. Now, regimes, and if need be regime change and pre-emptive action, have become the new currency. Effectively, there are currently two categories of nuclear weapons: "good nukes", like the US ones – as they are stabilising and have a noble purpose – and "bad nukes" in rogue, proliferating states.

In this state of naive nuclear dichotomisation, the Bush administration has tried to pursue smaller and more usable nuclear weapons (the proposal faced cuts by Congress late November), renounced the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, reduced the time for testing readiness, and opposed negotiations for a verifiable Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. Putin, on his part, announced November 17, that Russia is developing a new nuclear missile system that will be second to none in the world, and the armed forces will have it in their arsenal in the near future. But an inimitable and growing reliance by Washington and Moscow on nuclear weapons for its security can only complicate international efforts to marshal non-proliferation.

As the international community approaches the 2005 Review Conference for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the regime is facing an array of challenges. More than three decades ago, the NPT epitomised the, perhaps, most important international security bargains of all time: states without nuclear weapons pledged not to acquire them, while nuclear-armed states committed to eventually give them up. Nuclear weapons are now *temporarily* legal in five countries (the five that had tested prior to January 1,1967); not illegal in three others (Israel, India and Pakistan, which never joined the NPT); and forbidden everywhere else.

May 2000, a road map of measurable milestones towards nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation was adopted by consensus by all NPT member states, including the US. In parallel, the nuclear-weapon states reiterated their unequivocal responsibility to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

The plan of action included a entry-into-force of the mentioned Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, negotiations of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, the principle of irreversibility to apply to nuclear disarmament and related arms control and reduction measures, a requirement to uphold and implement existing treaties (START and ABM), reduce nuclear arsenals unilaterally, increase transparency, reduce tactical nuclear weapons, and to improve nuclear verification capabilities for disarmament and non-proliferation.

Less than five years later, however, the vast majority of the steps have been violated by leading nuclear-weapon states. The United States and Russia have been unable to substantially, irreversibly and verifiably dismantle their still massive Cold War-era stockpiles of strategic and tactical weapons. Rather, under their flawed leadership nuclear weapons are undergoing a quiet renaissance. By this they have not only increased the risk of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. They are also severely undermining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – the one multilateral mechanism to stem the spreading of nuclear weapons and control the nuclear ambitions of states like Iran.

To meet mutual nuclear security concerns of the 21st century, what we urgently need is an acknowledgement of the linkages between disarmament and non-proliferation, as well as a broadening of the understanding of the disarmament commitments embedded in the NPT. If not, more WMD possessors and the concept of the "second nuclear age" can only become self-fulfilling prophecies.

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