

The non-proliferation agenda: paths to two nuclear futures

If North Korea and Iran are to take heed of pressure on nuclear disarmament, it is essential that G8 countries keep up their own reduction programmes

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As presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin discuss a new round of United States-Russian nuclear arms cuts and work with their G8 counterparts and other leaders on the challenges from Iran and North Korea, the success or failure of these negotiating tracks will help determine the global nuclear future. The current near-term agenda on nuclear arms is especially consequential for the long-term outcome.

Obama hopes that progress on all fronts will move the world closer to the nuclear weapons-free vision famously outlined in his April 2009 Prague speech, on which he has staked part of his legacy. Yet even though the Prague speech was a landmark of US policy, it can also be considered a belated follow-through to the multilateral framework for nuclear arms that was put in place more than 40 years ago, in the form of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on nuclear weapons. The bargain at the heart of the NPT called on the nuclear 'have-nots' to refrain from acquiring arsenals while 'haves' undertook to disarm.

The opposite trajectory – with an expanding club of nuclear powers – leads towards the world that the NPT was intended to prevent. While a nuclear-armed Iran and North Korea pose problems in themselves, they could also draw Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf states, South Korea and Japan into regional arms races in the Middle East and North-East Asia. The NPT thus helps one understand current diplomatic efforts, underlying stakes and interconnected issues.

Take the link between bilateral US-Russian arms agreements and efforts to thwart Iran and North Korea, for example. Despite the simplistic arguments from hard-line arms control sceptics, no one really thinks disarmament by the nuclear powers will inspire Tehran and Pyongyang to follow their

virtuous example. Any chance of reaching a peaceful solution and avoiding armed conflict depends on marshalling political, economic and military pressure on the two defiant regimes. From their side, success for Iran and North Korea is a matter of deflecting pressure and clouding the issue of who is at fault. Thus reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia would deprive Tehran and Pyongyang of any pretext and distraction. When the big nuclear powers pursue their NPT disarmament obligations in good faith, it helps to keep international focus squarely on Iran's uranium enrichment programme and North Korea's nuclear weapons tests. Otherwise, Washington is left to argue somewhat naively: 'do as I say, not as I do'.

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In recent years, the united front that the Obama administration has forged with Russia, China and the western European powers has subjected Iran to a new level of economic and diplomatic pressure. Since the summer of 2012, tough new energy and financial sanctions have taken a heavy toll on Iranian oil and gas exports, mainstays of its economy. This international pressure is not an end in itself, but a means toward a diplomatic agreement to ensure that Iran's nuclear activities remain strictly civilian in nature. The best that can be said of the diplomatic process is that it is in a relatively serious and substantive phase, compared with earlier

periods. Despite frequent inactivity and inflexibility, negotiators at the February and April 2013 talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, at least probed possible compromises over restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment in exchange for the easing of sanctions.

The sides are at a very difficult impasse, while the metaphorical ticking clock of Iran's enrichment operations brings it closer to having the makings of a bomb. Given the unlikelihood that the major elements of an agreement can be worked out in one fell swoop, the exchange of incremental measures involves highly sensitive bargaining. Since Iranian leaders suspect that the true aim of sanctions is to remove them from power, they demand significant relief from sanctions as the price of their cooperation. For their part, the outside powers that have worked so assiduously to build the sanctions regime are loath to begin dismantling it without proof of Tehran's seriousness. Moreover, the Iranian government has proven itself to be an unreliable negotiating partner, with the long-secret Fordow facility serving as a prominent, if subterranean, reminder. The Iranians are taking some key steps, however, to slow the ticking clock, including diluting some of their 20 per cent-enriched uranium to less worrisome levels of concentration.

In North Korea, the young and relatively new leader, Kim Jong-un, makes no pretence of cooperating. In February 2013, his regime detonated the country's third underground test of a nuclear weapon, just two months after firing a ballistic missile on the pretext of putting a commercial satellite into orbit. Both actions prompted rebukes from the UN Security Council, including expansion of the list of goods North Korea is prohibited from importing. Far from negotiating or weighing incentives to offer Pyongyang, outside powers have grown impatient with North Korean attempts to wheedle economic assistance through military provocations. The US response to the Kim regime's recent actions was to flex its own military muscle: despatching a B-2 stealth bomber and announcing plans for expanded missile defence. But the real bellwether of international reaction to North Korea, and the country with the greatest leverage against it, is China, its neighbour and economic sponsor. While China did cut financial links to a key North Korean bank and impose a



An opening meeting of the High-Level Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which plays a significant role in maintaining peace

new level of tourism restrictions, Beijing's typical measured – sometimes strenuously even-handed – response reflects its primary concern with stability on the peninsula. Will Chinese leaders eventually change their assessment of how North Korea's actions affect stability?

Meanwhile, the US and Russia have entered into discussions about launching their next round of nuclear arms reductions, following the 2010 New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) agreement, lowering their strategic arsenals to 1,550 deployed warheads. The very fact that these discussions are taking place is significant; they are occurring amidst heightened bilateral tension

and punitive steps concerning human rights. If this is indicative of major powers' ability to compartmentalise and cooperate on mutual interests in this arena despite other differences, that is a good sign indeed.

While lingering US-Russian differences over missile defence and shorter-range systems should not be dismissed (and stricter limits on non-deployed weapons pose their own difficulties), the New START follow-on will nudge the world towards a more optimistic nuclear future. Most significantly, it would probably be the last agreement covering just two of the five nuclear-armed signatories to the NPT. For most of the nuclear age, arms control was mainly a bilateral enterprise,

because the vast majority of nuclear weapons was in American or Soviet hands. As the two powers cut their arsenals from peak levels in the tens of thousands to potentially mere hundreds, the NPT's disarmament obligation will gain new salience for China, France and the United Kingdom. Once all five reduced to minimal levels, attention would inevitably turn to India, Israel and Pakistan, all of which have remained outside the NPT.

Clearly, many of these issues are questions for another day, year or decade. But the current non-proliferation agenda offers glimpses of the world's nuclear future. One can only hope it ends up resembling what the NPT negotiators of the late 1960s intended. ■