'Soft Deterrence' and the Future of Nuclear Disarmament

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Ten years after India's Pokhran-II nuclear tests, its position in the global nuclear order has come full circle, from gadfly to pariah to wannabe. India went from denouncing the global nuclear regime as unfair, to being ostracised following its 1998 tests, and is now looking to rejoin as a model member. As part of its metamorphosis, the Indian government appears to be doing its utmost to embrace the spirit of nuclear disarmament, in order to project itself as a responsible and mature nuclear power. Special envoy Shyam Saran spoke of India's commitment to nuclear disarmament in New Delhi in February. India's Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament Hamid Ali Rao followed up with an outline of a seven-point agenda for nuclear disarmament in Geneva.

Global disarmament has fallen in and out of fashion. It was considered a realistic possibility until the 1960s, resuscitated during the Reagan-Gorbachev years, and reexamined following the end of the Cold War. In the past decade, the global nuclear disarmament movement has regained momentum, and is now perhaps the strongest it has been since the end of the Cold War. In some quarters, the movement has received official government sanction, including in the United Kingdom and Norway. In the United States, it remains a non-government-led initiative, but the addition of many senior retired statesmen has given it added cachet. Two opinion pieces in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2007 and 2008 by George Shultz, William Perry, Sam Nunn and Henry Kissinger were perhaps the most influential, as they came from seasoned Cold Warriors and proven realists.

The most recent international disarmament campaign has resulted from a series of developments: the September 11, 2001 attacks; the unveiling of the AQ

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Khan proliferation network; North Korea's 2006 nuclear test; Pakistan's political instability; and Iran's uranium enrichment programme. Worrying that the number and spread of nuclear weapons may soon get out of hand as a result of these and other developments, many individuals and institutions are making renewed calls for disarmament efforts with the aim of completely eliminating nuclear weapons.

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All of these initiatives are based upon two suppositions. First, that the utility of nuclear weapons (primarily as a deterrent against other nuclear powers) is far outweighed by their potential dangers, such as their use by terrorists and their development by so-called "rogue states". Second, that a world without nuclear weapons would be a safer place. Neither premise is irrefutable.

While it can easily be argued that the utility of a nuclear deterrent for the United States and Western European countries has greatly diminished since the end of the Cold War, the same cannot yet be said for other states with nuclear weapons, especially the second generation nuclear powers. India and Pakistan learned the utility of deterrence during the Kargil War, which remained a limited conflict, and during the 2001-02 border confrontation, during which not a shot was fired despite the massive military build-up on both sides. At the same time, the border confrontation taught other lessons to the Indian leadership: that a military build-up could not ensure the achievement of political or strategic goals, but would certainly lead to critical economic costs.

In many ways, it is natural that American realists like Kissinger and Shultz should now propose the abolition of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are a strategic equaliser, and the United States currently enjoys immense conventional superiority over any other power. Other nuclear powers have, naturally, realised this. Russia has, therefore, been adamant in its opposition to the US missile defence programme,which could diminish Russia's strike capability. China too will resist complete disarmament, being reluctant to entangle itself in an expensive conventional arms race with the United States. India will require a deterrent as long as China has nuclear weapons, and Pakistan will feel the same as long as India maintains its arsenal. Israel will continue its nuclear ambiguity as long as Iran enriches uranium, while North

Korea will want to maintain its small weapons programme for as long as possible to avert regime change. All these states have existential threats, and doing away with a certain kind of weapon will not remove those threats to their national securities.

Historically, voluntary nuclear disarmament or abstention never resulted from moral epiphanies, but rather from strategic, economic or domestic political considerations. Argentina and Brazil mutually called off a potential arms race as both states transitioned out of military-led regimes, but were operating in a less complex strategic environment. South Africa's apartheid-era regime dismantled its weapons in the early 1990s before handing power over to the African National Congress (ANC). Libya gave up its nuclear ambitions in 2003 as part of its rapprochement with the West. The wealthier and more technologically-advanced countries of Western Europe, the former Warsaw Pact, and East Asia gave up nuclear weapons because they were effectively under US or Soviet nuclear umbrellas. Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan lacked the strategic requirements for retaining deterrent capabilities when they inherited Soviet weapons.

It is also uncertain whether a nuclear weapon-free world would necessarily be a safer one. There are no reasons to think that cross-Taiwan Strait tensions will ease dramatically, or that Russia will immediately enjoy healthier ties with the United States, simply by the elimination of nuclear weapons. The prospect of India-Pakistan and India-China conflicts may, in fact, increase, while the United States' stand-off with Iran would be likely to continue. The feasibility of maintaining a nuclear-free world is also questionable, due to difficulties in conducting adequate inspections and enforcing effective sanctions, and the risks associated with taking military action against a state with nuclear weapons.

Yet, at the global level, the utility of nuclear deterrence is unquestionably decreasing, and when a strategic replacement can be found, nuclear deterrence may truly become obsolete. This can be brought about organically by the advent of what, for lack of a better term, can be called soft deterrence: deterrence based on the calculation that the human and economic – essentially non-military – costs of initiating a conventional war outweigh any potential military gains. Four factors will assist in this evolution, although they are neither necessary nor sufficient.

The first factor is increased financial and commercial interdependence brought about by globalisation. With China increasingly reliant on Taiwanese investment and commerce with the United States, it is as likely to be deterred

from an attack on Taiwan by these factors as by US conventional firepower or a nuclear deterrent. Similarly, Europe today is dependent on Russia as an energy source and the United States is dependent on cheap manufacturing in China, while China badly needs the United States as a market and a source of investment. Such vital ties are going to limit the likelihood of military conflict between these major powers. The economic integration as has occurred in Europe and East Asia has yet to replicate itself in many parts of the world, but it is likely to do so in the coming decades. Economic and commercial interdependence need not be bilateral to avert conflict. The possibility of a war between India and Pakistan, for example, would certainly decrease foreign investment flows into India, even from friendly countries, thus, helping to ensure peace in South Asia.

Second, the increased deadliness of conventional weaponry greatly increases the economic damage and human casualties it can cause, making states all the more eager to avoid military conflict against technologically advanced adversaries. This trend has been in place since World War II, when the fire bombings of Tokyo caused about as many casualties as the nuclear bomb blasts over either Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

Third, technological developments increasingly allow weaker states to fend off much more powerful military forces in asymmetric wars. The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in which the US military is currently embroiled are prime examples. The United States may be able to easily defeat any other military in conventional warfare, but it will be increasingly deterred from invading and occupying even minor powers due to the increasing effectiveness of insurgencies, made possible by technological developments such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Today, even the United States does not contemplate a military invasion of Iran, with precision air strikes being the only real military option available for dissuading that country from pursuing nuclear weapons.

Finally, demographic transformations, specifically the decelerated population growths that accompany economic development, will make states more reluctant to go to war.

These developments have not yet taken hold in many less economically developed or political secure states. But there are already signs of the effectiveness of soft deterrence in an increasingly prosperous, economically integrated and technologically advanced globalised world. Soft deterrence can already be said to be the norm in relations between the major powers, including the United States, Europe, China, Japan and Russia. India may have joined the post-nuclear world following the border confrontation in 2002. It is

also notable in this context that the countries considered least likely to renounce their nuclear ambitions are those that are the least economically developed and the most politically insecure: Pakistan, North Korea, Israel and Iran. Ultimately it is only when soft deterrence gains near-universal currency – even among poor and insecure states — that nuclear weapons be truly rendered unnecessary.