



Exploring Regional Zero An Alternative Indian Nuclear Disarmament Strategy?

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Today, the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials abound. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build or steal one. Our efforts to contain these dangers are centered on a global non-proliferation regime, but as more people and nations break the rules, we could reach the point where the center cannot hold.

Obama in Prague, April 2009

Since the 1940s, India has been passionately arguing for global nuclear disarmament. Regional and international events during 1960-80 forced India to look after its security interests, which resulted in India developing its own nuclear weapons programme. However, India still believes in global nuclear disarmament (GND); which is the stated intention of its successive governments, India has repeatedly called for global nuclear disarmament.

In terms of India's contribution to this cause, the last serious effort was made in the late 1980s, when Rajiv Gandhi announced his time bound plan for a GND. Ever since, there have been no major initiatives taken either in pursuing this concept or making a concrete contribution to achieving this goal. Worse, the international community sees India as an obstacle, after New Delhi refused to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

This essay critiques whether India could pursue a Regional Zero approach as its initiative and contribution to the GND.

I REGIONAL ZERO: THE RATIONALE

Indian critics of global nuclear disarmament have based their arguments on the following: First, the GND is desirable, but not feasible. Second, the security situation in the Indian region warrants the possession of nuclear weapons by focusing primarily on the nuclear weapons programmes of Pakistan and China and the nexus between these two countries, besides India's unresolved conflicts with both

these nuclear neighbours. Third, the international nuclear regime is eroding; nuclear developments in North Korea and Iran, besides illegal nuclear networks, including that of AQ Khan, have been thriving. Fourth, neither the US nor Russia are keen on GND, hence the movement is doomed from the beginning.

Undoubtedly, these criticisms on the Indian side are valid. However, New Delhi should understand that the world today is not what it was in the 1990s; there have been radical changes – both in the rationale and the strategy of the GND. India has to move beyond its stated positions of the 1990s, and take into account the recent developments at the regional and international levels. More importantly, India should take into account the new regional and international environment, and work towards achieving its security interests in the coming decades. The following developments/issues, in particular, warrant a change in India's policy towards nuclear weapons and GND.

Nuclear Renaissance: The Global Zero and Base Camp Movements

Irrespective of criticism, two movements initiated in the recent past are galvanizing the global nuclear renaissance towards eliminating nuclear weapons. The first began with an opinion article by four leading American strategists, who are referred to as the Quartet, who have transformed into a Global Zero Campaign, supported by important and respected leaders of the world. There was a spectacular launch of this campaign in Paris in December 2008, with 100 leaders from around the world taking part; from India, Ambassador Shankar Bajpai attended this launch.

At the political level, the international debate on the GND has been revived at the highest levels. Obama has unveiled the American trajectory towards GND during his speech in Prague earlier this year. He mentioned the following concrete steps as his way forward to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in American national security strategy, with the caveat that as long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain an arsenal to deter any adversary; to negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia to reduce warheads and stockpiles; to achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, with the promise that his administration will immediately and aggressively pursue ratification of the CTBT; to

seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in nuclear weapons; to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a basis for cooperation; and to build a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation, including an international fuel bank, so that countries could access atomic power without increasing the risks of proliferation. Whether Obama's speech is only rhetoric or reflects his real intentions is debateable, but what he has provided is a road map for GND, which the US will pursue to achieve this goal.

Following Obama's speech, some other countries have taken the idea further, either by its extension or as a critique. For example, Japan's foreign minister put forward conditions regarding Zero, in which he identified eleven benchmarks for the GND, including irreversible nuclear disarmament, terrorism, and regional issues like China and North Korea.

Nuclear Weapons and Regional Insecurity

Have nuclear weapons improved regional security from an Indian perspective? Are India's security interests better addressed in South Asia, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan with both countries possessing nuclear weapons? Have nuclear weapons provided deterrence against insecurity? To present the question differently, could India's security interests have been better achieved in the region if India and Pakistan did not possess nuclear weapons?

It is true, that the presence of nuclear weapons cannot ensure India's security against illegal immigration, poverty, unemployment and natural disasters. Nuclear weapons are not a panacea for all its ills. Nor is the debate of costs versus development particularly relevant here. Peaceniks argue in terms of economic costs – about how many schools and health institutions could have been built instead of making nuclear weapon. Arguments on developmental issues should not confuse this issue since they relate to problems of governance, not nuclear weapons.

However, the most important question that should be addressed in terms of costs is what nuclear weapons have done for India's security since 1998. Three arguments could be made. First, had there been no nuclear weapons, Pakistan would not have ventured into the Indian territory in Kargil. It is accepted by the strategic community that the presence of nuclear weapons, was the major factor encouraging Pakistan to pursue this course of action. Second, if there were no nuclear weapons, India's counter actions after the attack on Indian Parliament in December 2001 could have been based on a military strategy, using

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conventional weapons. Third, India felt helpless after the Mumbai attacks out of a fear that a conventional military response by it could ultimately result in a nuclear exchange.

Though military strategists have been talking about theories and strategies like Limited War and Cold Start, the political elite in India are reluctant to pursue the military option of using conventional weapons against Pakistan. As the Kargil Conflict in 1999 and Border Confrontation during 2001-02 after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament establish, the political elite is not prepared to attack across the IB/LoC. The international community, exaggerates the threat of a conventional response resulting in a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan. Hence, the presence of nuclear weapons in the sub-continent puts enormous pressure on India to diffuse any tense situation, to Pakistan's advantage. Rather than nuclear weapons deterring any crises, this situation has deterred New Delhi from pursuing any punitive action against Pakistan.

Pakistan prefers to use nuclear weapons as an umbrella, to pursue its interests/demand vis-à-vis India by the use of militancy. It has deliberately created an impression in the international community that its nuclear threshold is relatively low. Consider the following statement from the editor of a leading vernacular newspaper in Pakistan: "If, in order to resolve our (water) problems, we have to wage a nuclear war with India, we will." Besides, the ruling elite of Pakistan has succeeded in creating a self-image of being a failing state with nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the international community accepts this self-image, which results in their supporting the regime ruling Pakistan.

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Asian Nuclear Anarchy

India faces serious threats from nuclear weapons, not only from its immediate, but also from its extended neighbourhood. Five specific issues make the Asian nuclear balance precarious.

First the pursuit of nuclear weapons by Iran, which is linked to its immediate regional security, which includes Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Besides the Shia-Sunni divide within the Muslim community, the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Arab world have their own dynamics, forcing Israel and Iran to covertly seek nuclear weapons. The Islamic factor has drawn Islamabad into this conflict, as a section within Pakistan considers its nuclear weapons in terms of their being Islamic bombs. Second, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, also affects the nuclear balance in South Asia. The barter between Pakistan and North Korea on missiles for nuclear assistance would not have happened. Also, Japan and South Korea, today, are extremely wary of North Korea's nuclear assets.

Third, from an Indian perspective, what makes

these nuclear pursuits dangerous for New Delhi is the linkages between Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. Recent reports have proved beyond doubt, Pakistan's assistance to Iran and North Korea in furthering their nuclear weapons programme. In return, North Korea has assisted Pakistan's missile programme.

Fourth, an additional danger relating to nuclear weapons is the threat of Nuclear Terrorism by non-State actors, especially the al Qaeda, gaining access to WMDs. Osama bin Laden's quest for WMDs has been extensively documented and needs no further elaboration. Finally, the safety of Pakistan's nuclear assets is a clear and present danger for India. The insider and outsider threats to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme have also been extensively discussed elsewhere.

The above five developments make Asia the most dangerous region in the world, in terms of nuclear weaponry. True, irrespective of the presence of nuclear weapons, these regions have their unique security problems. The absence of nuclear weapons in the 1940s and 50s in the region did not prevent hostilities, hence, the abolition of nuclear weapons is unlikely to make the Asian sub regions peaceful. However, the abolition of nuclear weapons will ensure that there are no massive casualties and destruction in the case of a war.

II REGIONAL ZERO: A CRITIQUE

The Regional Zero proposal, like any other, is unlikely to avoid criticisms. The following questions in particular, are worth addressing in detail.

Global Nuclear Regime is flawed; will India's interests be achieved in this flawed international regime?

True, the present international regime is not only flawed but also weak. But the counter question is equally important: Is a weak international nuclear regime in India's interests?

What can India do to strengthen the regime, while pressurizing the other nuclear states? Instead of getting into the "desirable but not practical" debate, India should take the lead for its own security interests by making a serious effort towards achieving the GND. Obama has committed the US to achieve this objective, India should also review its own position and place it before the international community. What is it willing to do to seek this end?

How can India eliminate Nuclear Weapons, which are Weapons of Deterrence?

After 1945, there have been no direct, full scale wars between nuclear weapon states. However, in the Indian context, this theory is questionable, given the practical evidence to prove the exception. In fact, nuclear weapons have deterred India from taking any punitive actions against Pakistan. Had it not been for nuclear weapons and the threat of Pakistan's low nuclear threshold, India would have responded differently during the Kargil War and during 2001-02. In fact, the subsequent terrorist attacks after the Parliament attack would not have occurred, if Pakistan realized the costs of supporting groups

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like the Lashkar-e-Toiba.

What about China?

This is the trickiest and toughest question that the Regional Zero proposal is likely to address. For India's security interests include Pakistan, but also China, with whom India has an unresolved boundary dispute. Two issues need to be stated to answer this question. In Southern Asia, are India and China likely to wage a war against each other, in which the use of nuclear weapons can be contemplated? Does the recent trajectory of India-China political equations present an opportunity for India to eliminate this threat? The answer is mixed. While there have been positive developments in the last decade, over the last two years, especially after the Indo-US nuclear deal, there has been a downswing in India-China relations.

Finally, even if India and Pakistan agree to the idea of a Regional Zero, why should China be included in this equation? Clearly, China's nuclear weapons and strategies are primarily focussed on the US. Its nuclear strategy and their trajectory is different, and it will be extremely difficult to convince China to take part in a Regional Zero exercise.

What about Pakistan?

Some questions need to be addressed regarding Pakistan's possible game plan on the regional zero approach. Knowing that nuclear weapons provide Islamabad with a security umbrella to pursue its interests in J&K and the rest of India through proxy and covert means, will it agree to a regional zero approach, even if India is willing to accept it?

Pakistan has linked its signing the CTBT and NPT to India's signature; this is a strategy that has worked well so far. If India signs the CTBT, following the US, will Islamabad also sign? Unlikely. One could understand Pakistan's dilemma in signing the FMCT. Despite international pressure and India signing the FMCT, Pakistan is unlikely to join these treaties.

Is the international community really serious about GND?

This is not the first global initiative towards seeking GND; numerous initiatives have been pursued in the past; they failed due to the reluctance of the US and Russia to pursue this objective sincerely. How serious are they now? Even if the US and Russia reach an understanding on deep cuts, is there any guarantee that the other nuclear states – UK, France and China will follow suit? Both France and China, have a different approach,

and believe that nuclear weapons provide them security. If neither the US nor Russia pursue a transparent strategy and convince the international community, that this time they are serious, Global Zero is unlikely to happen. So will Regional Zero.

Is India really serious about GND?

Finally is India really serious about GND? Or does it use the GND for rhetorical purposes, but considers nuclear weapons to be the guarantor of its regional security interests? If the latter is true for New Delhi, then Regional Zero is unlikely to happen. So will Global Zero.

III FIVE BENCH MARKS

India's advocacy of a Regional Zero approach should not be a stand alone approach, independent of related global developments relating to complete nuclear disarmament. The lead should come from the US and Russia, having been responsible for developing these weapons in the first place. The Global Zero campaign states global zero, "will not happen overnight nor unilaterally. Getting to global zero will require the reduction of all nations' arsenals over many years. Because American and Russian stockpiles account for 96 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons, these two countries should begin with deep reductions to their arsenals, while beginning a dialogue with the other nuclear weapons states." Hence, the first serious bench mark in determining global seriousness should be the policy and road map that the US and Russia will pursue over the next decade. Once the US ratifies the CTBT and signs a Treaty with Russia on deep reductions in their nuclear arsenal, India could agree to a similar approach in the region. Perhaps, with signing the CTBT alongside Pakistan, while reaching an understanding with China and Pakistan on the size of their nuclear arsenals. Are these four countries – India, Pakistan, China and the United States - willing to live with a ratio of 1:2 vis-à-vis their principal enemy? Can this be a bench mark?

Second, a serious bench mark should be the role of China in these equations. Once the US and Russia agree on deep reductions, they are likely to involve China in this process, as the likely second step. Once there is an international understanding on the size of China's nuclear arsenal, India could work towards a similar understanding with Pakistan on the size of its nuclear stockpile in South Asia.

Third a serious issue would be the role of verification mechanisms to ensure global nuclear disarmament. Once universally acceptable mechanisms are in place that are followed by US, Russia and China, India could also pursue this modality, along with Pakistan.

Fourth, at the international level, there should be a corresponding Regional Zero efforts, taking into consideration regional security interests. At least four Regional Zeros could be identified – UK, France and Russia; Russia, China and US; Iran, Iraq and Israel; and North Korea, South Korea, Japan and China. If the US, Russia and China could lead the other RZ efforts, India should not hesitate to take the lead in Southern Asia.

The last serious benchmark should be the pace of GND. If there is a genuine phased movement towards GND, as happened with Chemical Weapons, India could join this process for a phased elimination of nuclear weapons.

Obama in his speech was realistic enough to state that this process is unlikely to be short and quick and said that complete elimination may not take place during his lifetime. Perhaps. As long as there is a time bound objective to reach GND, it does not matter whether it takes place during Obama's lifetime, or that of Rahul Gandhi.

IV CONCLUSIONS

From the days of Nehru, Indian leadership has pursued the goal of complete nuclear disarmament. While some may disagree about the real intentions of the leaders who profess GND, what needs to be looked into, at this juncture, is the opportunity for taking this initiative. Clearly, there is a nuclear renaissance at the global level; India should use this opportunity to pursue one of its most important international policies – nuclear disarmament.

Second, from a regional perspective, India can secure its national interests, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan, with zero nuclear weapons and a conventional weapons superiority. Pakistan will not be able to hold a nuclear pistol either to its own head or India's head and pursue an intransigent nuclear policy, and, worse, get away with it.

Third, Regional Zero, could be an effective policy and strategy for India to put before the international community and persuade other states to work towards GND. Perhaps, this is the time to come out with a new idea to pursue global nuclear disarmament to its logical conclusion, instead of being rhetorically sound and hypocritical, but do nothing substantial. Providing this idea should be pursued with practical measures on the ground, like how Obama has proposed an idea and promised to deliver certain commitments. From an Indian perspective, the threat comes from its immediate and extended neighbourhood. India should be more greatly concerned with nuclear security in its own region, alongside noting what is happening between the US and Russia. Since the two issues are interlinked, global disarmament cannot be achieved without regional disarmament and vice versa. India has to pursue both these Zeros – Global and Regional.

If the US is willing to pursue a strategy at the international level, India should be committed to pursuing a similar strategy at the regional level. Let the Regional Zeros grow in concentric circles and evolve into a Global Zero.



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