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Nuclear Stability Following the Cold War

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With the End of the Cold War, What Issues of Nuclear Stability Remain?

Following the end of the Cold War and the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nuclear weaponry has taken centre stage as being one of the biggest threats to mankind, and thus takes precedence in international peacekeeping efforts. The nuclear proliferation by non-signatories to the NPT, coupled with the decline in US hegemonic status and the rise of Asian military power, has increased tensions surrounding the nuclear debate. In particular, Pakistan and India's open testing of nuclear capabilities raises new questions surrounding the proliferation of post-colonial states with a strong current of nationalism (Bracken, 2000, p.156). The need for international agreement on managing nuclear capabilities is a fundamental issue in the post-Cold War world. This essay, then, will attempt to assess the impact of nuclear technology on the stability of the international system whilst looking at both disarmament and deterrence arguments.

As an issue of security, nuclear weapons and the possession/proliferation of them remains a top priority on the international agenda, and we can observe efforts at an institutional level to capture the essence of its critically important nature. With much of the focus of organisations such as the UN being placed on international stability, the nuclear debate increasingly takes a huge priority in multilateral objectives. To fully appreciate the issues surrounding nuclear stability and the threats to the post-Cold War balance of power, this essay will touch upon the strategies in place such as the NPT, whilst addressing the context of globalisation which has seen a rise in the urgency of finding a universal solution. With some opposition to the international security regime, it is also significant to question the success of such strategies and whether a treaty-based approach can fully safeguard the power structure of the international system.

To begin, it is crucial to recognise the global scope of the nuclear threat, and by looking at the impact of nuclear weapons in the Second World War, we can appreciate the critical and decisive measures taken throughout the Cold War and, now, into the 'new nuclear age' in preventing a recurrence of such extreme actions in a conflict. The use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 is our only reference point in understanding the impact and devastation to human life that such weapons can have. "After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear weapon's momentous consequences for warfare, politics and human survival were quickly appreciated" (Walker, 2012, p.181). The effects of a more powerful bomb than those employed in Japan are unthinkable, and it is from this that we can recognise the exigency of nuclear security strategy throughout the Cold War. Without this prior experience, however, it can be argued that the Cold War may have escalated due to the consequences of using such weapons being unknown, therefore restricting the apparent tentativeness that was witnessed. It is out of the Cold War that the international community has developed a more insistent emphasis on security issues, where relatively few countries are still out of range from nuclear destruction, making the matter truly global.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union required a new and unified approach to tackling the nuclear issue: "It was a period of unprecedented nuclear transformation requiring long-term cooperation between previously hostile states. This period of transition was facilitated by the foresight of policy-makers from both sides of the former cold war divide and by the framework of arms control and disarmament agreements in place" (Howlett, 2008, p.388). The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II) developed and applied by the US and the Soviet Union started the pattern of a treaty-oriented method of nuclear disarmament and deterrence within the global system. "Whereas the end of the

two world wars had drawn attention to the political organisation of the world, yielding the innovations of the Versailles Treaty and UN Charter, the inclination when the Cold War ended was to exploit the existing institutional framework to its full without attempting to recast it," (Walker, 2012, p.108). This is a model which has continued into the current structure, with Obama's new START with Russia, and in which the NPT (1970) remains the principle agreement in maintaining nuclear stability. With only four non-signatory states to the treaty: India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea (withdrawn), the NPT is the single most multilateral and universal arms limitation agreement in history. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (who are also the five recognised nuclear states within the treaty) have ratified and accepted its 'three pillar approach' to tackling nuclear arms, which centres on non-proliferation, disarmament, and the development of nuclear technology for peaceful means.

The neo-realist argument, presented here by Kenneth Waltz, counters disarmament theories which uphold the nuclear non-proliferation regime and advocate treaties such as the NPT as successfully constraining nuclear attainment. In Waltz's thesis, he ascertains that, similar to the managed stability through deterrence seen in the Cold War, "new nuclear states will feel the constraints that nuclear weapons impose and this will induce a sense of responsibility and a strong element of caution on their use; the likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase" (Sagan & Waltz, 1995, p.388). This thesis supports the idea that the current non-proliferation regime is unable to tackle the issue of the 'second nuclear age', and "does not address the security motivation driving nuclear weapons acquisition," (Howlett, 2008, p.388). Difficulties faced by the NPT become increasingly evident when we consider that there are few consequences for withdrawal from it, or from proliferation outside of it: vis-à-vis North Korea's withdrawal in 2003. It can also be reasoned that the NPT is discriminatory against Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS), who are obligated to relinquish their opportunity to acquire nuclear weapons. This, it may be said, ensures that the five permanent members of the Security Council (USA, UK, France, Russia and China), who are also the only recognised Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) under the NPT, can maintain their position and dominate the global power structure.

With the nuclear proliferation of states outside of the NPT and the rise of Asian military power comes another issue in the 21st Century. In the decade following the Cold War, and the beginning of the second nuclear age, the nuclearisation of Asia saw an increase in military spending in the region of 40 per cent (Clark, 2006, pp.120-121). "Just as Asia began asserting itself economically in the 1960s and 1970s, it now does so militarily, backed by arms that would make Western interference in Asia far more treacherous and costly – even in peacetime – than ever before" (Bracken, 2000,p.146).

Divergences between India and Pakistan, which date back to 1947 and their independence from the British Empire, have increased with the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Both countries, now nuclear, have amplified concerns on stability in the region, particularly following the open missile testing of 1998. Drawing parallels to the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) deterrence scenario of US-Soviet relations in the Cold War, the continuing disputes over the Kashmir and Jammu provinces are a cause for concern in the bilateral relations between the two powers. In addition to the four full-scale wars between the two countries and generally prevailing tensions, "bilateral and multilateral efforts to resolve outstanding issues have been met with little success. The end of the Cold War, which helped to reduce tensions in various troubled regions in the world, did little or nothing to unravel the South Asian conundrum" (Ganguly & Biringer, 2005, p.29). These on-going and unresolved hostilities raise a convincing argument in questioning the scope and relevance of universal doctrinal solutions, such as the NPT, in settling such an entrenched dispute. Potential alternatives, presented here by Ganguly and Biringer (2005, pp.36-45) involve a more regional and case-specific solution including, but not limited to: formalised bi-lateral declarations; a hotline (similar to US-USSR); time delays in warhead deployment (through de-mating the warhead from the delivery system); de-targeting missiles as a confidence building measure; and imposing limitations to avoid an arms race.

A particularly pertinent issue at the end of the Cold War period, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, was the proliferation of ex-Soviet States and the potential issue described by Miller (1994) as 'Nuclear Spillover'. Whilst the former Soviet countries with inherited nuclear capabilities (Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus) have now relinquished their nuclear weapons and signed the NPT, at the time the "trickle of illicit exports from the Soviet nuclear establishment [was] distressing evidence that there are those willing to supply nuclear assets on the international marketplace. Should the trickle become a torrent, this would be a non-proliferation disaster" (Miller, 1994, p.103).

Miller's 'Nuclear Spillover' depiction is relevant today on different terms. The threat of nuclear terrorism is an issue in the 21st Century particularly following 9/11, and the menace of nuclear weapons or even nuclear materials falling into the 'wrong hands' is still highly applicable. A problem lies between the civil and military uses for nuclear technology. With NPT signatories being allowed to develop nuclear technology for peaceful means, regulated and monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an issue arises in that the uranium and plutonium "can serve either as reactor fuels or as fissile material for nuclear weapons." Because most nuclear reactors use partly enriched uranium, "the technology of enrichment is therefore part of the technology of civil nuclear power" (Buzan & Herring, 1998, p.59). We can see this issue developing today with regards to Iran's uranium enrichment programme and the ensuing investigations into its underlying intentions. The potential leakage of nuclear technology stemming from this civil-military linkage is greatly increased when we consider that "if terrorists have used chemical weapons only once and nuclear material never, to some extent the reasons are technical" (Laquer, 1996, p.419). Because both chemical and biological weapons are easier weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to manufacture and deliver than nuclear weapons, a greater concern lies with their use. However, with advances in technology and "the birth of dozens of aggressive movements espousing varieties of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, fascism, and apocalyptic millenarianism […], mail-order catalogues tempt militants with readily available, far cheaper, unconventional as well as conventional weapons" (Laquer, 1996, p.419). As such, nuclear and WMDs use by terrorist organisations is a growing concern in the 21st Century.

For some, it is the fear of the unknown that presents a far more grave danger to international stability than the issues discussed so far. Alongside concerns over the procurement of nuclear weapons by extremist groups or, indeed, fundamentalist nations, the proliferation of non-signatories to the NPT remains on the agenda of nuclear trepidations. Whilst it lacks the appropriate delivery system, North Korea's posturing and testing of its missile systems exhibits a desire to obtain nuclear munitions, putting pressure on Western institutions to ensure that this remains a desire and does not become a reality. As an un-declared nuclear nation, Israel's influence in the Middle East also poses a great deal of questions for the international community. As the region's only nuclear power, and with an estimated arsenal of 200 warheads, Israel's undisclosed nuclear program counteracts the Security Council's objectives for a WMD-free Middle East. With Iran's growing nuclear capabilities and Israel's already substantial armaments, it can be seen as a force for instability in the region, which could increase other states' desire for proliferation. Add this to the fact that many NNWS are increasingly feeling the NWS lack of sincerity in upholding Article VI of the NPT (disarmament), we can notice a growing likelihood that other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) nations will seek nuclear weapons for self-defence purposes (Walker, 2012, p.79).

India's recent successful missile test (April 2012) has displayed a development in capability for its nuclear arsenal, putting Beijing within range, and whilst this will most likely not result in a response from China the potential escalation is alarming to say the least (Marcus, 2012). India considers "the non-proliferation regime more as an infringement on its sovereign right to self-defence and self-expression than as a source of security and stability," but, Walker suggests, both China and India's "interests will suffer if they do not inherit and nurture a robust international nuclear order" (Walker, 2012, p.188). The spread of nuclear desires across the regions discussed in this essay present a sound case that the NPT will need to be strengthened and better enforced in coming years.

To conclude, this essay has investigated some of the issues surrounding the nuclear debate in the 21st Century moving from the Cold War, and the resulting implications of nuclear proliferation, through to current concerns, challenges and potential complications facing the international community. At an organisational level we have seen that, over the course of the 20th century, many frameworks have been set in place in order to maintain stability with regards to nuclear weapons and other WMDs. Comparing universal efforts, through the UN Security Council and the NPT, with regional possibilities concerning the South Asian nuclear dilemma, it becomes clear that uncertainties regarding stability are still present despite the move away from Cold War bi-polarity and the arms races over several decades in the 1900s. In fact, more complications have arisen from advances in Eastern economies and nuclear acquisition which create conceivable obstructions to security in a globalised society.

Arguments over nuclear deterrence strategies, in contrast to disarmament initiatives, provide a suitable backdrop in understanding the challenges which the global community is facing now, and will continue to face in the coming decades. We have observed that, although the NPT has been the most established effort at maintaining this

indemnity, it does have its limitations and the outcome of its success or failure remains to be seen. This essay has discussed some of the regional issues in both the Middle East and South Asia, which have the potential to upset the current balance of power, and has aimed to highlight the significance of such problems for peacekeeping efforts. The uncertainty of the intentions of such states as Iran and North Korea, coupled with the friction between Pakistan and India, and the rise of China as a new economic and military power (which presents a possible shift to a new bi-polar system) has outlined the magnitude and global scale of a potential breakdown in nuclear stability. Unresolved tensions and "difficulties in obtaining consensus in international forums on how to respond to non-compliance," along with "the problems associated with verifying treaty compliance," (Howlett, 2008, 394) have emphasised the continuing and, indeed, growing complexities in the 21st Century. Without a unanimous decisive strategy by the international community, together with the setbacks apparent in the growing frustration at the disparity between NWS and NNWS, it is clear that the nuclear struggle is far from over in the post-Cold War order.

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Date written: 03/2012