

Multipolar Nuclear Order

Primakov Readings

**Speech by
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Nuclear has returned to the centre of geopolitics.

Widespread rhetoric threatening the use of nuclear weapons means that fears remain high over the actual use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapon possessor states are expanding their arsenals, particularly China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea, but also the United Kingdom.

At the same time, nuclear systems are being modernised, meaning that in addition to a quantitative expansion, we are also seeing a qualitative expansion.

There are serious proliferation concerns mostly arising from the shifting US position on alliances. If countries like Japan, Poland, and South Korea feel they can no longer rely on the US nuclear umbrella, then domestic calls for them to go nuclear would get louder.

Although recent developments in the Middle East mean that Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon has been setback, concerns remain that if it did develop nuclear weapons, other countries of the region, such as Saudi Arabia, would follow them.

With the unclear role of the US as a security provider in Europe, there are risks of nuclear proliferation also in Europe: Discussions in Poland illustrate this point.

This expansion and modernisation of nuclear arsenals is taking place in an arms control vacuum. After the expiry of New START in February next year, there will be no limitations on the arsenals of the two biggest nuclear weapons states, the US and Russia.

On top of all this is the added complexity of integration of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, into nuclear systems. The uncertainties around how these will be integrated and the risks associated with over reliance on AI, makes the nuclear order of the future look even more complex.

The progress made on nuclear disarmament, albeit stalled for some time now, is at risk of being reversed. With existing possessor states increasing their arsenals and the possibility of additional states acquiring nuclear weapons, we are at high risk of entering a new nuclear arms race. But one with many more actors and one that will be far more complex than the one between the US and the Soviet Union.

In today's order, the US calculations are based on the threat posed by Russia, China, and North Korea. Russia's on the US, then France and the UK, and to a lesser extent China. China's calculations look to the US, then India. India looks to Pakistan and China. France and the UK to Russia. North Korea to the US. Israel to Iran. It is a complicated web of relationships.

As arsenals grow and become more sophisticated, and perhaps the number of nuclear-armed states increases, interactions among the actors become more complicated and the risks of miscalculation and misperception increase. In such an environment, the risk that nuclear weapons will actually be used becomes higher.



What can be done to ensure that this complex multipolar nuclear order does not lead to catastrophe?

The answer is dialogue. At the moment, there is not much of a dialogue amongst the nuclear-armed states, beyond complicated P-5 expert exchanges. Of course, in a multipolar world, there is no one forum where all states can come together to discuss the challenges. However, the dialogue tracks do exist and must be reenergised.

The US and Russia, as the possessors of the two largest nuclear arsenals, must take the lead in restarting nuclear arms control dialogue. A commitment from them to abide by the limitations set out in New START would be a good starting point. This would send a signal that nuclear arms control is not dead. Hopefully, this would then lead to more substantial discussions between the two countries. Both Presidents have expressed a desire to restart arms control talks. That FM Lavrov said that resumption of a US-RUS dialogue on strategic stability is possible, is an encouraging sign. For this to happen we need to see dialogue teams put in place and a renewed commitment to compartmentalisation.

The GCSP stands ready to restart its track 2 dialogue on strategic stability between US and Russian experts, as a means to help revive or support track 1 talks.

The P5 Process must be revived. It is vital to get the nuclear five talking again regularly and substantively about nuclear risk reduction. There have been significant developments in all P5 countries over the last three years, but minimal dialogue among them to understand the consequences. It will be interesting to see whether the UK, as the incoming P5 Coordinator, can get some substantive dialogue going again at a meaningfully high level.

Outside of the P5, the recent conflict between India and Pakistan reminded us of the risks associated with all-out war between these two nuclear-armed states. Communication channels between the two are vital. The Indian Disarmament Ambassador in Geneva assured me that such channels existed.

North Korea is expanding its nuclear arsenal, thus posing an increasing threat to the US and its allies in the region. North Korea too must come to the dialogue table. It is clear that we would have to focus on risk reduction in the short-to-medium term, while denuclearization would remain a long-term vision. Through the GCSP's longstanding Zermatt Roundtable on Security in Northeast Asia we provide an open, neutral space for dialogue. We continue our efforts to get North Korea to attend this annual meeting.

The concerns over nuclear proliferation have led to the conflict between Israel and Iran. The issue of Iran's nuclear programme can only be resolved through dialogue.

So, in conclusion we need more dialogue and not more nuclear warheads!