

The Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East

P5+1 countries and Iran: The Middle East post NPT agreement

At the height of the Cold War, the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, had an estimated combined arsenal of 30,000 nuclear weapons; sufficient arms to destroy a sizeable chunk of our planet. As the Cold War receded throughout much of the 1990s, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, and, with the fall of Apartheid in South Africa, the world order suddenly became ripe for a radical agreement, that just some years before would have seemed impossible to contemplate. A treaty was in the works with the following objectives: (a) to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons; (b) to curb any aspiring country wanting nuclear weapons not to procure any; (c) to usher in policy on the use of nuclear proliferation; (d) to enhance global security through the implementation of an international treaty sanctioned by the United Nations.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (commonly known as NPT) entered into force in 1970. On 11 May, 1995, the treaty was extended indefinitely. At its height, the treaty garnered a total tally of 191 signatories. The nuclear armed states of India, Pakistan and Israel did not sign up to the treaty. Whilst the NPT was not the first treaty of its kind [that honour goes to the Treaty of Tlatelolco, signed in 1967], it was nonetheless the first global treaty. Throughout the 1960s, when the Cold War was at its most intense, the international community came together at the sixteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly to debate the issue of nuclear disarmament, as well as banning nuclear weapons tests. The Irish delegation brought forth, in 1961, the first resolution of its kind, adopted as UNGA resolution 1632, which set the ball in motion for a successive string of like-for-like resolutions, namely UNGA resolutions 1648, 1649, 1652, 1653, 1660, 1664, 1665, 1721, 1722, 1724 and 1740. The sixteenth session of 1961 saw a total of twelve resolutions adopted by the General Assembly on nuclear weapons. By 1965, the twentieth session adopted five more resolutions; they are: UNGA resolutions 2028, 2030, 2031, 2032 and 2033. Resolution 2028 dealt with 'Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons' and contained five key principles:

- (i) The treaty should be void of any loop-holes which might permit nuclear or non-nuclear powers to proliferate, directly or indirectly, nuclear weapons in any form;
- (ii) The treaty should embody an acceptable balance of mutual responsibilities and obligations of the nuclear and non-nuclear Powers;
- (iii) The treaty should be a step towards the achievement of general and complete disarmament and, more particularly, nuclear disarmament;
- (iv) There should be acceptable and workable provisions to ensure the effectiveness of the treaty;
- (v) Nothing in the treaty should adversely affect the right of any group of States to conclude regional treaties in order to ensure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their respective territories.

Resolutions passed in the General Assembly are generally considered non-binding on UN member states, and, are recommendations which should be seen in the context of guidelines, as per Articles 10 and 14 of the UN Charter. Thus said, those resolutions have served to foster a culture of peace and to highlight the need for arms reduction.

The intentions to move towards arms reduction were demonstrated in 1991 by the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, when they signed the landmark Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) by committing each other on the reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms, especially non-conventional weapons. This treaty was followed, five years later, by the multilateral Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), without enforcement, wherein the participating states undertook the task of banning all nuclear explosions in all environments, for military or civilian purposes. These past developments are a reflection of the shift in governmental policy concerning nuclear weapons, and stand out as a yardstick in terms of the quantifiable contributions brought forth by the NPT.

The NPT consists of eleven articles, and is summed up as having three main "pillars":

- (1) non-proliferation
- (2) disarmament
- (3) the right to peacefully use nuclear technology

The eleven articles of the NPT are available to view on the web [see link:].

<http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2005/npttreaty.html>

Unfortunately, some countries that are signatories to the NPT have fallen foul of non-compliance. Article I deals with the prohibition for nuclear-weapons states to provide any non-nuclear weapon states with nuclear weapons, or assistance to manufacture or acquire such weapons or devices. However, Pakistan is believed to have provided Iran with nuclear technology as far back as 1987 [and to Libya as well] after its top nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, allegedly supplied centrifuge parts. Iran's first nuclear power plant, a reactor in Bushehr, was constructed with assistance from Russia's state atomic energy company Rosatom. On the 1st of June, 2015, an announcement told that Rosatom would construct an additional reactor in Bushehr.

Article II deals with the prohibition for non-nuclear weapon states to: receive nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices from any source whatsoever; manufacture or acquire nuclear weapons; seek or receive assistance in their manufacture. However, Iran has embarked on a covert nuclear programme, reputedly since 1987. Iraq is also a signatory to the NPT and has sought proliferation after it built, with French assistance, a nuclear reactor in Osirak. Libya, too, is a signatory to the NPT and has embarked on a secret nuclear programme. Syria, also a signatory to the NPT, was building a secret nuclear reactor in al-Kibar, with the aide of North Korea.

Article III makes it incumbent upon each non-nuclear weapon state to: cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); enable monitoring of nuclear sites; accept safeguards; abstain from importing sources or fissionable material, or any other equipment not in compliance with IAEA safeguards. However, North Korea was once a signatory to the NPT, until it withdrew in 2003 and threw out all IAEA inspectors. It did so in accordance with Article X of the NPT but against the spirit of the agreement. Iran is not in compliance with this article to the fullest extent possible, as are others.

Article IV affirms the inalienable right of signatory parties to the NPT to develop and produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and without discrimination. However, it makes no explicit mention of a right to enrich uranium to a weapons-grade substance.

There are several dozen states that benefit from nuclear energy without enriching their own nuclear fuel; among them are Canada, Spain and South Africa. Iran, on the other hand, is doggedly opposed to any intrusion by foreign states to impede on its plans to enrich. Iran possesses nuclear infrastructure such as e.g. a heavy water reactor plant in Arak, as well as other infrastructure in the cities of Anarak, Ardakan, Bonab, Bushehr, Chalus, Darkovin, Fordow, Isfahan, Karaj, Lashkar Abad, Lavizan, Natanz, Parchin, Saghand, Tehran, and, Yazd.

Article VI expresses the need for signatory parties to the NPT to pursue negotiations "in good faith" on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to achieve nuclear disarmament. There has been a notable success in the form of South Africa disbanding its nuclear weapons programme, prior to the fall of Apartheid. The United States and the former Soviet Union, too, have taken steps to roll back their arsenals of nuclear warheads. However, the pace of disarmament draws its share of critique, and there is no policy in place to disarm completely.

Article X establishes the right of withdrawal from the NPT. The dictatorship of North Korea has exercised that option. Its status nowadays is that of a nuclear-weapons state that threatens the peace of its neighbours, and flouts sanctions imposed by the UNSC. This inconvenient reality is testament to the inherent flaws and drawbacks that treaties can have. No treaty is ever so ironclad that it cannot be broken.

A bilateral process was underway to deter North Korea from acquiring the bomb after it had announced, on the 12th of March, 1993, its intention to withdraw from the NPT. The Administration of William Jefferson Clinton thought that significant progress had been made when it reached an agreement on the text of a framework document on the 17th of October, 1994, prompting the President to make these statements a day later:

“This agreement is good for the United States, good for our allies, and good for the safety of the entire world. It reduces the danger of the threat of nuclear spreading in the region...Today, after 16 months of intense and difficult negotiations with North Korea, we have completed an agreement that will make the United States, the Korean Peninsula, and the world safer...This agreement represents the first step on the road to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”

~ Bill Clinton

The P5+1, a group of six world powers consisting of the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, plus Germany, joined forces in 2006 in a bid to address the Iranian nuclear programme. Negotiations carried on for almost a decade, up until the 14th of July, 2015, culminating in the ‘Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action’. This agreement binds Iran to roll back parts of its nuclear programme in exchange for relief from some sanctions, carrying a fifteen year timeframe. Under the deal, enrichment of uranium may proceed, up to a cap of 6,104 centrifuges, which should not be sufficient for a nuclear warhead but meet the needs for peaceful nuclear energy. However, once the deal expires, enrichment could continue at unconstrained levels, fifteen years after it goes into effect. The American delegation has called this deal the “*least bad option on the table*”. Thus said, the deal is not wholly in line with the NPT. Article IV makes provisions for states to develop peaceful nuclear programmes, but does not provide a word on uranium enrichment. The majority of states that benefit from nuclear energy opt to import enriched uranium into their reactors from offshore, rather than enrich it.

Enrichment carries a multitude of hazards; it is highly explosive, must be safely stored and guarded against potential threats of terrorism. The production of it is enough of a burden for some states to warrant procurement over the former, which explains some of the reasons behind the policy, in addition to expenditure in R&D and infrastructure. Ironically, Germany and Japan, once part of the axis powers under the Tripartite Pact, do uphold a right to self-determination on enrichment. Iran, being a theocracy, differs insofar that it is an Islamic Republic that is ruled by a dictatorial regime—the supreme Ayatollah of Iran. The United States and the Soviet Union both demonstrated during the nuclear arms race that by adopting the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction", in which a full-scale use of high-yield weapons of mass destruction by two opposing sides or more would cause the complete annihilation of the attacker and the defender, peace between sworn enemies is possible. Thus said, Iran is a wholly different case in point. Any comparison made of a nuclear armed Iran with the former example would be irresponsible. As long as the weekly Friday chants of "death to America; death to Israel; death to Britain" rhetoric go on, suspicion and mistrust will not dissipate. Israel for its part affirms that it is not party to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and reserves the right to take whatever action it deems necessary, such as targeting nuclear scientists, sabotaging infrastructure and launching air strikes at nuclear sites. Much of the Arab world, too, affords tacit approval with Israel's policies vis-à-vis Iran—a rare phenomenon. All the parties to this nuclear deal have praised it, as have its supporters. For the rest of the sceptics, however, tomorrow is already too late. The future of the Middle East looks ominous, with a nuclear arms race of unspecified proportions about to erupt in the region. History will judge the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and it will be judged in the context of either a saviour, or, a total capitulation of the NPT.