

Extended deterrence and a Nuclear weapon Free Zone in NE Asia

Can extended nuclear deterrence coexist with a Nuclear weapon Free Zone in NE Asia?

Valère Mantels

This paper assesses two aspects of the strategic security situation in NE Asia: the perception that extended nuclear deterrence provided to non-nuclear weapon States can provide security, and the contribution of a nuclear weapon free zone to alleviating concerns regarding the ability of non-nuclear weapon states to participate in some sort of nuclear alliance with a nuclear weapon state.¹

Continued relevance of nuclear deterrence

Proponents have not spared efforts to underscore the continued value of deterrence. Nuclear weapons can deter nuclear attacks, prevent invasions and confer great power status. It was the indispensable military strategy behind containing the Soviet Union and a crucial ingredient in winning the Cold War without fighting World War III. Deterrence has been for many decades and continues to be a buzzword. Looking back, it was only through a mix of sheer luck and some (occasional) clear thinking that the world avoided the worst of catastrophes.

As Richard K. Betts observed in a Foreign Affairs essay last year, “Deterrence isn’t what it used to be.” Until recently it was widely believed that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended World War II. However, recent research of Japanese, US and Russian documents indicate that the destruction of the cities did not significantly impact the position of the Japanese government and military. It is assumed that it was rather the declaration of war by the Soviet Union that brought hostilities to an end.

It is striking that top US military officials were openly opposed to using nuclear weapons in Japan. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey group, assigned by President Truman to study the air attacks on Japan, produced a report in July of 1946 that concluded inter alia:

“Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey’s opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations

Since the end of the Cold War, significant attention has focussed on the issue of nuclear deterrence and in particular whether formal nuclear security guarantees from nuclear weapon States to non-nuclear weapon States involving the possible use of nuclear weapons have a place in the twenty-first century global strategic landscape. Growing support for nuclear disarmament in the US and elsewhere has seen serious doubts being raised about the ongoing utility of extended nuclear deterrence.

In a January 2007 article in the Wall Street Journal, former cold-war policy makers Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry, George Shultz, and Sam Nunn asserted that far from making the world safer, nuclear weapons had become a source of extreme risk. "Senior European statesmen and women" called for further action in 2010 in addressing problems of nuclear weapons proliferation. They said: "Nuclear deterrence is a far less persuasive strategic response to a world of potential regional nuclear arms races and nuclear terrorism than it was to the cold war."

Nevertheless, we see all around us preparations to engage in a nuclear war. We see that the Cold War doctrine of nuclear deterrence continues to be integrated into the security policies of countries representing most of humanity, including both possessor states and members of nuclear alliances. We see well-funded, long-term plans underway to modernize nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, yet no government plans or negotiations for nuclear disarmament.

My concern is that much of the time deterrence is an illusion: we can never know for sure what our adversaries are observing or planning, and thus that the foundation for our security in the modern world is deeply compromised. One has to recall exercise Able Archer of 1983 as a reminiscing close call in that respect. One can argue that the DPRK has not been deterred in producing nuclear weapons.

In addition, many of the proponents lose sight of the evolving nature of the international security environment. Rational opponents have been replaced by irrational groups that cannot be deterred. Who would have predicted 9-11 or anticipated the more recent success of the Islamic State in the Middle East. The question that begs is then: who do we wish to deter? Why the vast arsenal of nuclear weapons? And in times of scarce economic resources, is the expense worth the perceived benefit?

Nuclear weapons and International Humanitarian Law

It is a fact that the catastrophic and potentially irreversible implications of any nuclear weapon detonation are known to and understood by all States.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty itself was concluded in the knowledge and understanding of “the devastation that would be visited upon all humankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples...”

Until the commencement of the present Non-Proliferation Treaty review cycle, there has been insufficient debate about what this might mean in practice. The 2010 Review Conference Final Document clearly expressed the Conference’s “deep concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the possibility that these weapons could be used and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons”.

That this narrative has been taken up enthusiastically by a majority of United Nations Member States and a majority of NPT States parties within the period of the current Non-Proliferation Treaty review cycle demonstrates that it is of central relevance to the issue of nuclear disarmament. Humanitarian concerns were a motivating factor in establishing the NPT; they remain a motivating factor in insisting that its provisions are implemented fully.

Recent fact-based discussions around the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, including at two open-ended Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, convened by Norway in March 2013 and by Mexico in February 2014, have enabled us to deepen our collective understanding of these calamitous consequences and of the increasing risks to life and health arising from possible (and actual) accidents, human error or systems failures at nuclear weapons facilities.

A key message from experts and international organizations throughout these discussions has been that no State or international body has the capacity to address the humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapon detonation or to provide adequate assistance to the victims.

In addition to the immediate consequences for victims killed or injured by a detonation, the calamitous longer-term and trans-boundary implications - for human survival and the health of future generations; for our environment and ecosystems; for agriculture; for socioeconomic development; and for our economies - are also clearly understood.

We see a growing recognition worldwide of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and the basic incompatibility of such weapons with fundamental norms of international humanitarian and human rights laws, customary international law, and the timeless laws of morality. Nuclear disarmament has evolved far beyond the utopian dream so

often cited by its critics. The demand for progress in this field has become a historical reality and this is very good news indeed.

Extended nuclear deterrence

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear weapons, cornerstone of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime left open a number of ways to allow for military nuclear cooperation. Blatant examples of such loopholes are the nuclear weapon sharing arrangements between the United States and European NATO members as well as the continued policy of extended nuclear deterrence.

The most obvious version of extended nuclear deterrence is the one extended to NATO with forward deployed nuclear weapons on the territories of a number of European NATO partners, as well the guarantees extended to Japan and the Republic of Korea. Nuclear weapons used to be deployed in the latter two countries as well under the assumption that such forward stationing would strengthen the value of the deterrence offered by these weapons.

Recently, the United States has gradually moved away from a strong emphasis on nuclear security guarantees to a mix of conventional forces coupled with ballistic missile defences.²

Here, I wish to highlight the understanding or rather misunderstanding of the commitment of the provision of assurances to non-nuclear weapon States under the format of a nuclear umbrella.³ A pledge by the country to assist states under threat or attack is by no means an assurance that it will do so, less a legal obligation.

In addition, following recent developments in Ukraine, one can be concerned about the meaning of security assurances provided to a country in return for it becoming a non-nuclear-weapon State party to the NPT.

Concerns have also been voiced over the reliability of security assurances extended by the permanent members of the Security Council in connection with the conclusion and indefinite extension of the NPT.

In the 2000 and 2010 NPT Review Conferences, the States parties agreed that disarmament offered the only absolute guarantee against the use of nuclear weapons and I suspect that same theme will reappear in 2015.

² See 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review

³ See also Jeffrey Lewis in Policy Forum 10-054: Rethinking Extended Deterrence in Northeast Asia", NAPSNet Policy Forum, November 03, 2010

It is my view that deterrence and therefore extended deterrence with nuclear weapons is a flawed concept that has no place in security strategies. If we maintain to cling to the concept of deterrence and extended deterrence, nuclear disarmament will remain a distant goal.

Role of NWFZs

In his opening remarks to the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament in New York on 26 September, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for increased denuclearization, stressing that “States without nuclear weapons have much to contribute, as seen in the expanded cooperation between members of regional nuclear weapon- free zones”

The role of nuclear-weapon free zones (NWFZs) as a regional approach for pursuing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation was recognized in article VII of the NPT and reaffirmed by the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The contribution of NWFZs to maintaining international peace and security is obvious.

While participation of non-nuclear weapon states in various alliances is considered compatible with the NPT, the existing nuclear-weapon-free zone arrangements do not totally restrict their members from various facets of cooperation with nuclear weapon States. While some of these zones close some of the loopholes in the NPT, they do so in a very random way. Only the Treaty of Tlatelolco prevents its members to participate in any use of nuclear weapons, directly or indirectly. Other treaties have various forms of flexibility in this regard.

It is obvious that curtailing the ability of non-nuclear weapon states to participate in any use of nuclear weapons in nuclear weapon free zones would go a long way in eliminating the doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence. For non-possessors who are not in an alliance with a nuclear weapon State this would be largely symbolic. For those in an alliance, it would imply some adjustment in their security arrangements. It is my view that maintaining a policy of extended nuclear deterrence and the creation of a nuclear weapon free zone are mutually exclusive.

I must underscore, however, that such nuclear weapon free zones are neither ends in themselves nor substitutes for other efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament.

The situation in NE Asia

The six-party talks are obviously moribund. A new framework is needed to manage the insecurity created by nuclear weapons of the DPRK and the risk of nuclear war in the region.

Since President Obama declared the abolition of nuclear weapons to be the overarching goal of American policy, security analysts and ordinary people have been grappling with the implications of this declaration for the East Asia region.

It is my view that a nuclear weapon free zone in the region in which the members undertake political and legal commitments to adhere to the stringiest disarmament standards that can be found among existing arrangements.

Any such commitment would be accompanied by measures to evaluate/ verify its proper implementation. It would be counterproductive to create a zone in which (a) member(s) would continue to rely on extended nuclear deterrence.

Awaiting the exploration of new options such as a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of agreements that would ultimately prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons, such a zone may prove the most promising avenue for the region.

The elaboration of such a treaty in the region could serve to mobilise efforts to bring other zones up to the highest standards and effectively eliminate the policy of extended nuclear deterrence globally. It would possibly pave the way to a more comprehensive agreement to outlaw nuclear weapons altogether.