



**Dialogue** on  
**Globalization**

**BRIEFING PAPER**  
**FES NEW DELHI**

## **Nuclear Non-Proliferation: An Indian Perspective**

*RAJESH RAJAGOPALAN*

## 1 Introduction

The global nuclear non-proliferation regime is facing some serious challenges. But we need to put these current challenges in perspective. Though the challenges facing the non-proliferation regime today might seem as if they are unprecedented, we must also not forget that from its inception, the regime has faced such challenges. Indeed, historically, the existence of such challenges has provided the impetus to strengthen and tighten the regime. India's first nuclear test in 1974 led to establishment of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG); revelations about Iraq's success in hiding its nuclear weapons program led to the Additional Protocol; North Korea's withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) led to proposals to eliminate the right to withdrawal clause in the Treaty, though this particular proposal has not yet been accepted.

Nevertheless, the non-proliferation regime does face a crisis today. For the first time, a non-nuclear member state, North Korea, has withdrawn from the Treaty and gone nuclear, and another non-nuclear member state, Iran, is threatening to do the same. Such non-compliance with the basic purpose of the treaty can lead other NPT non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) to also seek their own nuclear weapons, thus unraveling the treaty. The NSG waiver granted to India for international nuclear commerce despite India building a nuclear arsenal and not being a signatory to the NPT is also seen as a challenge to the non-proliferation regime.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, little progress has been made on nuclear disarmament, a key objective of the NPT, another issue that agitates NNWS.

But the most important challenge that the non-proliferation regime faces is the breakdown in the consensus about non-proliferation. The global nuclear non-proliferation regime was established and strengthened in the first several decades after the NPT came into force in 1970 because the major powers, the key actors in international regime creation, management and sustenance, broadly agreed on the need for the regime and its key objectives and provisions. Over the last decade, that consensus has broken down. Washington's policies have been an important factor in this decline, but other major

powers have not helped much either because they have allowed differences with the US on other political issues to spill over into non-proliferation issues. This has given violators and non-complying members space to exploit and weaken the regime. Hopefully, the next US administration will recognize the need for global consensus and work towards it. Equally hopefully, other powers will recognize that they would ultimately lose if the regime completely collapses and thus act in concert with the US to shore up the regime.

India is severely constrained from doing much to help the regime. India, not being a member of the NPT, has been outside the non-proliferation regime, and indeed a target of the regime. With the NSG waiver and the additional IAEA safeguards in place, India is now moving towards a *modus vivendi* with the regime. And India has strong interest in preventing further nuclear proliferation. The challenge that India and the non-proliferation regime face is in finding a way for India to support and strengthen the regime even while staying outside many of the formal institutions of the regime.

## 2 India's Nuclear Policy

Though India conducted a nuclear test in 1974, the Indian nuclear weapons program was more or less shut down for the next decade and half.<sup>2</sup> Though some developmental work continued at a low level, the decision to build nuclear weapons was taken only around 1988-1989. The Indian decision to go nuclear appears to have been taken reluctantly: Indian intelligence had been warning for about a decade that Pakistan was making steady progress on its nuclear weapons program, and both the international community in general, and the non-proliferation regime more specifically seemed unable or unwilling to stop Pakistan's nuclear pursuit. In addition, there were clear indications that China was aiding Pakistan's efforts. India's efforts at nuclear disarmament made no headway either, with the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan receiving little support from the powers that mattered. These conditions appear to have left Indian decision-makers believing that they had little choice but to restart the Indian nuclear program.

<sup>1</sup> On the implications of the nuclear deal for the nuclear non-proliferation regime, see T.V. Paul, "The US-India Nuclear Accord: Implications for the non-proliferation regime," *International Journal* (Autumn 2007) pp. 845-861.

<sup>2</sup> The best history of the Indian nuclear program is George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also, Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's Quest to be a Nuclear Power* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000)

The Indian decision to conduct a second series of tests in 1998 and declare itself openly a nuclear weapon state is more complex. As the non-proliferation order tightened, with the NPT being extended indefinitely and the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) threatening to eliminate an Indian nuclear option, various Indian governments sought to slip the noose by conducting nuclear tests. Such efforts were thwarted either due to internal political problems or because preparations for nuclear tests were discovered. India's 1998 tests were thus a response to fears that India would be permanently consigned to a position of nuclear inferiority, especially vis-à-vis China.

In the decade since the 1998 nuclear tests, India's weapons program has made slow but steady progress. India's size and conventional military capability are sufficient to handle most threats that it faces, which also reduces the pressure to deploy nuclear weapons in more adventurous roles.<sup>3</sup> Early fears about a nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan and China now appear to have been exaggerated. India has shown little concern with the state of the nuclear balance between itself and its two nuclear neighbors, concentrating instead on building up a relatively small but capable nuclear arsenal. India's doctrine of no first use and a credible minimum force structure represents a prudent investment, in line with India's general view that nuclear weapons are political instruments with little value other than as a deterrent for other nuclear forces. It must be noted, however, that India's nuclear forces are currently not capable enough to deter China because India does not have a missile with sufficient range to target all regions of China. Therefore India's nuclear force, especially its missile force, should be expected to grow slowly both in qualitative and quantitative terms over the next decade.

### 3 The US-India Nuclear Deal

The US-India nuclear deal was essential to India because India's traditional approach towards nuclear cooperation had reached a dead-end. Traditionally, India sought international nuclear cooperation, even while maintaining a nuclear weapons program, by agreeing to partial safeguards on nuclear imports. This strategy allowed India to supplement its domestic nuclear

power capability with international cooperation, as long as there were willing international partners. However, when the rules of international nuclear commerce changed from partial safeguards (safeguards only on the specific imported item) to full-scope safeguards (safeguards on the entire nuclear program as a condition for any nuclear commerce), India was faced with the choice of either giving up its nuclear weapons program, or giving up on international nuclear commerce. Not surprisingly, India chose the latter. What the US-India nuclear deal does is give India the option yet again to both keep its nuclear weapons program while also preserving its access to international nuclear commerce. The issue had become even more vital for India because India's explosive economic growth has put much greater strains on its electricity generation capacity, leading to peak power shortages of as much as 11 percent. Now that the nuclear deal is complete, and India has the necessary waiver from the NSG that permits other nuclear powers such as France and Russia to supply India with civilian nuclear technology, India is expected to significantly enhance its civilian nuclear power sector with international cooperation.

The nuclear deal is unlikely to have major impact on India's nuclear weapons program. In the last two decades, ever since India went nuclear in the late 1980s, India has only built a few dozen nuclear warheads. Most estimates suggest that India has enough fissile material for about 65-110 warheads, with some estimates suggesting even lower numbers. If we assume a median of 85 warheads, it would suggest that India has only built, on average, about four warheads a year. This suggests that India feels no great pressure to rapidly increase its arsenal. The suggestion, by some arms control experts, that access to foreign nuclear fuel will free India's domestic fuel resources for weapons does not hold much water because India has much larger stockpiles of fuel (about one ton) that it could have converted for weapons if it had wanted to do so.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the small size of the Indian nuclear force is the consequence of deliberate choice rather than because of any fissile material shortage.

<sup>3</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India: The Logic of Assured Retaliation," in Muthiah Alagappa, *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Ashley J. Tellis, *Atoms for War? U.S.-Indian Civilian Nuclear Cooperation and India's Nuclear Arsenal* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006)

#### 4 India's Non-proliferation and Arms Control Policies

Over the last several decades, India has emphasized nuclear disarmament rather than nuclear non-proliferation. New Delhi's position on the spread of nuclear weapons was a complex one. On the one hand, India always saw such spread of nuclear weapons as a danger. Its decision not to sign the NPT despite taking part in the negotiations was a difficult one, reached after New Delhi concluded that signing the treaty would adversely affect Indian security especially because neither Washington nor Moscow appeared willing to provide any form of extended deterrence cover for India's security. In other words, India never accepted the idea that nuclear proliferation was legitimate, unlike, for example, China in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, though New Delhi refused to sign the NPT, it also refused to help other states such as Libya with nuclear technology.

New Delhi was also quite meticulous about ensuring that its nuclear weapons technology did not reach other non-nuclear weapon states. Though there have been some concerns raised that India might have illegally acquired some technologies and materials, and that it may have been careless in ensuring the security of some of its nuclear technology, the Indian record in protecting its technology from leaking is far better than that of most other nuclear powers.<sup>6</sup> In the process, New Delhi built up a reputation as a 'responsible nuclear power' that became an unexpected bonus in dealing with the international community, especially as India sought a waiver from NSG guidelines. India squared this circle of both opposing the NPT and opposing nuclear proliferation by taking the position that though each country should be free to decide on how to meet its security needs, states that did sign the NPT had an obligation to live up to their commitments. Thus, on both North Korea and Iran, India's position has been to argue that because these countries voluntarily accepted the NPT, they have an obligation to live up to their treaty commitments. India's response to the threat of nuclear proliferation was to take an active part

in nuclear disarmament diplomacy, seeing the elimination of nuclear weapons as both a way of dealing with the threat of proliferation as also a way of avoiding the unpleasant decision about building its own nuclear weapons. India also was at the forefront in pressing that *all* commitments in the NPT be honored, including the Article 6 obligation towards nuclear disarmament, rather than focusing only on the spread of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states. Thus, a favorite Indian argument about nuclear proliferation was to point out that what mattered was not just horizontal proliferation (or the expansion of the nuclear weapons club) but also vertical proliferation (the expansion of the arsenals of the existing members of the club).

Nevertheless, as the global nuclear non-proliferation regime comes under increasing threat due to non-compliance or even outright violations by countries such as Iran and North Korea, India will have to increasingly face up to the needs of fashioning a more appropriate approach to the non-proliferation regime. In addition to focusing on nuclear disarmament and non-compliance by NWS (Nuclear Weapon States), India will also have to come up with meaningful and effective ways of dealing with non-compliance by NNWS (Non-Nuclear Weapon States), something that India had previously ignored. One of the disadvantages that India faces in making this policy transition is that India is not a member of the NPT and it is unlikely to become one unless India's *de facto* NWS status is accepted as *de jure* status by the NPT members. This is unlikely. But the alternative – India giving up its nuclear weapons and joining the treaty as a NNWS – is equally unlikely. In essence, then, India's relationship with the treaty is unlikely to undergo any formal changes though India can be expected to play a more active diplomatic role in trying to keep the NPT system together.

As stated earlier, India is likely to continue stressing nuclear disarmament as a way of resolving the problems of nuclear proliferation. Though India's disarmament drive is sometimes seen a cynical ploy to divert attention from its unwillingness to accede to the NPT, a good number among India's political and administrative elite appear sincerely committed to the goal of a nuclear-weapon free world. This may very well be because no serious cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken within the government of the implications of nuclear disarmament on India's security interest. If so, it would not be the first time: India originally supported both the NPT

<sup>5</sup> See Mingquan Zhu, "The Evolution of China's Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy," *The Nonproliferation Review* (winter 1997), pp. 40-48.

<sup>6</sup> On these concerns, see David Albright and Susan Basu, "Neither a Determined Proliferator nor a Responsible Nuclear State: India's Record Needs Scrutiny," *ISIS Issue Brief*, April 5, 2006 available at <http://isis-online.org/publications/southasia/indiacritique.pdf>

and the CTBT without realizing the full import of these treaties on India's security. India would eventually refuse to accede to either treaty. Nevertheless, India does strongly support a Nuclear Weapons Convention with the objective of eventual comprehensive nuclear disarmament. Even after openly declaring itself as a nuclear weapon state, India has reiterated its commitment to comprehensive nuclear disarmament.

## 5 Global Governance of Non-proliferation

If efforts at comprehensive global nuclear disarmament are to succeed, arms control and disarmament institutions need to be strengthened. This is easier said than done. It would be difficult even to agree on the principles for such institutions. The Conference on Disarmament (CD) and its predecessor entities were clearly the key forum for global non-proliferation negotiations and were responsible for the most successful global arms control measures, including the NPT. But, unfortunately, the CD has been deadlocked for more than a decade now, with member-states unable even to agree on a work agenda. The CD's consensus rule is generally blamed for this deadlock, but it is unlikely that this rule will be or can be changed.

This deadlock has serious consequences: negotiations on the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), the key next step in global nuclear arms control, has been held up. The FMCT negotiations are likely to be challenging, given the disagreements among some key parties on important issues such as whether the treaty should have verification elements (the US has opposed verification measures, while most others want it), and whether existing fissile material stocks should be counted in the treaty (some states including Pakistan want existing stocks included, while many states including the NWS only want to cut-off future production). But until serious negotiations start, it is unlikely that the disagreements on these issues can be resolved, which will delay the treaty and quite possibly, suggest the need to move the treaty to some other forum.

Indeed, there are now more calls for moving critical arms control treaties away from the CD altogether because of the inability of the CD to get anything done.<sup>7</sup> Two key arms control

measures, the Ottawa Treaty banning land mines, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions have been negotiated outside the CD. If the CD continues to be unable even to decide on what their annual agenda should be, frustration with the CD process can only increase. On the other hand, despite the problems with the CD, it remains the indispensable forum for nuclear arms control negotiations. Neither the Land Mines treaty nor the Convention on Cluster Munitions are appropriate examples because neither of these initiatives include the key nuclear weapon powers. Such a non-CD model might be useful when like-minded countries come together, leaving out states that are likely to present serious obstacles. But clearly such a model will not work in dealing with nuclear arms control and disarmament. The primary obstacle in nuclear arms control talks are the nine nuclear weapon states and their touchiness on issues they consider vital to their national security. Moving to an *ad hoc* body outside the CD will be of little help.

If the CD is deadlocked, the situation is little better in other fora such as the UN First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, which is essentially a talk shop with little real initiative being shown by the various member states, and with no progress on any issue. In any case, with all member states included, the First Committee is not exactly nimble. Even the UN Disarmament Commission, which was intended to be a forum for less formal and more open discussion of disarmament issues has become stultified with member-states stating well-known national positions rather than suggesting possible ways finding middle ground for breaking deadlocks and making progress.

The problems afflicting these nuclear arms control institutions create serious difficulties when trying to deal with the challenges currently facing the NPT and the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Broadly, these challenges include preventing non-compliance and break-out by NNWS, fulfilling of the full treaty obligations by NWS, and establishing other supporting treaties and norms to support the nuclear non-proliferation order, such as the FMCT, CTBT and various technology control regimes.

Preventing non-compliance by NNWS signatories to the NPT, especially cases of such states trying to build nuclear weapons, is the key problem. Though the NPT has not been able to prevent

<sup>7</sup> On why such sentiments may be misplaced, see David Atwood, *Why the Conference on Disarmament Still Matters: What NGOs Need to Do*, available at:

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/cd/atwood.html>

the spread of nuclear weapons, it has, until recently, prevented the spread of nuclear weapons to signatory NNWS. Three of the four states that built nuclear weapons after the treaty was established were not NPT signatory states. Thus, the only real failure the NPT has had is with North Korea, a signatory NNWS state that built a nuclear weapon and then withdrew from the treaty. But if North Korea does not return to the NPT fold, or if another state in a similar situation such as Iran were to build nuclear weapons, then the pressures on NPT would be far greater than that posed by India, Pakistan or Israel. This is because other states in the neighborhood of Iran and North Korea will feel the pressure to respond by building their own nuclear weapons. But all such states are signatory NNWS and they will be able to build their nuclear weapons only by violating their NPT commitments. In other words, these states will also have to leave the NPT to build their own nuclear weapons, or will have to violate the treaty by covertly building their arsenals. In either case, this would represent the beginning of the unraveling of the treaty.

The treaty itself can do little about non-compliance: non-compliance needs to be addressed by the UN Security Council and other interested institutions and parties. But these institutions depend on nation-states which have the capability to monitor non-compliance, such as the U.S. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is mandated to monitor the nuclear programs of member-states, does not, in many cases, have the resources to satisfactorily fulfill its safeguards mandate. In addition, the IAEA can only report non-compliance to the UN Security Council, which has to take a political call on what is to be done.

A key problem that the UNSC faces in dealing with issues of non-compliance is that there is often little political consensus on what could be done to handle such cases. That lack of consensus is visible in the case of both North Korea and Iran. In both cases, the issues of disagreement appear to be not so much about the specifics of the individual case (on which there is broad agreement) but on how these countries should be handled, with China and Russia generally favoring a softer approach than the US. It is difficult to not see in Chinese and Russian opposition to the American approach a broader concern with US foreign policy and strategy which reveals itself as a reluctance to go along with American approach to these problems, and sometimes as outright opposition. Washington

is not entirely blameless: over the last decade the US has eschewed the essential task of creating consensus on a broad range of international issues that has created these conditions of non-cooperation by other major powers. The US, as the hegemonic power, needs to pay greater attention to its responsibilities. Fortunately, there are signals that the US has realized the need for creating such consensus. The next US administration will have to expend greater efforts in creating the climate for consensus that is vital to dealing with the challenges facing the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

The NWS will also have to do more to live up to their NPT commitments. This includes taking real measures towards nuclear disarmament, rather than constantly citing their reduced nuclear arsenals – the result of post-Cold War nuclear arms control measures rather than a step towards nuclear disarmament – as an indication of their commitment towards nuclear disarmament. Nobody underestimates the difficulties of the process towards nuclear disarmament, but the NWS could start by agreeing to that goal, and undertaking other measures such as reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in their military doctrines, de-alerting their nuclear forces, eliminating their remaining tactical nuclear weapons, and withdrawing their nuclear forces to their homeland as a way of indicating their commitment towards nuclear disarmament.

## **6 Regional Non-proliferation Initiatives**

Along with global measures, regional measures to reduce the nuclear risk may seem a logical step. A number of regional nuclear-weapons free zones (NWFZ) exist, and there has been a long-standing proposal for a similar measure in South Asia. India has rejected such proposals, though, oddly, it has offered to accept some other NWFZ, such as the Bangkok Treaty. Globally, though, the idea has gained greater support.

Nevertheless, it is not clear that the five accepted NWS are fully committed to the concept of such NWFZ. For such zones to be effective, it must prohibit the testing, deployment and transit of nuclear weapons through that region. If it cannot do this effectively, it becomes a non-proliferation measure which targets the regional states rather than a step towards global nuclear disarmament. There is little indication that such zones have lived up to this standard or that NWS have treated such zones seriously. Their nuclear armed ships regularly traverse areas that are

supposedly nuclear weapons free with little hindrance. Regional members to such arrangements have little capacity to monitor such transit and even less capacity to control or prevent such transit. In essence, such zones are paper arrangements whose key provisions are routinely violated by the NWS.

In addition, there are other weaknesses to such treaties and proposals. Though such treaties can reduce bilateral nuclear insecurities among neighbors, they do little to contain extra-regional nuclear threats. This is most clearly visible in South Asia. India will be unlikely to accept any South Asian regional nuclear arms control proposal that leaves it vulnerable to China. And China is unlikely to accept any controls on its nuclear weapons programs given its concerns about the US. In other words, nuclear politics cannot be isolated as a regional problem when extra-regional concerns are present.

Finally, there is little to suggest that these measures have in any way aided nuclear arms control or disarmament. These measures, by themselves, have put little pressure on the nuclear powers to find ways to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in their military strategies. The best that can be said about these proposals is that they have supported the existing norm about the illegitimacy of nuclear weapons.

Overall, India's approach to nuclear arms control and disarmament has been at either the bilateral or the global levels rather than at the regional level. At the bilateral level, India and Pakistan have concluded a number of agreements to reduce the nuclear risk, including an agreement to not attack each others' nuclear facilities, to not test ballistic missiles towards each other, to control military movements near their border and hotline agreements to enhance communication in crisis. At the global level, India has proposed disarmament approaches as well as risk reduction measures such as de-alerting of nuclear forces. In contrast, there have been few regional measures that India has either proposed or accepted.

## 7 Conclusion

India has always had an uneasy relationship with the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. On the one hand, it has seen the non-proliferation regime as a discriminatory order that unfairly targeted NNWS while allowing the NWS to maintain their nuclear arsenals. On the other hand, India has always seen the spread of nuclear weapons as a danger and has been careful about ensuring that its own nuclear technology has not spread to other NNWS. Though the current crisis in the nuclear non-proliferation regime is serious, and a break-down of the regime can affect India also, New Delhi has only limited means to tackle the problem.

The key requirement to deal with the crisis in the non-proliferation regime is consensus among the major powers, a consensus that goes beyond boilerplate policy statements and includes concerted action by all major powers in the recognition that if they do not act, they could all face serious difficulties. If North Korea is not denuclearised, Japan's current nuclear calculus could change, setting off chain-reaction all over East Asia, a prospect that China cannot ignore. A similar chain reaction could take place in the Middle East if Iran's nuclear ambitions are not controlled, something that will directly impact on both China and Russia. The US has the greatest responsibility: it must reinvigorate the non-proliferation consensus, but to do this, it must also lead a global consensus on major international issues that go beyond nuclear proliferation. Without such a consensus, institutional tinkering will be useless and the current nuclear non-proliferation challenges cannot be met.

### *About the author*

*Rajesh Rajagopalan is Professor in International Politics at Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies. He served as Deputy Secretary in the National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India (2000-2001). He has taught at Hunter College, Brooklyn College, and Queens College of the City University of New York.*

More information is available on:  
[www.fes-globalization.org](http://www.fes-globalization.org)

---

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily the ones of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Department for Development Policy  
- Dialogue on Globalization –  
Hiroshimastrasse 17  
10785 Berlin  
Germany  
Tel.: ++49 (0)30 26935-7404  
Fax: ++49 (0)30 26935-9246  
Mail: [globalization@fes.de](mailto:globalization@fes.de)  
[www.fes-globalization.org](http://www.fes-globalization.org)