

Nuclear Weapon-free World

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The recently concluded G8 Summit in Germany discussed more extensively issues of climate change and aid to Africa. Among other subjects, it also discussed global security concerns. In the nuclear area, the G8 agreed to strengthen measures to prevent proliferation, intensify counter-proliferation initiatives, and tighten sanctions against Iran to prevent it from pursuing enrichment of uranium. It also decided to take coordinated steps to prevent the spread of uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing (to separate plutonium) technologies. Regrettably, it took no initiative to reduce arsenals with the nuclear weapon states, much less discuss how the world can rid itself of the menace of nuclear weapons. This is not surprising as the original G7 (Russia is a recent addition) were all members of the Euro-Atlantic alliance led by the U.S., which has never been a supporter of the idea of a nuclear weapon-free world.

In July 2007, the Pugwash movement is holding its 50th anniversary meeting at Pugwash, Nova Scotia in Canada. This movement was launched in response to a call from Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russel with an appeal to the statesmen of the world to save mankind by eliminating all nuclear weapons. In its initial years, the Pugwash meetings brought together scientists from U.S. and the USSR (and other countries too) so that the isolation on contacts imposed by the cold war could be breached. These contacts eventually paved the way for more formal discussions on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties and the treaties on the elimination of chemical and biological weapons. In the 1980s and '90s, the Pugwash movement commissioned studies on how to achieve the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world. The late Joseph Rotblat, as Chairman of the Pugwash conferences for many years, actively championed this cause. While he and the Pugwash movement were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize in the mid-1990s, the pursuit of a nuclear weapon-free world has disappeared from the global agenda.

In 1988, India presented to the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament, the Rajiv Gandhi Plan for a nuclear weapon-free world. This plan envisaged a time-bound elimination of all nuclear weapons by all countries possessing them. The plan was rejected out of hand by the U.S.. The USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev welcomed it; this support however meant little as the USSR was itself hurtling towards implosion. Had there been a positive response to this plan, even if the timetable indicated in it was much too optimistic, it is entirely possible that neither India nor Pakistan would have gone overtly nuclear 10 years down the line. After Pokhran II tests of 1998, India announced that it would develop a credible minimum nuclear deterrent; it also announced a no-first-use policy and that it would observe a voluntary moratorium on further testing. Ever since, India has reiterated its commitment to universal nuclear disarmament.

The question now is whether the time has come to revive the idea of a nuclear weapon-free world. In January 2007, four U.S. veteran policy makers, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schultz, some of whom were nuclear hawks in the past, stated that “ Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America’s moral heritage. The effort could have a profoundly positive impact on the security of future generations. Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as realistic or possible. We endorse the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and working energetically on the actions required to achieve that goal.”

More recently, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, warned there could be 30 “virtual new weapons states” on the horizon. He has gone to say that elimination of nuclear weapons in all countries is the only way that will prevent new countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. Some time last year, the IAEA Director General also stated that there were “no legitimate nuclear weapon powers.” He implicitly reminded the nuclear weapon states of their obligation to eliminate them over a period of time and not to claim a legal right to possess them for all time to come.

There are some new developments that portend a revival of the arms race, which characterised the cold war era. The U.S. is considering launching a new family of nuclear weapons called the “reliable replacement warhead” to replace its ageing arsenal. It is also working on a “bunker buster” to destroy heavily guarded underground facilities where WMD activities may be hidden. Russia and China will then be provoked to respond with their own plans. The U.S. is planning to set up missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic ostensibly to counter Iran and North Korea. Russia has reacted angrily and said it would be forced to target such missile bases in Europe to safeguard its own security.

In parallel, the weaponisation of space is gathering pace with incremental actions taken notably by the U.S., Russia, and China. As long as the U.S. and the other nuclear weapon powers continue to rely on them for their security into the indefinite future, the rest of the countries will come under severe domestic pressure to acquire nuclear weapons to improve their political leverage. The restraint they have accepted under the NPT cannot be expected to last forever, especially when the weapon states have not kept their part of the bargain to denuclearise themselves over a period of time. There is of course the moralistic argument that the world is still spending far too much of its resources on military expenditure and if those moneys could be spent on elimination of hunger and poverty, and provision of education and healthcare, the world would become a happier and more peaceful place.

It is time therefore for India to propose an updated version of the Rajiv Gandhi Plan at the United Nations General Assembly or the Conference on Disarmament. The elements of the plan would be a no-first-use commitment by all states possessing nuclear weapons and a comprehensive test ban. The nuclear weapon states should terminate the production of nuclear weapons and also abjure all new developments of nuclear weapons. There must be an agreement on dismantling of existing nuclear arsenals on a balanced basis and the fissile materials removed from weapons returned to civilian domain irreversibly. There would have to be a fissile materials cut off treaty that is universal, non-discriminatory, and verifiable. The IAEA, which has already developed considerable capabilities and expertise in safeguards activities, could be entrusted with verification and monitoring activities to ensure compliance of different states to their commitment to eliminate all nuclear weapons. There would be a transitional period when nuclear warheads, fissile materials, and production facilities would operate under the surveillance of the IAEA. The IAEA would also be responsible for a fissile materials bank into which all fissile materials committed earlier to weapons would be deposited and made available to countries for use in civilian energy production. All countries of the world would also be obliged to close down the nuclear weapons laboratories and redeploy the scientists in other areas of civilian applications. The world as a whole is looking for non-carbon sources of energy to mitigate the global warming phenomenon. Nuclear energy has an important role to play in this context; however commerce in technology has been seriously constrained by proliferation concerns. Once the world is launched on elimination of all nuclear weapons, it will be possible for the full potential of safe and economic

nuclear power to be realised for the benefit of all mankind and for the health of the planet.

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