

Manpreet Sethi

STEPS TO DEVALUE NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Abstract

With the end of the Cold War it had been anticipated that war, in general, and nuclear weapons, in particular, would lose their relevance. No such thing has, however, happened. Rather, nuclear weapons have tightened their hold over national security strategies in countries that possess these lethal weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear doctrines of the US, Russia, NATO, China, India and Pakistan perceive a certain value in their nuclear arsenals. The risks, nevertheless, of the continued existence of nuclear weapons cannot be underestimated. In fact, it is the reality and enormity of these risks that makes it imperative that ways to attain universal nuclear disarmament be seriously considered. In this context, the paper enumerates certain steps to achieve this by way of devaluing nuclear weapons. Once they are gradually stripped of their utility and fall into a pattern of disuse, their abolition can then be conceived.

Barely a decade after the end of the Cold War, the contrast in the attitude of countries that possess nuclear weapons towards their nuclear arsenals could not have been more marked. In 1991, there had been optimism resulting from the end of Superpower rivalry and the fast developing co-operative relations between the US and

Ms. Manpreet Sethi, Ph.D. is a Research Officer at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. She is currently on long leave from the Institute and based in Mumbai. Views expressed in the paper are those of the author and not those of IDSA or any other organization. Her e-mail contact is: manpreetsethi@hotmail.com
@Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, 2001

Russia.¹ Consequently, international strategists almost began writing obituaries of war and forecast a declining utility of nuclear weapons.² Hopes on their subsequent removal from national arsenals were raised.

These prognostications, however, had underestimated how deep the roots of nuclear deterrence had penetrated over the years. Today, eleven years after the end of the Cold War, all nuclear weapon states (NWS)³ still continue to rely on these weapons as a cornerstone of their national security for the "indefinite future". The US, UK, NATO and Russia have updated their nuclear doctrines to assign newer roles and missions for their nuclear arsenals. For each

-
- 1 Much of this optimism was emanating from a reassessment of threats on the part of US and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The predominant view among American security analysts of the time was that Russia lacked the capacity or even the intention to threaten or attack Western territories. The CIA Director, Robert Gates, even told the US Congress in 1992 that "the threat to the US of deliberate attack from the [former Soviet Union] has all but disappeared for the foreseeable future". The then Russian Foreign Minister echoed the same very sentiments when he stated in the same year that his nation "no longer views the US as a foe." Tom A Zamora, "Put A Safety Cap on Testing", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, vol. 48, no.2, March 1992, p.25
 - 2 The spirit of the changing times was aptly caught by an international analyst in these words, "These are the days of hope, not despair... It is time to strip away the complex and arcane strategic theory of the Cold War and start from scratch". See, Lincoln Wolfenstein, "End Nuclear Addiction", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, vol., 47, no. 4, May 1991. In a similar mood, the Stimson Centre came out with a publication in the mid-1990s that argued that the character of international relations "is undergoing an irreversible transformation that would eventually invalidate rationales for weapons of mass destruction". This report, prepared by Barry Blechman and Cathleen Fisher, is mentioned in Robert A Manning, "The Nuclear Age : The Next Chapter", *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1997-98, p. 76. Also see, William Arkin, Damian Durrant and Hans Kristensen, "Nuclear Weapons Headed for the Trash", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, vol. 47, no. 10, December 1991, p. 16
 - 3 The term nuclear weapon state is normally used to designate the five nuclear powers accepted under the NPT as those that had detonated their nuclear devices before January 1, 1967. However, in this paper, the term is used in a more loose sense to denote any state with a nuclear weapons capability.

one of them, these words of Under Secretary Walter Slocombe, though spoken in the context of the US, in his testimony before the International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services Subcommittee of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on February 12, 1997, ring equally true: "Nuclear deterrence, far from being made wholly obsolete, remains an essential, ultimate assurance against the gravest of threats."⁴

If earlier, the Cold War justified their existence, it is now the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new threats that appears to vindicate the continued existence of nuclear weapons. Consequently, the pendulum appears to have swung once again in the favor of nuclear weapons.

The renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence, however, imposes a heavy cost on international security. It raises the specter of proliferation by adding value to nuclear weapons. In fact, a US action that is likely to strengthen this trend is the likely deployment of a national missile defence (NMD), despite objections from several countries. While the US justifies it for protecting itself from errant missiles of the states of proliferation concern, Russia and China read more sinister motives into it with implications for their security. France too has expressed apprehensions that a missile defence shield could eventually lead to a decoupling of the US from Europe. Moreover, if the Russians and the Chinese were to increase their nuclear and missile arsenal because of the NMD, then France too would be compelled to reinforce its deterrent. Given the cascading effect that would follow, most countries oppose the proposed US NMD as a destabilizing step. They perceive in it a US design to seek

4 Annual Report of the US Department of Defence as quoted in Office of the Secretary of Defence, *Nuclear Weapons Systems Sustainment Programmes* (Washington DC : DOD, May 1997)

strategic superiority at the cost of disrupting global and regional strategic balance and stability, besides triggering off a new round of nuclear arms race.

With a scenario such as this looming large on the international horizon, how does one identify steps for devaluing and delegitimising nuclear weapons? At a juncture when the value of nuclear weapons is apparently on an upward swing and it is the stock of arms control and disarmament that is fast depreciating, how could one arrest the trend? The paper hopes to put forth some answers to these questions. But, it may be said right at the outset that while groping for viable answers, a palpable sense of *déjà vu* – of it all having been said before, to little avail – tends to predominate. The feeling of cynicism, to which it would be very easy to succumb, however, must be outweighed by the realisation that inability to act urgently and decisively, would inevitably result in dangerous and far reaching repercussions for international security and possibly, for the future of mankind.

It is with this in view that the paper suggests certain steps to devalue and delegitimise nuclear weapons. These would serve as stepping-stones to eventually arrive at universal nuclear disarmament. The complexity of the problem and the fact that it is intertwined with issues such as state sovereignty, power play etc. make it impossible to expect that all countries would suddenly arrive at a comprehensive treaty on nuclear abolition and do so in one go. Conditions to make this possible will have to be gradually worked out and created. The devaluation strategy put forth hopes to strip nuclear weapons of their utility and render them redundant and unusable through a series of measures so that the ground would have been prepared for their eventual elimination.

While it is the nation state, through appropriate legislation, that can be the only effective implementing authority of these steps, the ambience for doing so can be created through a build-up of public awareness and opinion. During the 1960s and 1970s, the civil society had manifest itself as a powerful tool in anti nuclear peace movements. Unfortunately though, such activism faded out without achieving the desired results. While it its beyond the scope of this paper to examine the reasons for their failure⁵, in the present context, it shall be important for the rational elements in every society to impress upon their governments the need to implement the steps to devalue nuclear weapons so that all could be freed of the fear of a nuclear war.

Devaluation is Desirable

Before identifying steps to actually devalue nuclear weapons, one needs to be convinced that devaluation is actually an attractive option. This is imperative because the desirability of undertaking this exercise has time and again been questioned by those who vouch by the benefits of nuclear deterrence in keeping a third world war at bay.⁶ The proponents of this school of thought see these weapons as security enhancers by threatening such horrendous consequences that the adversary is deterred against making any move that could invite their use. According to this logic, nuclear

5 For more on this aspect see, Lawrence S Wittner, *One World Or None : A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953*, vol. I and II (Stanford, Calif.:Stanford University Press, 1993), and Stuart Croft, *Strategies of Arms Control: A History and Typology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

6 Neo-realists support the retention of nuclear weapons capabilities on the ground that they exercise a fundamental restraining influence on inter-state conflict. For more on this, see, John J Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future", *International Security*, vol.15, no.1, Summer 1990; and Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons:More May be Better", *Adelphi Paper*, no. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981)

deterrence provides stability to the international order. This belief has over the years contributed to the inertia against realising nuclear disarmament.

When subjected to closer scrutiny, however, the belief reveals itself as no more than an untested and un-testable hypothesis. Of course, nuclear weapons have deterred the use of nuclear weapons. But their presence has done nothing to really stop conventional conflagrations. These did take place and the presence of nuclear weapons does not deter the very act of aggression. In fact, if it is conceded that nuclear weapons reduce the chance of large-scale conventional conflict between nuclear-armed powers, then, would it not be logical to presume that more such powers would further reduce chances of major conventional wars? It would be sheer fallacy, if not downright suicidal, to indulge in such a line of thinking since it is a fact that wars have been and will continue to be a means of settlement of disputes among nations. Man killed man in the Stone Age and he will continue to do so into the e-tech future.

Risks from Nuclear Weapons

The very presence of nuclear weapons poses three major risks that cannot be taken lightly. Firstly, there is the danger of a conflict involving one or more NWS escalating to a nuclear level. This is a frightening prospect because a nuclear war would cause destruction of life on a massive scale and with relative ease.⁷ In fact, the destruction so wrought would not be measurable only in terms of number of casualties, but would go much further in time and space.⁸

7 It can be argued that modern day conventional weapons can cause similar extent of destruction. But the difference lies in the fact that to do so would require a more intensive and extensive use of air power. Nuclear weapons, meanwhile, offer the temptation of easy use and therefore, also invoke the fear of irresponsible use.

8 For a detailed description of the kind and scale of destruction and damage a nuclear attack could cause, see, Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of Earth* (London: Picador, 1982)

Besides the risk of a conventional conflict escalating into a nuclear exchange, the presence of nuclear weapons also carries the threat of a nuclear war brought on by an unintended accident or miscalculation. In fact, modern day communication and sophisticated delivery systems take pride in extremely short lead times between the political decision to use nuclear weapons and the ability to bring it down on the pre-designated target. This carries the inherent risk of a nuclear weapon being launched during a crisis without adequate thought or in the heat of the moment. The danger of unauthorized nuclear launch cannot be dismissed either, since however advanced, the nuclear command and control structure cannot be absolutely foolproof. Whether intended or unintended, the mushroom that would go up and the horrendous consequences would remain the same. It needs little explanation then that a world free of the physical presence of nuclear weapons would definitely be a *safer* world, and to that extent, it is a more *desirable* one.

The second reason why nuclear weapons must be devalued is because their continued existence carries within it the seed of nuclear proliferation. If those who possess the weapon continue to show a fondness for the weapon, then over time, others too could be expected to feel the need to develop the same. It is not going to be possible to indefinitely profess that a nuclear arsenal is vital to the national security of a few but harmful to global security if others develop or acquire the same. It is in this context, that Jonathan Schell has referred to the US arsenal as a "proliferant" and not as a "deterrent",⁹ because as long as weapons exist with one, others are going to aspire to possess them.

The acquisition of a nuclear weapon or its technology, in contemporary times, may not prove too difficult given the widespread availability of information and the relatively easy

9 Jonathan Schell, "The Folly of Arms Control", *Foreign Affairs*, Autumn 2000.

accessibility to fissile material. Of course, the NPT provides some sort of a notional barrier. But as the examples of Iraq and North Korea have demonstrated, neither the NPT, nor other export control regimes, have been able to restrain those not ready to voluntarily accept limitations on themselves.

While one cannot deny any country the right to defend itself, even if it be through the acquisition of nuclear weapons if it so deemed necessary, nuclear proliferation does impose additional strain on international security and stability. Nuclear weapons, by their inherent nature are not weapons of just any other kind. Their possession has to be necessarily accompanied by the development of a fairly sophisticated command and control apparatus so as to minimise, if not totally obviate the chances of accidental, miscalculated or unauthorised nuclear war. And, it is for this reason that non-proliferation of nuclear weapons becomes a desired objective. But, non-proliferation can be sustained only when it is accompanied by the elimination of these weapons.

A third reason for devaluing nuclear weapons arises from the growing risks of nuclear smuggling or terrorism. These are exacerbated by two main recent developments. Firstly, because international terrorism fuelled by religious fundamentalism is on the rise and has become a tool to wage proxy wars. A well-established nexus among international terrorism, organised crime and narco-trafficking ensures a steady supply of resources. Highly motivated and monetarily well-endowed outfits then, might have little compunctions about using a nuclear weapon, or its threat, for certain limited gains. The second factor that raises the probability of nuclear terrorism is the less than adequate storage facilities for fissile material and weapons at the Russian nuclear weapon complexes. The problem is further compounded by the state of economic deprivation that the un- or under-employed workers at these storage sites face. They could then fall easy prey to temptation

of a sufficiently motivated and cash-rich terrorist outfit. While there may be little logic in nuclear terrorism nevertheless, ease of accessibility could prompt its use. Neither can such outfits be expected to act within the confines of rationality at all times.

Given the dangers that persist with the existence of nuclear weapons – those of deliberate nuclear wars; those of miscalculated, accidental or unauthorised wars due to uncontrolled proliferation; and those of nuclear terrorism -- the desirability of devaluing them with the ultimate objective of doing away with them is self-evident.

Steps to Devalue Nuclear Weapons

Measures aimed at universal nuclear disarmament have often been bogged down by questions that have no easy answers. Should the security concerns of countries be first addressed through the creation of an international system that is based on peaceful co-existence and rule of law enforced through world governance? Could the demand for these weapons be quelled only after a complete resolution of all differences between states and in a world where all nations live in complete harmony? While a world that has renounced armed conflict as a means of settling disputes would indeed offer the ultimate security guarantee and remove all justification for such weapons, the challenge, however, lies in conceiving nuclear abolition in this real world inhabited as it is by “sovereign states with conflicting ideologies”.¹⁰ One way to do this would be devalue nuclear weapons, make them useless and hence unwanted.

The task, of course, cannot be expected to be easy by any standards. Politically, it would call for exemplary vision and statesmanship to discard entrenched beliefs and accept new norms of

10 James Schlesinger, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA, as quoted in Ken Booth and Nicholas J Wheeler, “Beyond Nuclearism”, in Regina Cowen Karp (ed), *Security Without Nuclear Weapons? Different Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Security* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 1986)

inter-state behaviour. Militarily, it would require immense courage to shake off the crutch of nuclear deterrence and accept seemingly lower levels of security, especially for states that are conventionally weaker and see nuclear weapons as levellers of sorts. Logistically, it would call for large doses of innovative expertise to deal with the discarded weapons. Internationally, it would necessitate a change in the inter-state system through the injection of greater transparency, confidence building measures and more participative institutionalised mechanisms. It is keeping the magnitude of the problem in mind that certain steps are being suggested in the following paragraphs to devalue nuclear weapons. These are not sequential. In fact, each would create an environment making it easier to take another. Any one of them could follow the other, or even be pursued simultaneously.

Targeting Nuclear Belief Systems

Beliefs that deify nuclear deterrence for its war prevention capabilities ascribe greater value to them. Therefore, it becomes necessary to attack the old belief systems that grant a larger than life image and role to nuclear weapons. Changing mindsets would be imperative for devaluing nuclear weapons since the power of the mind should not be underestimated. Since the majority of those who matter in strategic decision making have believed in the undesirability and impracticality of nuclear disarmament, this belief has gone on becoming entrenched. In order to break the mould, the belief systems need to be strategically "attacked" and replaced by those more favourable to nuclear abolition.

History provides ample examples of institutions whose abolition was once thought to be unthinkable having broken down under the pressure of changed belief systems. One need only point to the case of slavery to further drive home this point. In fact, when a few had

started demanding the abolition of slavery, there were several who argued against it on the grounds that the economic and social systems would not be able to survive the drastic change! At the time, on December 1, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln, in his famous message to the US Congress, had said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present... As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves."¹¹ This advice has come in useful whenever radical transformations have taken place. It is most relevant today in the case of nuclear weapons. We have to disenthrall ourselves from their hold and if anything can do that it is the force of new ideas.

Re-drafting Nuclear Doctrines

Altered belief systems would automatically prompt a re-examination and re-drafting of nuclear doctrines. This would be an extremely important step since the role of a nuclear weapon is defined by a country's nuclear doctrine. Therefore, to first restrict the role to a narrow core mission, and then take even that away, a re-examination of national nuclear doctrines is required. In the post-Cold War period, most countries did undertake just such an exercise in the light of changed threat perceptions. However, all of them concluded that nuclear deterrence was still required to remain a principal pillar of their national security. The US Department of Defense annual report released in March 1996 categorically stated that notwithstanding the transformed international scenario in the post-Cold War period, "strategic nuclear deterrence remains a key US military priority." Therefore, for the US, nuclear deterrence, far from being made wholly obsolete, is still an "essential, ultimate

11 Jerome B Wiesner, "A Militarised Society", in Len Ackland and Steve McGuire (eds.), *Assessing the Nuclear Age* (Chicago : Educational Foundation for Nuclear Science, 1986), p. 227.

assurance against the gravest of threats.”¹² The Russians, likewise, are absolutely clear that “For Russia, at least for the next several decades, there will be no alternative to nuclear deterrence”¹³

Statements such as these provide a positive feedback to nuclear deterrence and reinforce its hold over strategic thinking. The strategy of deterrence then becomes self-perpetuating. It is this feedback loop that shall have to be broken in order to devalue nuclear weapons and for this a reassessment of the nuclear doctrines becomes imperative.

The US is scheduled to conduct a new NPR by the end of this year. This signifies an important opportunity for bringing about a change in thinking on nuclear issues. However, if present US nuclear thinking is any indication, there seems to be a general inclination to add value to nuclear weapons by promoting designs that would make them smaller, more compact and thus, more usable. This would be a retrograde step as far as the elimination of nuclear weapons is concerned and needs to be opposed. The re-drafting of nuclear doctrines must instead, be encouraged along lines that make nuclear weapons less attractive by restricting, and eventually obviating their role in international politics.

Restricting the Role of Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons were originally conceived and developed to deter the use or threat of use of other nuclear weapons. Gradually,

12 Statement made by Under Secretary Walter Slocombe in his testimony made before the International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services Sub-committee of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on February 12, 1997. He is quoted in the report produced by the Office of Secretary of Defense entitled, Nuclear Weapons Systems Sustainment Programmes (Washington D C: Department of Defence, 1997)

13 Statement made by Col General Yakolev, Commander-in-Chief of Russia's Strategic Missile Forces.

however, countries detected in it the power to offset even conventional inferiority. Throughout the Cold War years, NATO banked on its nuclear arsenal to deter an overwhelming Soviet conventional might. However, in the post-Cold War period, Russia, with a substantially reduced conventional strength has felt the need to reassess the role of nuclear weapons in its own national security strategy. In view of its limited political and military capabilities, a new nuclear doctrine put forth in 2000 has found it prudent to affirm Russia's "right to use all available means and forces, including nuclear weapons, in case of the need to repel an armed aggression when all other means of settling the crisis situation have been exhausted or proved ineffective".¹⁴

For Russia, therefore, its nuclear arsenal performs two crucial roles at this present juncture: One, it fills an internal void and gives Moscow the requisite strength to pursue domestic policies of the kind that it deems fit. This is amply evident in the manner in which references to Russia's nuclear strength have been made while responding to international criticism of its policy in Chechnya. Secondly, the Russian nuclear weapons fortify an otherwise weak nation against the relative strength of other international players that Moscow perceives as security concerns.

In performing both these roles, the Russian nuclear weapons send out some messages – one, that these weapons can be effectively used to match and deter superior conventional capability. It is this belief that has led to the weapon being considered as one "of the weak against the strong, as the only weapon that can counter the conventional superiority of the West".¹⁵ The other point they make

14 "National Security Concept of the Russian Federation: January 2000", as reproduced in *Strategic Digest*, March 2000, p. 297.

15 Robert G Joseph, "Nuclear Deterrence and Regional Proliferators", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 1997, p. 168.

is that these weapons grant prestige and status, as also the right to independent decision making. This viewpoint is best expressed in the words of the French Prime Minister Alain Juppe. He had acknowledged in 1995 that, "By acquiring nuclear capability, France was able to play, on the world scene, a role well above that justified by its mere quantitative significance."¹⁶ These perceptions, then, enhance the utility of nuclear weapons and motivate others to strive for them. It could compel countries to reassess their own need for acquiring such a capability that can act as a leveller of sorts -- a clear prescription for nuclear proliferation.

It is to guard against such a danger emanating from countries perceiving a multi-role capability in nuclear weapons that it becomes imperative to devalue the weapon by narrowing down its role. It should be confined to the core mission of nuclear deterrence and nothing beyond that. Once this happens, the motivation to acquire these WMD would substantially recede.

Accepting No-first Use (NFU)

The adoption of NFU could be a crucial step towards the eventual delegitimisation of nuclear weapons since it would involve an assurance from every NWS that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into a conflict. Since there will not be a first, it would effectively mean no use of the nuclear weapon at all. If the NFU could be implemented through a legally binding-universally accepted agreement, then any first use would constitute a violation of international law inviting crippling universal sanctions, worldwide opprobrium and any other penalties that could be consensually agreed to.

16 Speech delivered by French Prime Minister Alain Juppe at the *Institut des Hautes Etudes de Defence Nationale*, Paris on September 7, 1995 and as reproduced in *Strategic Digest*, April 1998.

Of course, there are critics of the no-first use who dismiss it as nothing more than a declaratory policy that would mean little once hostilities actually break out between two nuclear nations. Such criticism, however, tends to overlook two facts. Firstly, that the adoption of NFU automatically translates into a different nuclear force posture and deployment pattern that ensure that the promise of no-first use is kept. Therefore, in order to be meaningful, no-first use would have to be accompanied by the withdrawal or non-deployment of nuclear weapons that have war-fighting rather than deterrent functions. In fact, a pledge to negotiate the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons would add additional credibility to the NFU.

Secondly, one cannot summarily dismiss declarations on the conduct of war since they do have some relevance. They set certain limits to the levels of permissible violence and establish useful norms. For instance, the Geneva Protocol of 1925 outlawed the use of chemical and biological weapons and except for rare exceptions, the weapons have remained out of the realm of war fighting. In fact, eventually, though several decades down the line, it did become possible to capitalise upon the norm to formalise conventions outlawing these WMD.

Following this example, an NFU commitment from all NWS could translate into a nuclear weapons convention some time in the future. At present, only two countries – India and China – accept NFU. The latter, however, does not offer an unconditional NFU¹⁷, in contrast to the one spelt out by India that is clear and unambiguous. Enshrined in the draft Indian nuclear doctrine that was put forth in

17 China maintains that its NFU commitment does not apply to its own territory or territories that it claims as its own. Hence, the ambiguity regarding the possibility of Chinese nuclear weapons in a conflict over Taiwan, or certain portions of Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state to which China lays claim.

August 1999, it categorically commits India to never be the first to use nuclear weapons. In doing so it has opened up an alternative to the prevailing conventional wisdom of first use as espoused by the Western nuclear powers, and now, even Russia. It offers a counter view to the traditional aggressive and arms inducing doctrines and could engender a new belief system. If all NWS were to accept this principle, then none would ever initiate a nuclear strike. Naturally, therefore, over the years, the utility of nuclear weapons would decline.

Banning the Use or Threat of Use of Nuclear Weapons

A step even beyond the NFU, an agreement prohibiting the very use or threat of use of nuclear weapons would be a meaningful step to delegitimise the weapon. In case all NWS were to make a solemn declaration that nuclear weapons shall not be used and that any country using them or threatening to use them, shall face commensurate retribution and a **total** boycott by all the countries of the world, it would make these WMD significantly impotent and useless. The value of nuclear weapons would fall instantly and further proliferation would voluntarily stop. None would want to acquire weapons that could not be used, not in war, and hence not as a deterrent either. Consequently, the unique status that nuclear weapons are deemed to provide, would no longer seem worth aspiring for. Meanwhile, even rogue states would no longer have any use for these weapons for fear of serious reprisals. Therefore, a total ban on use of nuclear weapons would directly strike at the very root of their utility.

In this context, it might be mentioned that the UN General Assembly has periodically considered resolutions to this effect. Way back in 1961, it had adopted a declaration by a vote of 55 to 20 with 26 abstentions stating that the use of nuclear weapons was contrary to the "spirit, letter and aims of the UN". The US and

NATO had then opposed it contending that in the event of aggression, the attacked nation should be free to take whatever action with whatever weapons not specifically banned by international law. India, for several years now, has proposed a "Convention on the Prohibition of Use of Nuclear Weapons" (UNGA 55/34G [L.30]).¹⁸ It seeks a multilateral, universal and binding agreement prohibiting the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons through an international convention. In the year 2000, however, the move was able to muster only 109 votes in favor with 43 against and 16 abstentions. Predictably, the P-5 opposed the resolution. The US did so since it did not consider it a practical approach to the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament. It hailed instead a step-by-step process that embraced unilateral, bilateral and multilateral measures.¹⁹ Interestingly, Japan, for all its abhorrence of nuclear weapons, also found it prudent to abstain for reasons similar to those voiced by the US. Such country positions, nevertheless, underestimate the significance of actually arriving at a convention banning nuclear use to devalue them substantially.

Reducing Arms and De-alerting

Reduction of nuclear arsenals beyond those called for in the two START treaties would be a significant move towards promoting confidence building and thereby, reducing the need for nuclear weapons. Given that in the context of the US and Russia, a deliberate nuclear attack is believed to be implausible, there can be no reason for retaining the kind of numbers that they continue to keep. Rather, the presence of such large numbers complicates matters in various ways. For one, it raises the possibility of

18 For the complete text of the resolution see <<http://www.un.org/News>>

19 See "Appendix: Summary of Resolutions", *Disarmament Diplomacy* <<http://www.acronym.org>>

"accidental" or unintended nuclear war, especially since Russia's nuclear command and control systems or early warning mechanisms are not believed to be in the best of condition. Smaller arsenals then would impose less strain on these mechanisms, besides being easier to safeguard and protect from accident, theft or unauthorised use. Moreover, arms reduction by NWS would help to shore up global support for the non-proliferation regime and thereby contribute to greater international confidence building.

Reductions in arsenals should be accompanied by a conscious effort at reducing alert levels. This is important because once the arsenals are smaller, there is a greater likelihood of countries with first use doctrines keeping them on hair-trigger alert so as to defy a "use them or lose them" syndrome. This could raise the risk of mistaken or unauthorised launch. The way out then lies in de-alerting in order to extend the time needed to prepare the weapons for a launch. De-alerting could be done through the physical separation of warheads from delivery vehicles or through the deployment of delivery systems out of the range of targets. If undertaken on a reciprocal basis it would reinforce stability and reduce risks of an inadvertent launch.

Meanwhile, lengthening the fuse on their possible use would be a step towards downgrading the importance of nuclear weapons since military planners would have to discount their role in contingency planning. Over a period of time then, the weapons could fall into a pattern of disuse and lose their utility.

Halting Further R & D for Nuclear Modernization

Besides reducing the existing nuclear arsenals, it is also imperative that a complete halt be put to further modernization of nuclear weapons. This is particularly important given the emergence of a new trend towards improving the weapons in such a way as to make them "more user-friendly". In the US, certain laboratories are

reportedly pushing for the development of mini-nukes of smaller yields. In fact, in a little-publicized move, the US Congress lifted the ban on designing of new low-yield weapons in the year 2000.²⁰ The US justifies this by pointing towards threats arising from terrorism, and proliferation of smaller WMD capabilities to new states. It is contended that small, low-yield nuclear weapons could be effectively used to destroy even a deeply-buried or hardened underground facility without causing too much collateral damage.²¹

Whatever the rationale, a decision validating the importance of smaller, low-yield and more usable nuclear weapons could set off a dangerous chain reaction with global ramifications. Russia is already believed to be thinking along similar lines. Victor Mikhailov, the former head of Minatom has written in an article examining the role of nuclear weapons in the 21st century that "Of great importance [to Russia] will be [the future] development of new generation of super-precise nuclear weapons of super-small yield and with a small impact on the environment."²² The development of such usable weapons would signify a major reversal in devaluing nuclear weapons and hence, should be opposed at every level.

Restricting Delivery Systems

Long range delivery systems like ballistic missiles and strategic bombers expand the role and scope of nuclear weapons. It, therefore, would make eminent sense to put in place some kind of a universal restriction on delivery systems in a bid to devalue nuclear weapons. If the weapon is not effectively deliverable, then, it would be of little use and hence, not worth aspiring for or stockpiling.

20 Robert Alvarez, "A Long Season of Discontent", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Jan/Feb 2001.

21 Theresa Hitchens, "The US Nuclear Debate : Issues of Concern", BASIC Paper no. 35, Feb 2001.

22 *Ibid*, p. 57

In this context, it is suggested that the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, presently in force only for the US and Russia, should be expanded to prohibit deployment anywhere of land-based missiles between the ranges 500 and 5,500 kms. In fact to do so would be even more pertinent in the present context of the US NMD. The defence shield has raised the hackles of various countries, including US allies and has further raised the danger of proliferation. A multilateralization of the INF treaty, meanwhile, offers another way of addressing the threat of errant missiles from small states, since most of them would fall within the range that shall be prohibited by a universalized INF treaty.

Investing Confidence in Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Treaties

Nuclear arms control and non-proliferation initiatives have periodically been pursued to reduce the armaments of NWS and to check further proliferation. In order to ensure that these measures are able to fulfil their objectives, it is necessary that countries exhibit commitment to and faith in them. Actions demonstrating a trend to the contrary, naturally take away from the effectiveness of such treaties or agreements and could shake the faith of others as well. Two such actions from contemporary times could be mentioned in this context to illustrate the impact they could have from the point of view of proliferation and stability.

The US rejection of ratification to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the likelihood of its abandoning the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty are actions that undermine the credibility of such treaties. They reveal an underlying lack of faith on the part of the US in the ability of these measures to guarantee its national security. Expectedly, other countries too would feel the need to reconsider their posture.

While the ABM is a treaty only between the US and Russia (formerly the USSR), the manner in which it is treated by the two sends a signal to others – whether these should be seen as sacrosanct measures or as pieces of paper that could be amended or abrogated as interests deem it necessary, without paying adequate attention to the global ramifications of the same? Moves such as these generate international instability, lower confidence levels and increase the value of nuclear weapons.

Dealing With Cheaters

In order to devalue nuclear weapons it becomes necessary to put in place effective enforcement strategies that clearly lay down penalties for cheating or breakout. The guarantee of a collected and concerted response could act as an effective deterrent to the clandestine development of nuclear weapons once all countries have committed to their non-use or abolition. The importance of broad international support in this regard is best demonstrated through the example of Iraq. In the early 1990s, when the clandestine nuclear weapons programme in Iraq was first discovered, it led to an international outcry that resulted in the consensual establishment of the UNSCOM. However, over the years, as aspersions came to be cast upon the preponderant US role and objectives in the UNSCOM, the consensus has broken down. Dwindling international support has then not only undermined the effectiveness of the UNSCOM, but also exposed the inability of the international community to stem proliferation a country is determined enough to carry through its nuclear ambitions.

The case of North Korea provides another example of how a country is deemed to have used its pursuit of a nuclear weapons programme to extract concessions from countries that felt threatened. In its negotiations with the US in 1994 that led to the Agreed Framework, Pyongyang agreed to halt its nuclear weapons

programme, in exchange for certain rather lucrative concessions from the US and others. This generates a sense that the country has not only got off rather lightly for its misdemeanour but has rather been rewarded. Such feelings promote the temptation to go down the nuclear path in order to use it as a lucrative bargaining chip. In order to stem this trend, it becomes necessary that sure penalties be guaranteed for any breach of trust. Only a collective endeavour to respond surely and unitedly could effectively serve to devalue nuclear weapons. Of course, a determination of the exact nature of penalties that may be acceptable to all requires further investigation. But it is not a challenge that cannot be surmounted if the requisite political will exists.

Conclusion

The paper has identified several steps that could help to devalue the importance of nuclear weapons. These are largely based on common sense and logic. However, country positions are not always dictated by these two parameters. Ample evidence of this is provided by national positions as revealed in the voting patterns on the different resolutions that continue to be placed before the UNGA on the issue of disarmament. In the year 2000 (as also every year on an average) nearly four dozen such resolutions appeared before the UN. However, an examination of the voting patterns revealed the rather predictable positions of each country. The NWS and their allies tend to support resolutions listing the progress already made in the direction in terms of the increasing membership of the NPT, the conclusion of the CTBT, negotiations on the FMCT, reductions negotiated under the START process etc. However, they oppose all resolutions seeking an actual delineation of steps to eliminate nuclear weapons in a time-bound or phased manner.

Meanwhile, the two most relevant resolutions introduced by India²³, year after year, and containing most of the steps outlined above have been dubbed as “unrealistic” and unacceptable for failing to take note of the progress made unilaterally and bilaterally in the direction of arms reductions and other non-proliferation measures. However, India has consistently maintained that while non-proliferation is a positive step in the direction of containment of nuclear weapons, the basic argument of the NPT and the discriminatory treatment meted out to nations has an endemic syllogistic fallacy. The pursuit of non-proliferation without an adequate movement towards discarding nuclear weapons from arsenals of all is not a sustainable objective.

In conclusion, it may be reiterated that devaluing nuclear weapons could be an effective way to ultimately achieve nuclear abolition. This is relevant because complete elimination has often been dismissed as unattainable unless war as a means of settling disputes between states is first abolished and a state of general and complete disarmament is enforced through a system of world governance. Since the attainment of these pre-requisites appears Utopian, nuclear disarmament too tends to be dismissed as unattainable.

Simple and easily implement able steps to devalue nuclear weapons, however, prove that there are worthwhile ways of arriving at nuclear abolition. In this context, it is heartening to draw upon the experiences of outlawing other classes of weapons and activities without waiting for a comprehensive solution. In fact, it must be realised that nuclear weapons are in a class by themselves considering the indiscriminate, comprehensive, and long-lasting destructiveness they can cause. For the sake of the future of mankind, then, it is imperative that these steps be taken.

23 “Reducing Nuclear Dangers” and “Convention on the Prohibition of Use of Nuclear Weapons”. For text see *UN Disarmament Yearbook*, vol. 24, 1999.