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Beyond Symbolism? The U.S. Nuclear Disarmament Agenda and Its Implications for Chinese and Indian Nuclear Policy

by Lavina Lee

Executive Summary

The Obama administration has elevated nuclear disarmament to the center of its nuclear agenda through the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia and the release of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). The administration also expects that its professed goal of “getting to zero” has symbolic value and will encourage reciprocity in terms of disarmament and nuclear arms control by other nuclear weapons states, as well as cooperation on measures to limit nuclear proliferation and the threat of nuclear terrorism. In the case of the two rising powers of Asia—China and India—it is highly questionable whether either of these expectations will be met.

From China’s perspective, New START is merely a first, tentative step toward

global disarmament, while the NPR is disturbingly ambiguous on key issues and retains a worrisome emphasis on ballistic missile defense. In the case of India, any decision to reciprocate on disarmament and arms control will be more strongly influenced by concerns about China than by any ideological commitment to a nuclear-free world or developments in Washington’s nuclear posture. Washington’s emphasis on disarmament could provide both states, especially China, with a pretext for limiting their cooperation on U.S. nonproliferation goals that are more important and achievable. Because of that risk, the United States should be cautious about dissipating its advantages in the nuclear arena without getting significant concessions in return.

Lavina Lee is a lecturer in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She is the author of U.S. Hegemony and Legitimacy: Norms, Power and Followership in the Wars on Iraq (Routledge, 2010).

A key issue is whether the U.S. disarmament agenda is likely to enhance American interests vis-à-vis the two rising powers of Asia—China and India.

Introduction

On April 5, 2009, President Barack Obama made a now-famous declaration in Prague that it was the “moral responsibility” of the United States to take “concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.”¹ Since then, some of these concrete steps have come to fruition, including the approval of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia and the release of the administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in April 2010. New START commits both countries to significant cuts to ICBM and SLBM² launchers and heavy bombers, and it limits each side to no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads.

Similarly, the NPR clearly seeks to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy by narrowing the circumstances under which those weapons can be used and the potential targets for such a strike. The United States now pledges that it will not use nuclear weapons “against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations” and will respond only with conventional forces to any use of chemical or biological weapon attacks by these states. That stance provides a clear “negative security assurance.” For those states outside of that category—nuclear weapons states, states outside the NPT, and non-nuclear weapons states not in compliance with their NPT obligations—the United States reserves the option of using nuclear weapons “in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies.” That scenario could include the use of nuclear weapons to deter a conventional, chemical, or biological weapons attack by any of these countries.³

President Obama’s commitment to “getting to zero” clearly demonstrates his administration’s faith in the role of international institutions in solving common problems

and seeks to encourage non-nuclear weapons states to fulfill their own obligations under the NPT by demonstrating that the United States takes its side of the “grand bargain”—eventually abolishing its own arsenal—seriously. That stance has symbolic value both for the credibility of the NPT itself and the administration’s attempts to re-establish America as a responsible, indeed benevolent, hegemon whose legitimacy to lead rests on a commitment to the pursuit of collective interests as well as its material power.⁴

The question remains, however, whether symbolism is able to translate into real and beneficial outcomes for American interests. A key issue is whether the U.S. disarmament agenda is likely to enhance American interests vis-à-vis the two rising powers of Asia—China and India—the first as a strategic competitor of the United States, and the second as an emerging de facto strategic partner. Neither state is covered by the negative security assurance offered within the NPR. In both cases, two core questions need to be asked. First, how will China and India likely respond to President Obama’s global zero proposal regarding nuclear weapons? Second, how will the two countries likely respond to America’s current and prospective nuclear posture over the next decade (both the size of the U.S. arsenal and Washington’s strategic nuclear doctrine)?

China’s Probable Response to Washington’s Global Zero Goal

China’s 2008 “White Paper on National Defense”—still the most definitive statement of Beijing’s strategic doctrine—asserts that “all nuclear-weapon states should make an unequivocal commitment to the thorough destruction of nuclear weapons.”⁵ Consistent with this statement, China has already responded favorably to the new START treaty between the United States

and Russia.⁶ Although this response should be encouraging to the Obama administration, New START is likely to be viewed in Beijing as merely a first, tentative step toward global zero, rather than a dramatic signal that alters Chinese strategic calculations and threat perceptions regarding the United States. In China's view, the United States and Russia, as "the two countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals, bear *special and primary responsibility* for nuclear disarmament" and should "further drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable and irreversible manner, so as to create the necessary conditions for the participation of other nuclear-weapon states in the process of nuclear disarmament."⁷

Although New START commits both the United States and Russia to significant reductions in deployed strategic warheads, limiting them to no more than 1,550 each, it places no limits on either state's nondeployed nuclear warheads. Given that the United States currently has 5,113 warheads in its nuclear stockpile (not including "several thousand" warheads that are now retired and awaiting dismantlement),⁸ and China's nuclear capabilities are estimated at around 240 nuclear warheads,⁹ it is unlikely that the Chinese will believe that the New START treaty has created anywhere near the "necessary conditions" to enable China to begin force reductions of its own. The Chinese have not placed a precise number on the level of force reductions they expect of the United States and Russia, but it is almost certain that some semblance of nuclear parity with Beijing will be required.

In any case, given President Obama's own admission that global zero is unlikely to be achieved in his lifetime, the Chinese have cause to question whether the United States and Russia will voluntarily relinquish their nuclear superiority any time soon. Under these circumstances, the United States will be waiting a long time for any Chinese reciprocity on nuclear force reductions. At a minimum, Beijing's posture will stiffen domestic opposition in the United States to

further cuts in America's own arsenal.

India's Probable Response to Washington's Global Zero Goal

At the April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh welcomed the New START treaty as a "step in the right direction" toward global zero and stated that he was "encouraged" by the NPR.¹⁰ That position is consistent with the stance of successive Indian governments of various political persuasions that have advocated global nuclear disarmament since India gained independence. The present Congress Party-led government has called for negotiations on a multilateral, "non-discriminatory" and "verifiable" Nuclear Weapons Convention that would ban the "development, production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons" in a "time-bound" manner.¹¹

India's development of an indigenous nuclear capacity, despite New Delhi's strong stance on nuclear disarmament, would appear at first glance to undermine the credibility of its stance on global zero. However, Indian leaders have maintained that the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995, despite the failure of the nuclear weapons states to take concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament in a time-bound manner, left New Delhi no choice but to seek a nuclear deterrent to protect its "autonomy of decision-making" (i.e., as a defense against nuclear blackmail). In light of its own experience, India's response to the Obama administration's global zero agenda has emphasized the connection between comprehensive nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as "mutually reinforcing processes."¹²

Apart from rhetorical support for nuclear disarmament, India has not made any commitment to join the United States and Russia on the path to zero in the near future. Given

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the historical and existing defense linkages between India and the USSR/Russia, and the developing security partnership between the United States and India, New Delhi has little reason to view the continuing strategic nuclear superiority of the United States and Russia as a security threat. However, in keeping with its moral and political stance against nuclear weapons, India will continue to insist that both states must take the lead by making even further cuts to their nuclear arsenals. For example, Prime Minister Singh, while welcoming the New START agreement also called on “all states with substantial nuclear arsenals to further accelerate this process by making deeper cuts that will lead to meaningful disarmament.”¹³

The greatest influence over when India will begin nuclear force reductions remains its assessment of the security threats emanating from its nuclear armed regional competitors, China and Pakistan. India maintains a minimum credible deterrent nuclear posture aimed primarily toward these states, with which it has a history of unresolved territorial disputes that have erupted into outright conflict, including the 1962 border war with China and recurring clashes with Pakistan over Kashmir (discussed further below). Any commitments India is likely to make on nuclear force reductions will be linked to both of these states doing the same.

China’s Probable Response to the Current and Prospective U.S. Nuclear Posture

From the Chinese perspective, the NPR takes some of the essential steps necessary to achieve the eventual eradication of nuclear weapons. These steps include the decisions to abstain from the development of new nuclear warheads, to limit both the potential targets and the circumstances under which the United States might use nuclear weapons, and to elevate nuclear prolifera-

tion and terrorism as security threats above the possible threat posed by other nuclear weapons states. China will, however, view the NPR as not going far enough in a number of areas. First, the United States has stopped short of committing to a “no first use” policy or unconditionally exempting non-nuclear weapons states or states within nuclear-weapon-free-zones from the threat or use of nuclear weapons,¹⁴ all policies that China has adopted. Regardless of whether those commitments are themselves believable or reliable, Chinese officials will use them as a reason to be skeptical of U.S. commitments toward global zero, given that the retention of offensive options will require the United States to maintain a much larger nuclear arsenal at a higher level of alert than China possesses.

Second, although the United States has stated in the NPR that it will only use nuclear weapons in “extreme circumstances” where its “vital interests” are at stake, as long as those terms remain undefined—particularly where the status of Taiwan is concerned—China will argue that the NPR remains strategically ambiguous and does not, therefore, reduce Beijing’s threat perceptions of U.S. nuclear forces. Chinese officials will use this ambiguity within the NPR to deflect U.S. calls to improve the transparency of China’s own nuclear force modernization program, which has the ostensible goal of avoiding destabilization of the strategic balance between the two countries. Thus, this aspect of the NPR will not reduce the incentives for China to magnify its deterrent capabilities by maintaining opacity about the nature and scope of its nuclear modernization activities. Yet, prodding China to increase transparency regarding its arsenal and doctrine is an important goal of the United States in getting to zero.

Third, the Chinese are likely to be particularly concerned about the greater emphasis within the NPR and Washington’s 2010 Ballistic Missile Review on ballistic missile defense and the upgrade of conventional ballistic missile capabilities, both of which

most directly threaten the strategic balance between the two countries. Within the NPR, the United States specifically links the pursuit of ballistic missile defense as a means to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons for deterring an attack (nuclear, biological, or chemical) on the United States or its allies.¹⁵ However, U.S. theater missile defense cooperation with Japan,¹⁶ or potentially with Taiwan, provides the opposite incentive to China by raising the prospect that its smaller arsenal and delivery capabilities will be unable to penetrate U.S. missile defenses, thereby calling into question the credibility of Beijing's nuclear deterrent.

Although aware of China's concerns, the U.S. "Ballistic Missile Review Report, 2010" explicitly foresees a role for missile defense to counter China's military modernization program, including the development and deployment of advanced ballistic missile capabilities and anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities. The report describes Chinese advances in those systems as having created a "growing imbalance of power across the Taiwan Strait in China's favor."¹⁷

Strategic arms reductions and the possibility of missile defense cooperation between the United States and Russia, suggested within the NPR,¹⁸ have become possible only because the underlying conflict of strategic interests between the two countries has significantly dissipated since the end of the Cold War. These conditions do not apply in the case of China, because each side remains uncertain about the other's future intentions within the Asian theater. That is especially true in relation to Taiwan, but there is mutual wariness more generally in terms of China's regional aspirations and Washington's reaction to those aspirations.

The continued U.S. emphasis on and development of ballistic missile defense, however understandable, has the potential to undermine the Obama administration's global zero agenda, particularly by eroding Chinese support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or a fissile material cut-off treaty. If improvements in U.S. ballistic

missile defense capabilities undermine the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent, Beijing will likely be compelled to increase the number and quality of its nuclear warheads, which would in turn increase requirements for fissile material. In short, from China's perspective, the NPR does not go far enough to reduce Beijing's concerns about U.S. nuclear forces and, therefore, does not provide significant additional incentives to join the United States on the path to global zero.

India's Probable Response to the Current and Prospective U.S. Nuclear Posture

India has made a number of proposals to the Conference on Disarmament regarding steps toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, including the "reduction of the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines," the negotiation of a treaty among nuclear weapons states on the "no-first use" of nuclear weapons and the non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states.¹⁹ The specific steps within the NPR to limit the potential targets and the circumstances in which the U.S. nuclear arsenal may be used certainly reduces the "salience" of nuclear weapons within Washington's nuclear posture. However, India is likely to argue that it is the United States that needs to go much further in establishing its bona fides on disarmament by emulating New Delhi's nuclear doctrine, which explicitly commits to a no-first-use policy and exempts all non-nuclear weapons states from nuclear attack.²⁰

The specific measures contained in the NPR are also unlikely to influence the future development of India's own nuclear doctrine, because India is an emerging strategic partner of the United States and, therefore, an unlikely target of U.S. nuclear forces. Rather, India's nuclear posture and decisions to join arms control treaties, such as the CTBT and

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a fissile material cut-off treaty, will be most influenced by developments in the nuclear programs of its regional competitors, Pakistan and China. Apart from the no-first-use posture and negative security assurance given to non-nuclear weapons states, India's nuclear doctrine centers on the maintenance of a "credible minimum deterrent."²¹ Precisely what that means in terms of the adequacy of the size and quality of India's nuclear arsenal and delivery systems is calculated primarily with China, rather than Pakistan (much less the United States), in mind.

China has loomed large in India's strategic calculations since Chinese forces decisively defeated the Indian army in the October–November 1962 border war. The decision to develop a nuclear capability was largely spurred by China's first nuclear weapons test in 1964. Likewise, India's 1998 nuclear tests were motivated at least as much by increasing fears about being exposed to Chinese nuclear coercion if New Delhi failed to take the next step from fission to thermonuclear weapons²² as they were by serious and continuing conflicts with Pakistan over control of the disputed territory of Kashmir.

China's positioning of tactical nuclear weapons on the Tibetan plateau, force projection into the Indian Ocean, and Beijing's willingness to supply missile and nuclear technology to Pakistan are all seen by New Delhi as indicators of a Chinese strategy to hobble Indian influence within South Asia. Further tensions between the two countries continue regarding unresolved border disputes from the 1962 war over geostrategically significant territory in Arunachal Pradesh (claimed as part of Tibet by China but controlled by India) and Aksai Chin (controlled by China but claimed by India). India has been particularly concerned about China's infrastructure-building programs within the disputed border areas, which would enable the efficient movement of land forces during a crisis. In response, New Delhi has stationed 100,000 troops and two squadrons of advanced Sukhoi-30 MKI aircraft in the north-eastern state of Assam as of June 2009.²³

Given these continuing sources of tension between the two countries, Indian support for either the CTBT or a fissile material cut-off treaty is most immediately influenced by how adherence to either treaty will affect the balance of nuclear forces between it and China, rather than any disarmament initiatives of the Obama administration. Indian negotiators successfully resisted the Bush administration's pressure to sign the CTBT as a prerequisite to the successful conclusion of the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement in 2008. Instead, New Delhi merely reiterated its commitment to a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing announced after the 1998 tests.²⁴

The political commitment of the Congress-led government to this moratorium was tested in August 2009 after a prominent nuclear official involved in the 1998 tests, K. Santhanam, publicly expressed doubts about the officially claimed yield of the devices tested in 1998, thereby calling into question the credibility of India's nuclear deterrent.²⁵ That allegation set off a vigorous internal debate about whether India should resist pressure to sign the CTBT.²⁶ Nevertheless, members of the Indian government have vigorously disputed Santhanam's claims and maintained that no new testing will be required.²⁷

The government is well aware that any resumption of nuclear testing would trigger the termination of the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement, and potentially the reversal of the September 2008 Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver, which allowed its members to trade with India for the first time.²⁸ Further testing would therefore also put at risk recently signed contracts for nuclear materials and reactors with countries such as Russia and France, which are essential to success of the government's ambitious plans to expand nuclear energy capacity. In all likelihood, India will maintain a voluntary moratorium on testing to keep its options open unless and until both the United States and China agree to ratify the CTBT.²⁹

In terms of a fissile material cut-off treaty, India officially supports the future development of a multilateral and verifiable treaty that will limit future production of fissile material but has refused to commit to a voluntary moratorium in the meantime. Clearly, India does not believe it yet has sufficient fissile material to support a nuclear arsenal in keeping with a “credible minimum deterrent” nuclear posture. India’s nuclear arsenal is similar in size to Pakistan’s at around 60–70 warheads, but only about a quarter of the size of China’s deterrent.³⁰ Nongovernmental sources also estimate that China has sufficient enriched uranium and weapons-grade plutonium to produce between 500 and 1,500 additional warheads.³¹

The U.S.-India nuclear deal has potentially increased India’s capacity to produce fissile material by allowing domestic sources of uranium to be reserved for military purposes. The completion of a Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor, due in 2011, will increase that capacity as well. While there is the potential for a nuclear arms race to develop between the two countries, India has so far shown no signs of attempting to reach parity, in terms of numbers of nuclear weapons, with China. New Delhi instead seeks to maintain a credible minimum deterrent by establishing a survivable nuclear triad of bombers, land-based missiles, and missiles deployed aboard submarines.³²

Whereas Pakistan remains vocally opposed to a fissile material cut-off treaty that prohibits only the future production of fissile material, India has been able to keep a low profile and avoid making any commitment to a treaty either way. Should this obstacle to negotiations be removed in the Conference on Disarmament, India is still likely to seek to avoid a firm commitment to a treaty on fissile material in the near future until it has built up greater fissile material stocks. To buy time, India will seek to link support for a fissile material agreement to additional binding disarmament commitments by the United States and Russia within a specific time frame. The most fruit-

ful potential point of leverage for the United States on this issue is the prospect of cooperation in the field of high technology, particularly the development of ballistic missile defense systems.

Conclusion

Within the NPR and elsewhere, the Obama administration has clearly elevated disarmament to the center of its nuclear agenda. The administration hopes that credible moves toward the goal of zero nuclear weapons will lead to reciprocity in terms of disarmament by other nuclear weapons states, as well as encourage greater cooperation on measures to limit nuclear proliferation and the threat of nuclear terrorism. The question remains, though, how far should the United States move beyond symbolism in “getting to zero”? The Obama administration ought to ensure that in making moves toward zero, the United States will in fact receive concrete, reciprocal concessions from China and India regarding their own nuclear disarmament and their commitments to joining the CTBT and a treaty on fissile materials.

A preliminary assessment suggests that the prospects for both results are doubtful. From China’s perspective, New START is merely a first tentative step toward global disarmament, and the NPR both remains disturbingly ambiguous on the issue of Taiwan and retains America’s worrisome commitment to ballistic missile defense. There is also good reason to doubt that China will agree to the level of intrusive inspections required to verify compliance and prevent cheating with respect to treaties such as a fissile material cut-off treaty. In the case of India, the decision to reciprocate on arms control is more strongly influenced by its weakness in both nuclear and conventional forces relative to China, rather than by any ideological commitment to a nuclear-free world or developments in Washington’s nuclear posture.

The question remains, how far should the United States move beyond symbolism in “getting to zero”?

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As long as strategic competition/mistrust exists between the United States and China and, in turn, between China and India, there are definite limits to how much can be achieved on arms control. That situation is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

The Obama administration must also ensure that its disarmament agenda will directly translate into support by both China and India for “measures needed to reinforce the non-proliferation regime and secure nuclear materials worldwide.”³³ Again, on core nonproliferation objectives, such as enforcement of NPT obligations concerning Iran and North Korea, the results of linkage between disarmament and nonproliferation are likely to be mixed, and to fall below expectations. Perceived national security interests (especially energy security and geostrategy) will hamper how far China and India will go to reciprocate U.S. words and deeds. In the case of China, similar arguments could be made in relation to its likely support even for more limited measures, such as those to impede illicit trade in nuclear materials and technology.

Conversely, India has behaved responsibly and has thus far maintained a strong record on preventing proliferation of its own home-grown technologies. It is likely to continue those practices irrespective of the Obama administration’s disarmament agenda. The bottom line is that the short-term national security interests of both China and India are likely to have greater influence over the level of reciprocity that will be forthcoming, given that global zero is still aspirational and the United States continues to maintain a high level of nuclear superiority.

Such considerations are important for U.S. policy and interests, because there are real opportunity costs associated with elevating disarmament to the center of U.S. nuclear diplomacy. Of concern here is the risk that the United States will offer much with respect to nuclear disarmament and get little in return. In particular, placing emphasis on disarmament could inadvertently

provide both states, especially China, with a reason to condition progress toward nuclear proliferation goals on even greater force reductions by the United States. The emphasis on disarmament could create a similar negative incentive regarding their own steps toward nuclear disarmament. Linking disarmament to nonproliferation may have had symbolic value but may ironically have the effect of reducing U.S. leverage in achieving nonproliferation goals that are more immediately pressing and achievable. Because the United States has more to lose in getting to zero—if that goal is achievable at all—than either China or India, it would not be wise for America to dissipate its advantages without gaining significant concessions in return.

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