

WHERE THERE'S, A WILL THERE'S A WAY

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"I do not think a nuclear catastrophe will happen. The more common this nonsense is, the more secure we are [...] just because the feeling of responsibility will become more common", Joseph Brodsky opined.

Brodsky was a genius poet. But he was no specialist in nuclear weapons. Did not his intuition (his vision of the world was rather pessimistic) let the poet down? Are there grounds for this ray of unexpected optimism?

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As a specialist, I have always wanted to get to the bottom of the issue. And to assess if it is true that nuclear-weapons-states are becoming increasingly responsible. It has also been clear to me that such an assessment would be best done using the example of the relations of two nuclear superpowers – Russia (and its predecessor – the Soviet Union) and the United States of America. My ambition was to study the history of their nuclear dialogue, look into the dichotomy cooperation/rivalry. And draw conclusions for the near future so that the lessons learned be practically useful and applicable.

I made the first attempt to do so twenty years ago. At that juncture, in close cooperation with my senior PIR Center colleague Amb. Roland Timerbaev and a younger colleague of mine Anton Khlopkov, who at that time was only beginning his professional

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journey, we published a monograph² on this issue. It goes without saying that a lot of water has flown under the bridge since then and to a great extent, at the distance of two decades, many problems are seen differently. However, the key finding of that, already time-honored study, I regard as correct, the way I did two decades earlier. **"Russia and the U.S., as major nuclear powers, are doomed to act together in the areas related to nuclear weapons and their proliferation. This dialogue requires a definite agenda. It also requires mutual trust"**³.

Six years ago, in May 2015, as an advisor to the Russian delegation at the NPT Review Conference, I witnessed how the lack of mutual trust in Russia-U.S. relations began to corrode their traditionally respectful dialogue on nuclear nonproliferation, running the risk of undermining the dialogue in the areas where the two countries' interests converged or at least did not collide. It did not avoid the attention — with a mix of unease and nuisance — of some of my Russian colleagues, both those wise and seasoned and the ones who were only beginning their professional journeys in international security, strategic stability, and WMD nonproliferation.

Our dismay for the future of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, which was put under the threat of erosion as a result of the full-fledged blame game between Russia and the United States, led us to brainstorming sessions rooms, where — firstly, in Geneva, and then in New York and Moscow — we sought to find an answer to the question if this mutual interest of Russian and the U.S. in maintaining the resilience of international nuclear nonproliferation regime, in preventing further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world was a phantom, a myth. To do so, we studied the history of the last five decades.

When we came to a conclusion that it was neither a myth, nor a phantom, we began to explore what points of convergence exhausted themselves, where previously overlapping interests transformed into pressure points and what could be done about this to reduce the tension in the bilateral relations on all the matters dealing with nuclear weapons and their nonproliferation.

² Vladimir Orlov, Roland Timerbaev, and Anton Khlopkov. (2002) Nuclear Nonproliferation in U.S.-Russian Relations: Challenges and Opportunities. Moscow: PIR Center.

³ Ibid. P.5.

At times, such brainstorming sessions were disillusioning and even disappointing because on most occasions we did not seem to see the light at the end of the tunnel. But there were also encouraging findings. Particularly useful, I thought, was the greater participation of younger people. They indeed lacked the experience, which they made for by diving into numerous sources (including those that were becoming publicly available in the course of our project). At the same time, they were not blinkered. For most of them, even the collapse of the Soviet Union was something that had happened before they were born. In this project, the voice of a new generation of nonproliferation specialists was a matter of principal importance for me.

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What are those encouraging findings? Below I cite some of them, which I am ready to endorse. In the final sections of each chapter, as well as in the monograph Conclusion, you will find a lot more such findings, there is a whole palette of those — as well as of policy recommendations regarding the road ahead. This broad palette reflects the broad circle of our monograph's authors: overall twenty authors and contributors took part in its writing and preparation for publishing.

With all the increasing importance of the P5 dialogue and process, I believe that **our two nations, Russia and the United States, still keep special responsibility for the smooth running of the NPT review cycles** and for a successful X NPT review conference which has been postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic and, as we currently anticipate⁴, should take place in January-February 2022.

In 2015, it was because of the United States (as well as their allies UK and Canada) that the conference failed and the final document was not adopted. However, the problem was deeper than disagreements over the Middle East. The problem was that the United States, between 2014 Prepcom and later on at the plenary of the 2015 Rev-Con in New York, had introduced issues that had nothing to do with the nuclear nonproliferation agenda and with the NPT per se. With that, they had indicated that they preferred the blame game. Well, Russia had to respond.

⁴ Editorial work on this preface was completed in June 2021.

Blame game at the NPT review process is a waste of time. I suggest that **both nations re-establish the tradition of cooperative game, and put the blame game aside.** Tradition of *cooperative game* between the two nuclear superpowers had been established, on the then Soviet side, by Andrey Gromyko who had insisted that, despite all contradictions we had – we always had! – with the United States, despite all the heavy baggage of disagreements, despite *Vietnams* or *Afghanistans*, nuclear weapons and prevention of their proliferation in the world was so vital for Soviet national security – as well as for global security – that this issue should be treated as a separate basket free from the strains which could affect other baskets. Americans normally accepted such separation.

Not that it was always easy, particularly during the darkest days of the Cold War. But, mostly, it worked. As a result, we now have a very short list of nations outside of the NPT and with nuclear weapons: Israel, India, Pakistan, and DPRK⁵. With the bilateral blame game, such a list could have been much longer. And it would not have been good news for Russia's own security, needless to say for the global security.

The recipes for re-establishing of a *cooperative game* are not brand new. We should take those ones from the past which did not contain poison and which produced fruit.

We should **resume and re-build bilateral Russian-American holistic dialogue on the three pillars of the NPT.** First of all, we should restore our collaborative work on preventing horizontal proliferation in the world. In my view as a nongovernmental expert, it should be in the interest of the Russian Federation to keep nonproliferation as the top priority in the international security agenda.

Secondly, both our nations should do together our own homework on Article VI of the NPT. We should continue our work on further bilateral strategic arms control, making it non-stop and irreversible. We should not find excuses not to do this homework, we should not blame Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as it is already *fait accompli*. Instead, more effort should have been invested into the implementation of the NPT by all state parties, both nuclear and non-nuclear. Having said that, I believe that while Russia and the United States feel free to criticize TPNW as much as they like (and there are so many reasons to criticize), they should not forget

⁵ DPRK's status within the NPT remain unclear.

to do their homework on arms control and nuclear disarmament. **The extension of the New START in 2021 has become a signal to the NPT state parties that Russia and the United States are back to dialogue and are back to their homework, taking it seriously.** They will no further entertain the whole NPT community with endless *rights of reply* destructing from real business.

Thirdly, **Russia and the United States should rebuild the spirit and the practical work on bilateral cooperation on peaceful uses of nuclear energy.** Legal framework for such cooperation has been built. We should also promote international cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy, including our full support to the IAEA, but without politicizing the work of the Agency, including the issue of safeguards. It would open a Pandora box.

When I look at the options for Russian nonproliferation policy, I always think of that very sensitive moment in 2014 – early 2015 (but particularly in 2014) when negotiations on Iran were going on, with the United States, UK, France, Germany at the table, among others - and Russia at the same table. And, in a parallel universe, the Americans, the Brits, – they all were imposing sanctions on Russia, because of restored Russian sovereignty over Crimea. U.S. warships entered the Black Sea... tensions raised as well as risks of accidental military conflict. But was it a parallel universe, really? Or was it the same universe? Was it right, for Russia, to continue sitting at the same table with those who were introducing sanctions against her?

I think it was. What was born from those negotiations we know as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran (JCPOA). JCPOA was a good concept, which, when signed, turned into an important document. It is not Russia's fault that the Americans withdrew. It has been a lot of effort on the Russian side to contribute to JCPOA, and, later on, to keep it alive. One could even say: Russia did more than it should have done... But it has been in Russia's national interests.

Iran should remain the top priority in the Russian-American nonproliferation dialogue. It is the highest potential threat proliferation-wise. And the biggest potential opportunity for both Russia and the U.S., and for all the P5, in case diplomacy prevails over pressures and politics.

If, or when, the United States is fully back to the JCPOA Russia should be supportive and should contribute to full, transparent, and sustainable implementation of the JCPOA by all parties, including

Iran. Russia is well-positioned to do so. Russia maintains its vibrant dialogue with all key stakeholders in the region.

It would be useful if, at some point, we extend this dialogue with the United States on a broader *comparing of nonproliferation notes when it comes to potential nuclear proliferation risks throughout the globe*, from the Middle East to East Asia, with the emphasis on potential new state proliferators as well as on non-state actors.

We have a history of such dialogue, including in the 1970s and 1980s. Not always it led to proliferation prevention. For example, Pakistan was a mutual failure. But there were success stories, including our dialogue on the Republic of South Africa⁶. We should not ignore the fact that jointly Russia and the United States can do *a lot* to stop others from going nuclear. But for that, we need at least two things. **We need to maintain a frank dialogue immune from stormy weather in our bilateral relations. And we need to lead by example.**

3

When this volume has already been signed to print, in June 2021, welcome news came from Geneva. In what some analysts and the media called "a historic summit", two Presidents, Joseph Biden and Vladimir Putin, made an important Joint Statement:

"... the United States and Russia have demonstrated that, even in periods of tension, they are able to make progress on our shared goals of ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war.

*"The recent extension of the New START Treaty exemplifies our commitment to nuclear arms control. Today, we reaffirm the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."*⁷

No, it is not a new *détente*, it rather creates the environment for such long-awaited *détente*. It is telling that in search of stamina

⁶ Sarah Bidgood (2016) The 1977 South Africa nuclear crisis, Adelphi Series, 56:464 – 465, 55 – 78, DOI: 10.1080/19445571.2016.1494248

⁷ U.S. – Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability. Kremlin. June 16, 2021, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5658/print> (last accessed July 1, 2021)

for moving forward, both leaders looked backward and drew from Reagan-Gorbachev statement on the inadmissibility of a nuclear war. One year ago, I remember, when raising this issue with the senior officials of the U.S. Department of State, I heard back that such affirmation – and reaffirmation – was unacceptable for them.

The progress is evident. But so far it is more verbal than practical. It is too fragile and may turn out to be easily reversible. What vaccine should one get to receive immunity from unnoticed slide to the abyss? The answer may be found in the same Geneva Joint Statement: it is necessary to launch a bilateral dialogue, which would be simultaneously «deliberate and robust»⁸. The two countries' leaders allocated six months of time for launching such a dialogue.

The readers, which would read this book of ours some time away from the Geneva summit, six months after, will have a formidable opportunity, which I lack, to observe and compare if the reality was up to the expectations. If the Geneva spirit, which was of inspiration for us, when we were publishing the book in Summer 2021, faded away? Finally, may the readers decide if Joseph Brodsky was a good prophet. And whether the feeling of responsibility, which he discussed, prevails over geopolitical egocentricity in nuclear matters.

And I, myself being under the fresh effect of the Geneva spirit, would invite you to the journey over this monograph's pages, where the lessons learned from history transcend into forecast-like recommendations on what this road to be traveled should look like.

You may encounter direction signs, which could lead to different directions, yet, this is a collective study, which *a priori* allows for options and crossroads. The calculation of a mutually acceptable security equation is a theorem rather than an axiom. But the complexity of the tasks we face should not justify beating around the bush. The road will be mastered by the walking. In my view, this *is* the axiom.

⁸ Ibid.