

Games with Nuclear Weapons

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The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference kicks off in less than 6 months' time. Both Russia and the United States are on the final stretch of their respective preparations for that key international security event. Our two countries bear special responsibility. First, the Treaty designates them (and the United Kingdom) as the NPT depositary governments; they are the guardians of the Treaty's letter, so to speak. Second – and most important – between the two of them, Russia and the United States control over 95 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons, thereby retaining their status as nuclear superpowers. Of course, the world has changed since the NPT entered into force back in 1970. Some superpowers have collapsed, only to be succeeded by others... but in nuclear matters, the bicentric world order has not changed much since the Cold War. In an era of dangerous erosion of international norms, the NPT remains the cornerstone of the global security architecture; are Russia and the United States ready to work *responsibly* and *cooperatively* for the *sustainability* of the Treaty?

To those keeping a close eye on preparations for the next NPT RevCon (which opens on April 27, 2020), it is clear that constructive cooperation between Russia and the United States is indispensable for a successful outcome of the Conference. This is especially true of two key items on the agenda: the outlook for nuclear arms control and disarmament, and creating a favorable climate for the establishment of the Middle East WMD-free zone. There are also, however, several other important issues on which Washington and Moscow are more likely to end up “in the same boat” than in “two tanks training their guns at each other”. The NPT Review Conferences are held once every five years; eight such conferences have been held since the NPT came into force – a large enough number to draw some lessons. At several RevCons – including the latest, held in 2015 – Russia and the United States chose to pursue the blame-game strategy, with a torrent of recriminations and not even a hint of working in tandem. But the two governments also have a solid track record of “cooperation game” instead of blame game. In 1995 and 2010, for example, they managed to set their differences aside and work together in a spirit of cooperation for the good of the NPT. In 1995, that spirit of cooperation fostered a favorable climate for an indefinite extension of the Treaty, a major victory whose positive impact has lasted to this day.

From where I stand, there are three possible scenarios for the 2020 RevCon.

Under the ideal scenario, Moscow and Washington will mark the date of March 5, 2020, as a special occasion. On that day 50 years ago, the Soviet Union and the United States set their differences aside and pulled off a simultaneous ratification of the NPT, enabling the Treaty to enter into force only a few months later. By doing so, they set an example that is well worth emulating. Fifty years on, our two leaders would do well to remember that occasion and adopt a joint statement reiterating their mutual commitment to the principles of the NPT, as well as their mutual understanding that a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought. Furthermore, on that

day, the Russian and US leaders could put their money where their mouth is by extending the New START Treaty for a five-year period. The world is waiting for just such a step.

The second possible scenario – which Washington seems to be favoring at the moment – is to turn the traditional duo into a trio on the strength of the notion that strategic dialogue between Russia and the United States is impossible without the third actor, China. The proponents of that notion argue that even though the Chinese nuclear arsenal is much smaller than the US and the Russian stockpiles, China's strategic capability is beginning to approach that of the United States and Russia. This scenario is as tempting as it is difficult to pull off, at least in the near term. China shows no signs at all of being ready to join the process. Of course, that could change over time. In fact, it would also be in Russia's best interests if not just China but also France and Britain were to join in, though neither country seems to have much to say on the matter for the time being. If we choose to pursue this scenario, we should be aware that any meaningful progress would take years to achieve. Meanwhile, we are facing some urgent tasks that cannot wait. And that is why Russia and the United States should continue to work as a duo, until such time when the duo can become a trio or even a quintet. Meanwhile, even now there is nothing to stop Russia from working bilaterally with China. That bilateral format already exists in the broader sense of strategic partnership between the two countries, so why not include nonproliferation matters in its scope?

Finally, the third possible scenario is blame-game at its spectacular worst – and that is exactly where we seem to be heading right now. Washington is showing no interest whatsoever in coordinating its positions with Moscow. It has pulled out of the INF Treaty. It is questioning the utility of the few remaining arms control agreements. It is essentially pursuing another nuclear arms race – the only difference being that the race is for the supremacy in the capability of those weapons rather than in their sheer numbers. It is also evading any cooperation on the issue of a Middle Eastern WMD-free zone...

Unless things change – and quickly – the third scenario will become a reality, jeopardizing the sustainability of the NPT. Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Brazil, Japan – all of them, for one reason or another, are wondering if the NPT might collapse, paving the way for nuclear anarchy. I have been closely involved with NPT matters over the past quarter-century, and I'm well aware that "ideal scenarios" seldom come to fruition in this field. But unless we set motives of self-interest aside, and unless we set the bar high for the next RevCon, both Moscow and Washington may lose control of the process altogether, and the scenarios will be formulated elsewhere.

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