Models for Disarmament?
China, India, and Pakistan

Rajesh Basrur
INTRODUCTION

The current drive for nuclear disarmament requires that commitments of intent be combined with hard reductions in the types and numbers of weapons possessed by nuclear-armed states.

Even though little has been discussed in the public realm in the US about the nature of low-level deterrence, there is already considerable opposition to deep cuts. Some analysts have warned that any reductions below 1,700 warheads will leave the Russians with an opportunity to exercise their “immense advantage” in conventional weapons.

Some have urged the US government to retain a posture of “calculated ambiguity” that would leave open the possibility of nuclear use, while others have argued for a shift to “minimum deterrence” as a precursor to disarmament, contending that both deep cuts and “no first use” (NFU) are viable.

This debate between the conservatives and the minimizers is critical to the future prospects of disarmament. Yet little has been done to examine the intellectual foundations of the opposing perspectives.

WOHLSTETTER VS BLACKETT

What does it take to deter? Albert Wohlstetter and Patrick Blackett debated this very question in the context of the early Cold War.

Wohlstetter argued that the USSR, owing to its experience in the Second World War, could tolerate massive losses, meaning that to deter it the US would require the assured capability to inflict a large number of fatalities. Blackett, however, took the opposite view, arguing instead that because of its war experience the USSR, wishing to avoid a repetition, would not be difficult to deter. A smaller retaliatory capability would thus suffice.

The logic of these two positions in terms of recommendations for nuclear force acquisitions was a large arsenal in Wohlstetter’s case and a more limited one in Blackett’s. In turn, these views became the genesis, conceptually, of the assured destruction strategy adopted by the US and the minimum deterrence approach espoused by China, India, and Pakistan.

NUCLEAR RIVALRY

Although a realist approach to strategic analysis stresses the importance of power and its distribution (which implies the usability of force), in military-strategic relationships, nuclear weapons do not in fact fit in with this worldview. Instead, they produce a high degree of interdependence between rivals who possess them.

The potential cost of going to war is viewed as so great in a nuclear weapons environment that states are compelled to cooperate.
in order to avoid it. The pattern that emerges from past experience, therefore, shows that nuclear rivals not only avoid nuclear conflict but major conventional war as well.

However, the symbolic power of centuries of conventional thinking inclines states to treat nuclear weapons as just another set of instruments of force. States measure each other’s relative capabilities, develop strategic doctrines, and build arsenals as if they were in a conventional environment. Indeed, they continue to behave as if power politics remains unaffected by nuclear weapons. The strategic behavior of nuclear states thus tends to be schizophrenic, treating nuclear weapons sometimes as revolutionary and sometimes as conventional.

Nuclear rivals also tend to strain at the leash, as it were, and engage in brinkmanship and other forms of crisis-inducing behavior. Some pairs of rivals go through a series of recurring crises; others prefer to distance themselves and remain hostile without further eruptions.

**CHINA, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN**

China, India, and Pakistan adhere in varying degrees to the chief principles and characteristics of minimum deterrence.

- **Nuclear weapons are for deterrence only and not for “war-fighting”**
  While China and India have adhered to this principle, Pakistan has begun of late to shift away from it. In response to a developing Indian doctrine of limited conventional war, Pakistan tested a tactical nuclear missile in May 2011.

- **Nuclear weapons are not for compellence**
  While all three have attempted some form of coercion under the nuclear shadow, none has attempted to apply direct pressure by brandishing a nuclear threat.

- **Nuclear weapons are for retaliation only**
  China and India espouse a doctrine of NFU, which means a first strike is eschewed. Pakistan, on the other hand, retains the right to initiate nuclear war owing to its conventional weakness vis-à-vis India.

- **Force balances are not important**
  Despite growing tension, China has not attempted to expand its capacity to strike the US. In India’s case, nuclear capability vis-à-vis China is rudimentary, so it is arguable that an arms race might appear. But the fact is that there is no evidence of a major investment to quickly attain an advanced capability against China. In the case of Pakistan, there is evidence that the numbers game was considered irrelevant, but that seems to have changed.

The key concepts dear to the Wohlstetterian approach are not intrinsic to the conception of deterrence in China, India, and – to some degree – Pakistan. The broad framework adopted by these countries is closer to the thinking of Blackett.
Yet the minimalism of the three countries goes well beyond that of Blackett and other advocates of this approach. The most striking operational aspect of the nuclear deterrence postures of China, India, and Pakistan is that they do not maintain their nuclear weapons in a high state of readiness for early use, but keep them unassembled.

Besides allowing states to obtain security from nuclear and conventional threats, non-deployed postures have important benefits, such as lowering threat perceptions or reducing the risk of war by misperception, technical failure, or unauthorized launch.

Does all this mean that China, India, and Pakistan are good models for the “Big Two” to follow? While these three Asian nuclear powers have much to offer by way of minimalist nuclear thinking and practice, their minimalism lacks consistency. All of them are subject to the pull of Wohlstetterian thinking in their pursuit of nuclear modernization and expansion.

CONCLUSION

Deep cuts in weapons systems as a first step toward substantial or complete nuclear disarmament require careful thinking in the realm of doctrine in order to make small arsenals acceptable. Given the major obstacles that stand in the way of total disarmament, it is also vital that they be sustainable over time.

Yet there is a strong basis for nuclear minimalism in the history of nuclear rivalries. Large arsenals have never given their possessors relative advantage. China, India, and Pakistan offer valuable insights into the ways in which nuclear minimalism could produce a safer world. But these countries would become much better models of minimalism if they freed themselves of the intellectual baggage represented by Wohlstetter’s thought and carried forward the logic of Blackett’s minimum deterrence.

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