

The Return Of Nuclear Weapons

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After 1998, India premised its strategy on building ‘credible minimum deterrence’. The time has come to reflect on what is ‘credible’ and redefine what ‘minimum’ might be.

An international conference to review the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty concluded at the United Nations in New York last week without a consensus document. Given the growing great power conflict today, that was not unexpected. Surprisingly, though, the NPT review elicited little interest in Delhi. India, one of the world’s nuclear weapon powers, ought to be paying a lot more attention to the international nuclear discourse that is acquiring new dimensions and taking a fresh look at its own civilian and military nuclear programmes.

There was a time when Delhi used to be hypersensitive to what was said at NPT conferences. The parties to the NPT, which came into force in 1970, undertake a review of the treaty’s implementation every five years. The Tenth Review Conference, scheduled for 2020, was delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the US attempt to roll back India’s nuclear and missile programmes generated serious concerns in Delhi. India responded with a diplomatic strategy that sought to deflect external pressures. At the same time, Delhi also debated whether India should test nuclear weapons and declare itself a nuclear weapon power. After the nuclear tests in May 1998, India’s focus shifted to managing the consequences of that decision — including global economic sanctions. The historic India-US civil nuclear initiative of July 2005 finally produced a framework that brought to an end Delhi’s extended conflict with the NPT system.

At the heart of the deal was the separation of India’s civil and military nuclear programmes. The consummation of the India-US nuclear deal a few years later gave Delhi the freedom to develop its nuclear arsenal and resume civilian nuclear cooperation with the rest of the world which was blocked since India’s first nuclear test in May 1974. There was a fierce political debate — often slipping into the “headless chicken” mode — in Delhi on the terms of the nuclear engagement with the US. Many in Delhi argued that India was sacrificing the autonomy of its nuclear programme and its foreign policy.

A decade-and-a-half later, it is easy to ask what the political fuss was all about. India has not bought a single reactor from the US. Nor has it become a much feared “junior partner” to the US. India’s independent foreign policy appears to be thriving. Ironically, as India’s atomic isolation eased after 2008, India’s nuclear debate lost much of its urgency.

The failure of the Tenth Review Conference, however, does reveal many of the new challenges facing the global nuclear order today and their implications for India.

First, is the deepening divide between the main sponsors of the NPT back in 1970 – America and Russia. Even at the height of the Cold War, there was always one major area of cooperation between the US and the Soviet Union — strong support for the NPT. Most review conferences were jointly managed by close diplomatic coordination between Washington and Moscow.

More often than not, the nuclear problems of the Middle East involving Israel and Iran prevented successful outcomes at the quinquennial NPT review conferences. The Ninth Review conference in 2015, for example, ended without an agreement because of major differences over establishing a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Russia objected to critical references in the statement to Moscow’s military control over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the southeast of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has begun to envelop Zaporizhzhia, where the two armies are locked in combat and are raising the prospect of a horrible nuclear emergency.

Second, the non-nuclear state parties usually complained about the lack of progress in implementing the disarmament provisions of the NPT. The situation today is worsened by the absence of any dialogue between the nuclear powers on arms control. Rather than reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, the major powers now put greater emphasis on their strategic utility.

Third, the invasion of a non-nuclear weapon state, Ukraine, by a nuclear weapon power, Russia, has generated a whole series of new questions. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to put his nuclear forces on alert and threaten the use of nuclear weapons has sent a shiver down the spine of those who are on the periphery of nuclear weapon states. To be sure, Russia has since walked back on the nuclear threat. Putin has reaffirmed that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” senior Russian officials reiterated this message on the opening day of the NPT conference in early August. Russia may have put its nuclear sword away, but the impact of Moscow flashing it early in the Ukraine war has been significant. For those in Asia, who worry about China’s growing assertiveness, “Ukraine could well be the future of Asia”.

There are real fears that China might decide to flex its nuclear muscle while seizing the territory of its neighbours. America’s Asian allies worry about the US’s ability to reinforce the “nuclear umbrella”. East Asian policymakers are debating various options. These include building one’s own atomic weapons, sharing the use of US nuclear assets, developing nuclear-powered submarines, building powerful long-range conventional counterstrike capabilities, and strengthening missile defences.

Fourth, China's political campaign against the AUKUS arrangement has found some resonance in South East Asia. When the US and UK announced their plans to help Australia acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines in September 2021, China argued that the agreement violates the provisions of the NPT. Although the NPT permits non-nuclear states to develop nuclear naval propulsion, Beijing persisted with the campaign. In New York, this month Indonesia and Malaysia raised concerns about the implications of the AUKUS deal for the NPT.

Fifth, nuclear power is coming back into reckoning around the world amidst the growing challenge of climate change. The draft final statement noted that "nuclear technologies can contribute to addressing climate change, mitigating and adapting to its consequences, and monitoring its impact". Separately, a group of 12 countries led by the US, UK, Japan, and South Korea emphasised the importance of nuclear power in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals set by the UN.

What kind of implications does the unfolding global nuclear discourse present for India? A couple of them stand out.

One, India must find ways to end the current stasis in its civilian nuclear power generation, especially at a time when Delhi has outlined an ambitious programme to reduce the share of fossil fuels in its energy consumption. India, which commissioned Asia's first nuclear power station more than 50 years ago, is stuck today with a total generating capacity of barely 7,000 MW.

India's historic civil nuclear initiative was meant to open up international collaboration to boost the production of atomic electric power. But the enormous political and diplomatic energy that went into ending India's nuclear isolation was squandered by the disastrous 2010 Civil Nuclear Liability Act which has made it impossible for private players — internal and external — to contribute to the programme. Revisiting that law is now an urgent imperative for any Indian strategy to rapidly raise the contribution of nuclear power to India's energy mix.

India must also recognise and adapt to the return of nuclear weapons as major instruments of great power military strategy. Delhi must ask itself if its nuclear weapons can deter China's expanding atomic arsenal. After 1998, India premised its strategy on building "credible minimum deterrence". The time has come to reflect on the "credible" side of that strategy and redefine what the 'minimum' might be.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements in the context of 'Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty'-

1. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a multilateral treaty that was signed in 1968 and has been in effect since 1970.
2. It currently has 190 members and this treaty does not stop member states from building, producing and using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 2 only (b) 1 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Ans. (c)

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q . What is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty? What are the implications behind India not signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty? Discuss. (250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.