ISRAEL, THE NPT, AND MYTH OF UNIVERSALITY

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This week, representatives of more than 180 signatory states to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty gathered in New York for a review conference for the eighth time since this process began in 1970. For Israel, these meetings are always difficult, and not withstanding the blatant violations by Iran and North Korea that threaten to destroy the NPT framework, Israel will again be on the dock.

Despite this misplaced focus, which mimics the obsession that has eroded the credibility of the UN and other international frameworks, the NPT has been an unusual success. For most of the past three decades, the terms of this treaty and the verification mechanisms under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have prevented many countries and regimes from acquiring nuclear weapons. In the 1960s, President Kennedy warned of a world with dozens of nuclear-armed states. Had this prediction turned into reality, many of Israel’s neighbors, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq (under Saddam), Libya, Algeria and even Saudi Arabia would have had atomic bombs and missiles many years ago. Elsewhere, without the NPT, Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, South Korea, Sweden, Japan, and others would also have acquired these weapons.

The success of the NPT in preventing this nightmare scenario reflects its unique framework. Before the agreement, the idea that countries would voluntarily relinquish sovereignty and allow inspectors from other nations to poke their noses into highly secret facilities was unthinkable. But the danger of unchecked proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was a greater concern for most countries, and they agreed to take this extraordinary step. It allowed the signatories to develop nuclear energy (which, despite the difficulties, provides a large part of the power in many countries that do not have large petroleum resources) without leading to a nuclear arms race.

At the same time, the holes in the fabric of this treaty come from the few countries and regimes that have tried to have their nuclear cake and eat it too. Saddam Hussein was the first major violation to be revealed – he used the NPT to acquire “peaceful” technology while secretly using the materials and knowledge in making weapons. In many cases, the facilities were literally across the street, but IAEA inspectors could not go beyond the buildings that were designated by the Iraqi government.

After this ruse was exposed following the 1991 war, the IAEA tightened its inspection system, and the U.S. threatened military action against violators. This combination was enough to convince Qaddafi to come clean and turn over Libya’s illegal nuclear program. But the Iranian leadership has decided to continue using the “nuclear energy” façade in the effort to acquire nuclear weapons, and North Korea barely bothers with the facade.
Instead of dealing directly with these fatal dangers, the members of the NPT framework meeting in New York are again playing the usual political games. Too much time will be spent on messianic demands that the U.S. and Russia (the two major nuclear weapons states recognized under this treaty) move quickly toward full disarmament. The fact the former Cold War enemies have already reduced their arsenals by over a factor of ten is largely ignored. And the attacks against the U.S. for considering the development of small nuclear “bunker busters” for destroying hidden weapons of mass destruction are unrealistic in the era of mass terrorism.

Similarly, the overemphasis on the three non-signatories – India, Pakistan, and Israel -- prevents the NPT Review Conference from considering ways to stop Teheran and Pyongyang short of the finish line. India, Pakistan, and Israel are unique cases, having developed their nuclear technology foundations before and outside of the NPT. Unlike Iraq, Iran, Libya, and perhaps other regimes, they did not attempt to cheat by getting the benefits of the treaty in order to undermine its goals.

In these arms control settings, Egyptian officials always lead the Arab assault on Israel, citing the claim of “universality” to argue that Israel must be forced to accept the limits of the NPT and end the policy of nuclear ambiguity. But the myth of universality is the diplomatic equivalent of “one size fits all”, in which all states, large or small, powerful or weak, democratic or dictatorial, are forced into a single set of requirements. This distorted framework ignores Israel’s unique strategic situation and political environment, which includes missiles paraded through the streets of Teheran decorated with signs reading “Wipe Israel off the Map”. Universality also erases the difference between countries like Iran that sign treaties and then find ways to violate them without paying a price, and those nations that take these commitments seriously. Until the concept of universality is also applied to requirements for democracy, mutual acceptance, and strategic depth, there is no justification for demanding this with respect to the Non-Proliferation Treaty alone.

Thus, while the challenges facing the NPT system are very serious, the biggest danger is that, once again, the review conference will focus its attention on the wrong issues. More Egyptian-led Israel bashing will not serve the interests of peace or stability, and will not prevent the collapse of the NPT. And without this unique arms control framework, warts and all, the world will be far more dangerous.

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