British American Security Information Council

Themes arising from the BASIC Workshop in Doha

Nuclear Non-Proliferation in the Gulf, March 21-22, 2012

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Introduction

About 50 participants, representatives of Gulf states and experts from the region exchanged views on Nuclear Non-Proliferation in the Gulf with experts and government officials from the United States and Europe during a conference in Doha on March 21st and 22nd. The workshop was hosted by the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, with funding from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There were a number of themes that flowed through the workshop that deserve highlighting here. These are not an attempt to present a consensus, nor pull out recommendations, but rather to outline perceptions expressed at the conference whose proceedings were mostly on the record and detailed separately on the website's Events page: http://www.basicint.org/news/events/2012/basic-doha-conference-nuclear-non-proliferation-gulf

Justice and Rights

Perceptions of justice have a big influence on the differing approaches taken by officials and analysts. In the region concepts of justice tend to focus upon the double-standards and apparent hypocrisy that marks a system allowing some states to retain (and modernise) their nuclear arsenals, whilst others are penalised because they operate ambiguity on the boundaries of the rules. This concept of justice tends to trump strategic considerations, so that Gulf participants tended to focus (in public) more on Israel's possession of nuclear weapons than on the possibilities arising from Iran's nuclear programme, even if strategically they may face a greater direct threat from Iran.

U.S. and European approaches generally interpret justice as enforcement of the rules, ensuring that states abide by their commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and punishing them when they transgress. Justice from this perspective is also tempered by expediency and security, so that rules can be bent or changed through exerting power and threat in the system if it means order can be maintained. The less powerful then frequently feel their rights are being trampled upon, even when it may be in their interests (depending on perception) to comply.

Demands on states to abrogate their rights in the interests of maintaining the status quo, or that they agree to costly stronger measures emphasising the non-proliferation aspects of the Treaty when Nuclear Weapon States have yet to demonstrate a clear commitment to nuclear disarmament beyond reductions and warm words, directly harms faith in those states in the NPT and its regime. This is particularly so if those demands come from states that themselves enjoy the benefits of sophisticated nuclear technology, or who deploy nuclear weapons or exist under a nuclear umbrella – it looks as if they are pulling up the drawbridge and holding back other states from gaining that technology. It is this that draws together states in the diverse Non-aligned Movement (NAM) which otherwise would find little in common. Process, language and narrative in such circumstances are crucial,

as well as explicit acknowledgement of the temporary nature of inequalities within the regime.

Many NAM members do not appreciate the choices made to emphasise restrictive supplier technology control mechanisms that exist outside the structure of the more inclusive NPT process. The rise of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) at the expense of the NPT's Zangger Committee is the clearest case in point. Of course the tighter requirements reflect the burgeoning challenges to the task of preventing diversion and military programmes in the context of a globalising nuclear trade.

It is here worth going into some detail into the debate over the U.S. 123 Agreement with the United Arab Emirates, which has proved controversial within the region, and in our meeting. Under the agreement the UAE is to benefit from privileged access to U.S. nuclear technology in return for foreswearing its own development of the fuel cycle. It was lauded as the gold standard for future agreements by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, with the anticipation that other states would be held to similar expectations. They involved several principles: transparency, safety, security, non-proliferation, full cooperation with the IAEA, and a programme commercially sustainable in the long run. It was described as 'peaceful by design'.

Others were critical of the UAE for voluntarily 'giving up' its rights. But this agreement was possible because the UAE had no purpose or intention to develop fuel cycle technologies in the foreseeable future, as there was no commercial basis for enrichment within the UAE. Could this become a universal case for the region, and that with some fuel bank guarantees or other such mechanisms, the idea of a moratorium on all fuel cycle activities in the region be seen as realistic? The UAE action developed the necessary assurance in their own interests. In many respects, this was a microcosm of the philosophy of the NPT itself. This involves the voluntary sacrifice of elements of national sovereignty in the interests of international assurance and global security, and thereby also to facilitate valuable technology transfer.

One participant, a Jordanian politician opposed in principle to the development of nuclear power in his country, nevertheless found himself arguing strongly for Jordan's rights to such technologies. Framing access in terms of prohibition and control encourages this sort of response. Israeli attempts to use their influence to spike U.S. support for Jordan's programme only serve to strengthen internal support for the programme. Whilst Jordan does not yet have the capital to invest in a major nuclear programme, it has significant uranium reserves, so that it is less willing to contemplate premature renunciation of the right to enrich than the UAE.

In the end it will be the states in the region that determine their rights and freedoms in these issues. The international community can assist by offering state-of-the-art technologies that answer the need of regional states without undermining proliferation concerns. For example, they could supply Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) reactors for local operation and the production of medical isotopes.

Disarmament, universality and the health of the NPT

The NPT has near universal adherence, more so than virtually any other international treaty. Yet it is also more vulnerable in its effectiveness by those states that remain outside it. The end of the Cold War, and the accession to the Treaty of states such as France and China, as well as the indefinite extension of the Treaty, raised hopes that it could achieve global acceptance. Unfortunately, this hope, and the health of the regime, was dealt a near-fatal blow by the South Asian tests of 1998 and the United States' failure to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1999. Then the U.S.-India deal, and its endorsement in 2008 by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) sent a message to many that the NPT's guardians were prepared to sacrifice the credibility of the Treaty on the altar of commercial interest. Some feel this was arguably worse for the future of the Treaty than the violations of safeguards agreements by Iraq, Libya, Syria and Iran, which as well as being a challenge was also an opportunity to develop enforcement and strengthen the system.

The strength of the NPT derives particularly from the benefit states experience – principally the

security from knowing neighbours do not have nuclear weapons programmes, access to technology, and the promise of a world with fewer nuclear dangers. At its heart the NPT forms the cornerstone of an international attempt to escape the logic of the tragedy of the commons – where it may sometimes appear in the immediate interests of individual states to develop nuclear weapons, but that in doing so everyone suffers as it triggers insecurity and nuclear responses by other states. States that indefinitely exist outside the attempt to control the spread, either by sitting outside the Treaty with nuclear weapons, or in it with plans to modernise their arsenals, undermine this attempt at regime development, both by threatening states in compliance, and by undermining the fairness of the regime. Hans Blix, the former chief weapons inspector for Iraq and a former IAEA director general, described the Nuclear Weapon States as the wolves within the Treaty, and pointed to a handful of lambs growing teeth. Both send into the international community powerful messages of the value they attach to their capabilities when they spend billions of dollars on their military programmes, or on enrichment programmes that make little commercial sense.

Patricia Lewis, Research Director for International Security at Chatham House, expressed the view that the real threat to the future of the non-proliferation project is that states still invest magic powers in nuclear weapons, so that they retain a currency that drives their proliferation. Diminishing the salience, their roles in all military and political strategies, must be a central part of the project. Looking back at the history of nuclear deterrence we may come to realise that nuclear weapons have been less effective at preventing war than we originally thought. It is, of course, challenging to prove a negative, so much depends upon judgement. Even the most powerful case of deterrence arising from a threat to use nuclear weapons in a particular instance, namely James Baker's veiled warning to Saddam Hussein that the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons were Iraq to use chemical weapons, torch the Kuwaiti oilfields, or engage in extensive support of terrorism, did not deter Saddam from torching the oil fields.

Looking to the future, even as we go down to low levels, is it really true that in the world of the blind the one-eyed man is king, or would he be treated as a deviant that would be distrusted and outcast? Israeli nuclear weapons contribute little directly to Israeli security because they lack credibility... and they have other better options – conventional superiority and a cast-iron alliance with the world's remaining superpower. Israel's nuclear weapons drive proliferation not so much because others' fear of the imminent use of an Israeli nuclear strike against them, but rather through the sense of injustice and double-standards they create. They are yet another arena for states to challenge Israeli dominance, intransigence and inflexibility. The Israeli policy of ambiguity and keeping out of the NPT may appear to have served them well under certain criteria, but it was never a sustainable strategy. Israel has benefitted more from the NPT than from the possession of nuclear weapons, but that benefit is in the balance and will not last unless they change their tactics. Judging by Israeli opinion polls, it would seem that their public increasingly recognises this. Iran is forcing the choice that they would inevitably have had to face at some point between possessing nuclear weapons in an increasingly dangerous proliferating neighbourhood, or joining in the effort to lock themselves and all neighbouring states into a process that verifiably bans the development of WMD arsenals.

There remains the fundamental problem of credibility in nuclear deterrence – people do not believe their use could be contemplated in any but the most extreme circumstances, ones that appear to become less credible as sovereignty becomes more complex, populations move around the world, states become more interdependent with globalisation, and as the nuclear taboo deepens with time.

One of the crucial roles of the non-proliferation regime is to frame the communication of reducing salience, through announcements of changes to doctrine (such as the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review of 2010), explicit declarations of negative security assurances, moves towards no first use, ratifications of the CTBT, progress on talks around a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), talks amongst the P5, and the successful

conclusion of the 2012 conference to establish a process towards a Middle East zone free from WMD and their means of delivery. All these developments are linked.

Iran

Iran's nuclear programme overshadows the regional Arab discussions on nuclear issues. Iranians believe they can obtain the benefits from their type of nuclear ambiguity (uncertainty over the future direction of their civil program) without triggering proliferation elsewhere. However regional officials and analysts said that this view was mistaken. The parameters for a negotiated solution over Iran's nuclear programme were discussed at length, including:

- Western acknowledgement of Iran's rights;
- repetition of Iran's commitment not to explore nuclear weapons;
- serious improvement of safeguards and inspections arrangement – to clearly assure against violation, or detection of any such violation; and
- full relief from sanctions.

But there was some sense of frustration from the regional panellists, whose countries are not part of the P5+1 negotiations, that conflict appeared inevitable and that they would be powerless to prevent it. In this context, Israel was seen as the regional aggressor, having acted unilaterally to knock out Iraqi and Syrian nuclear reactors in the past and threatening to do the same with Iran. But Israeli strikes on Iran would challenge the very survivability of the NPT, as several participants pointed out. There would be little doubt across the region that Israel would be in the wrong, absolving Iran from blame and indeed encouraging many Arabs to side with Iran.

Impact of Arab Awakening and growing democracy

The new Arab Awakening is bringing in pluralism and democracy. This is likely to bring more accountability, checks and balances, and thereby strengthen the negotiating power of states vis-à-vis their neighbours and external states. Nuclear issues, including power and weapons, will no longer be the taboo for public debate that they have been in the past. The public is more sceptical, however, about the benefits arising from nuclear power than their previous leaderships, and tend to focus on environmental and safety concerns. So it could be that increasing accountability will set back the prospects for nuclear power in the region.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of diversity of opinion across the Arab world, and even between the smaller Arab states on the Gulf. Until now they have largely left the nuclear politics to larger states within the Non-Aligned Movement or the Arab League. However, with the possible strategic challenge arising from Iran's nuclear program, the international debate over responses, and the profile of the conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East rising towards the end of 2012, there is increasing interest in nuclear politics. Some within the Saudi Arabian leadership have indirectly threatened proliferation if Iran looks likely to acquire nuclear weapons. This is not a stable time, and it is critically important that states in the region understand the complexities of nuclear politics, and join together to make the necessary commitments and build a robust institutional non-proliferation framework for the region.

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