



Illogic of Nuclear Disarmament in the Contemporary Era

By

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Since the beginning of the nuclear age, the international community consistently made efforts toward disarmament. However, the world saw both vertical and horizontal nuclear proliferation. Nuclear-armed states are modernizing their nuclear forces.

Although there are notable breakthroughs in efforts to reach agreements on arms control and disarmament, the world remains far from achieving disarmament goals and is still on a long quest to eliminate nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons hold a key place in security policy.

The latest report by the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute \(SIPRI\)](#) says nearly all nuclear-armed states, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea, are modernizing and upgrading their nuclear capabilities. Consequently, a perilous new nuclear arms race is emerging, and reliance on nuclear weapons is increasing. This inevitably raises the question, is nuclear disarmament still logical and relevant?

Signed in July 1968, [the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#), is considered the first major step aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation and ensuring disarmament, including the recognized nuclear powers under the treaty. [Article VI](#) of the NPT emphasizes the pursuit of negotiations in good faith to bring an end to the nuclear arms race, achieve nuclear disarmament, and promote general disarmament by nuclear-armed states. Article [VI](#) serves as the foundation for global efforts such as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

However, nuclear weapon states under the NPT are not adequately fulfilling their obligations and commitments under Article VI and instead continue to modernize their nuclear capabilities. They even provide support to their allies on nuclear matters in clear violation of the treaty. The Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) deal and the Nuclear Supplier Group's waiver to India are cases in point. It is important to note that nuclear weapon states are primarily responsible for progressing disarmament. Under the NPT, the division between nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapon states is not supposed to be permanent as all NPT parties will move to non-nuclear weapon states.

The current geopolitical landscape regarding nuclear proliferation, nonproliferation, counter-proliferation, and disarmament indicates a deadlock in the pursuit of a global zero (GZ). Two key terms, conceptualized in this article, may help explain the shortcomings in nuclear disarmament efforts under the grand bargain. The first is the security betrayal trap (SBT), which refers to a situation where security guarantees are betrayed, leaving a country exposed and vulnerable. The second is disarmament deception syndrome (DDS), a pattern of negative consequences resulting from false promises made during the disarmament process.

This situation is exacerbated by the fear of cheating among the nuclear-armed countries, "If we disarm, others might not." Hence any proactive action would leave some at some disadvantage vis-à-vis adversaries.

The latest [SIPRI](#) report suggests that countries are modernizing their nuclear arsenals with a greater reliance on nuclear weapons, which undermines the efforts of arms control and disarmament. The abandonment of bilateral arms control treaties between the United States and

Russia, alongside the failure to develop multilateral treaties on the subject, led to a lack of faith in arms control and disarmament.

In South Asia, India's prestige-driven global ambitions and expansion of its nuclear arsenal beyond a credible minimum deterrent is complicating security dynamics in the region and beyond. This is further worsened by a purported strategic chain with cascading-downward influence on arms control, nuclear risk reduction, crisis management, confidence-building, and strategic stability in South Asia—induced by extra-regional powers. While offering no cascading upward stimuli for bringing regional stability, there are biases and discriminatory norms governing nonproliferation regimes and arms control and disarmament negotiations at the conference on disarmament (CD).

This suggests not only why nuclear disarmament is not happening, but it also explains skepticism over the future of disarmament. For instance, Ukraine presents a novel case of SBT and questions the negative and positive security assurances/guarantees in conventional as well as nuclear terms. The Ukraine paradox cautions other countries, in a DDS, that their survival rests with nuclear weapons of their own. Even confidence in the nuclear umbrella and assurance by treaty allies is eroding. NPT-member states are yearning for nuclear weapons and pose the greatest danger of proliferation.

Ukraine regrets abandoning its inherited nukes in the wake of its ongoing war with Russia. The withdrawal of North Korea from the NPT and the lesson it learned are that nukes are key to national survival. Similarly, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability is considered inevitable for the country's national security. In this geopolitical context, it is hard to make countries believe in any negative as well as positive security in return for disarmament and de-nuclearization.

Disarmament is also unlikely in today's world due to the changing technological landscape. Countries with advanced technologies and space-based capabilities can still threaten the survival of their enemies.

Emerging technologies are leading to increased conventional imbalances between rivals, which heightens reliance on nuclear weapons for crucial security interests and could, therefore, serve as the ultimate deterrent. Moving toward disarmament requires five actions. First, there is a need for legally binding agreements to address the threats posed by emerging technologies. Second, nuclear powers should not support their allies' nuclear pursuits. Third, effective multilateral arms control agreements are required. Fourth, it is important to address biases within global frameworks. Finally, confidence-building measures (CBMs) between rivals are needed to resolve long-standing disputes, help prevent arms races, reduce nuclear risks, and build hope for disarmament in the future.

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