Dealing with differences in approaches to nuclear disarmament presents a fundamental challenge for global disarmament and nonproliferation efforts, along with continued tensions between the United States and Russia and several regional issues.

A case in point is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted in July last year with 122 states voting in favor, 1 opposed, and 1 abstention among those who gathered to negotiate this treaty. The treaty, opened for signature last September, has been signed by 59 states and ratified by 12 states.

Treaty proponents assert that a step-by-step approach has proved fruitless in moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons. They claim that the prohibition treaty constitutes an effective measure for nuclear disarmament under Article VI of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) by creating a legally binding prohibition on nuclear weapons.
Nuclear-weapon states, however, have made it abundantly clear that they oppose the prohibition treaty. The report on the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review specifically mentions that the treaty was “fueled by wholly unrealistic expectations of the elimination of nuclear arsenals without the prerequisite transformation of the international security environment.” Such skepticism is shared by so-called nuclear umbrella states. These countries generally attach importance to the security situation and favor a step-by-step approach for advancing nuclear disarmament. Thus, the rift is obvious, and these divergent nuclear disarmament approaches may present a serious stumbling block for the upcoming 2020 NPT Review Conference, a key meeting to protect and advance the global nonproliferation effort.

When deliberating ways to mitigate and reconcile the differences in approach, it is important to consider the reality of nuclear weapons, which differs from one region to another. For instance, the “nuclear shadow” is imminent in North America, Northeast Asia, South Asia, Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, the regions which have nuclear-weapon states under the NPT and de facto nuclear possessors. This is not the case in Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific, where there are no nuclear weapons possessors whatsoever.

The expression “nuclear shadow” encompasses a host of elements related to nuclear weapons ranging from numbers and types of nuclear weapons to nuclear doctrine, deterrence, nuclear signaling, saber-rattling, and political significance. Nuclear shadow consists of all these relevant factors and the significance which nuclear weapons-possessing states attach to them.

Not surprisingly, in the regions with the nuclear shadow, there are many pressing issues. In the context of the U.S.-Russian relationship, there are the issues of extension of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and implementation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, on which there are compliance disputes. There is also the issue of how to bring into the strategic calculus various new factors, such as precision-guided conventional strike systems and developments in the cyber and space domains. Further, in recent years there has been more nuclear saber-rattling. The “escalate to de-escalate” doctrine, which allegedly has been promoted in Russia, has also been cited as a matter of concern.

On other regional fronts, North Korea’s nuclear advances continue to present a serious threat, despite the historic meeting in Singapore between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korea’s leader, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission Kim Jong Un. The Iranian nuclear issue is in flux following Trump’s announcement in May of the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Frustration is mounting over the lack of progress on a Middle Eastern zone free from weapons of mass destruction, an issue in NPT discussions since the 1990s. In South Asia, India and Pakistan continue to enhance their nuclear arsenals. All these pressing challenges are inherent in regions with nuclear shadow.

Proponents of the prohibition treaty consider these nuclear issues to be a global threat affecting all humanity, thus calling for the drastic measure of nuclear weapons prohibition. Critics of the treaty are generally more directly exposed to or involved in these issues and see no option other than pursuing a realistic step-by-step approach.

With a view to advancing nuclear disarmament, it makes sense to go beyond this division over nuclear disarmament approaches. The following issues should be examined in order to mitigate and reconcile differences.

**Disarmament and Security**

The first question to contemplate is the relationship between nuclear disarmament and the security environment. The divergence between advocates and critics of the prohibition treaty reflects the contrast between those who underscore the cause of disarmament and those who give greater weight to the security situation. Those in regions without the nuclear shadow tend to be the former, while those from regions with the nuclear shadow tend to be the latter. The Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, a group organized by Japan, observed that “this divide has deepened and become so stark that states with divergent views have been unable to engage meaningfully with each other on key issues.” How then to address this
conundrum?

As is often stated, disarmament does not occur in a vacuum. Whether a security situation is favorable or not makes a fundamental difference to expectations toward disarmament. Looking at the past, important nuclear reduction measures were realized when the security situation was favorable. It is no coincidence that such major steps as the 1987 INF Treaty; voluntary disarmament measures for strategic, theater, and tactical nuclear weapons by the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia in 1990 and 1991; and the Strategic Arts Reduction Treaty in 1991 (START I) were achieved when the Cold War was ending and there was a relaxation of the East-West security environment.

A favorable security situation is an essential prerequisite to achieving good progress on nuclear disarmament. This applies not only to U.S.-Russian relations but also to other dyads such as the Indian-Pakistani relationship. Thus, it is with good reason that U.S. policymakers underlined the importance of “creating the conditions for nuclear disarmament.”

The relationship between disarmament and the security situation is a two-way street. As discussed, the security environment affects what can be achieved in disarmament. At the same time, undertakings in the area of disarmament and arms control also affect the security situation. For instance, the U.S. decision in 2002 to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty had many implications on the security relationship between the United States and Russia.

As is often argued, today’s security situation is not in a good state. The nuclear shadow has become more prominent in many parts of the world. Since the mid-1990s, some see the coming of the “second nuclear age.” The most recent UN report on the disarmament agenda asserted that “Cold War tensions have returned, but in a much more complex and dangerous environment.” In this sense, the endeavor to advance nuclear disarmament is an uphill battle.

Under these circumstances, it is necessary to consider what measures may be possible even in an unfavorable security situation. Those who favor nuclear disarmament should be reminded that they are not operating in a closed system. Like it or not, the external environment comes into play. It is sometimes argued, from those who attach importance to the provisions and logic of the NPT, that a favorable security situation should not be a precondition for nuclear disarmament because Article VI
of the NPT does not refer to a security situation.

Yet, the NPT preamble highlights the importance of “the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States” in advancing nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, an unfavorable security situation does not provide justification for not moving forward because several paths to address this security-disarmament nexus do exist.

On the security side, easing tensions is imperative. Building confidence and enhancing trust are important. Addressing regional proliferation concerns is vital. On the disarmament side, it is essential to avoid backsliding. There are concerns about the durability of the INF Treaty and New START, which impose legally binding limits on the world’s two largest nuclear superpowers. The international community should also endeavor to move the security-disarmament nexus in a positive direction through measures such as raising transparency, risk reduction, and verification of nuclear disarmament.

Applicability and Time Frame

The second question is the issue of applicability and time frame for disarmament measures, particularly global disarmament measures. As noted earlier, there is a clear difference in the situation between regions with nuclear shadow and regions without nuclear shadow. Tailored measures are needed to address some of the region and country specific issues, but global measures cannot be forsaken in order to advance disarmament and nonproliferation.

For global disarmament measures to be effective, they should be appropriate in applicability and time frame. As for the vision of a world without nuclear weapons, it would be fair to say that this is a goal with general applicability but of a long time frame. Discussions of this goal refer, of course, to the global situation, including those regions with imminent nuclear shadow. It is meant to be a goal of general application.

At the same time, realization of this goal will not occur overnight. U.S. President Barack Obama, who clearly and fervently expressed his wish to realize the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons, acknowledged that “this goal will not happen quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence.” It is certainly a goal with a long time frame.

Taking another example, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is a measure to be applied generally, and its entering into force is a current challenge. The treaty was adopted in 1996 with almost unanimous support from the international community. Although there remain eight countries needed to ratify the treaty in order to bring it into force, China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, and the United States have signed the treaty. As for the three remaining, India and Pakistan have committed to a voluntary moratorium, and North Korea announced the discontinuation of further nuclear testing in April and took a destructive measure for its Punggye-ri nuclear test site in May. Prohibiting nuclear testing has been judged as a meaningful and feasible global measure. Striving for the CTBT to enter into force is an issue for immediate action.

How then to evaluate a measure for the legal prohibition of nuclear weapons, as exhibited by the prohibition treaty, from this standpoint? There can hardly be any argument about the significance of the legal prohibition of nuclear weapons if it is proposed as a measure of limited application, as in the form of nuclear-weapon-free zones. Currently, there are five such regional zones in Latin America (Treaty of Tlatelolco), the South Pacific (Treaty of Rarotonga), Southeast Asia (Bangkok Treaty), Africa (Pelindaba Treaty), and Central Asia (Treaty of Semipalatinsk). Such nuclear-weapon-free zones provide for legal prohibition of nuclear weapons in these specific regions.

The central question is whether a legal prohibition of nuclear weapons can be a measure for general application. Nuclear-weapon-free zones are established in regions without nuclear shadow and not in regions with nuclear shadow. In this context, an examination should explore how such zones have dealt with nuclear weapons existing in these regions or the nuclear ambitions of the countries concerned.

The Treaty of Pelindaba became a reality after South Africa renounced nuclear weapons. For the
Treaty of Semipalatinsk, the proposal for a Central Asian nuclear-weapon-free zone was advanced after Kazakhstan renounced nuclear weapons left on its territory following the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Treaty of Tlatelolco is a more complicated case, but the essence remains the same. The treaty was signed in 1967 and entered into force in 1968 between Mexico and El Salvador, but the biggest challenge for the region was that the military leaderships of Brazil and Argentina did not forgo a nuclear option. Brazil ratified the treaty in 1968, but did not waive the requirements for its entry into force then. The important evolution took place hand in hand with domestic political change in these two countries, namely a shift from military to civilian rule, which led to a historic agreement between the presidents of each country to establish a bilateral nuclear inspection system in 1990. Both countries subsequently changed their stance to fully committing themselves to this treaty. Both countries ratified the amended treaty in 1994.

The experiences of such nuclear-weapon-free zones suggest that the function of such zones is to ensure the absence of nuclear weapons in regions without nuclear shadow, rather than the removal of nuclear weapons in regions with nuclear shadow. This indicates that, given the current situation, the legal prohibition of nuclear weapons is bound to be a measure of limited applicability if it is intended as a measure of immediate action. It is enlightening, from this perspective, that many of the signatories of the prohibition treaty come from regions without nuclear shadow. On the other hand, if considered to be a measure of global applicability, its time frame should be long term. As often stated, it is when the global stock of nuclear weapons comes closer to a minimum point that the general legal prohibition can best be argued.

This characteristic, however, does not negate the significance of the legal prohibition of nuclear weapons. Even though this measure does not enjoy universal application, it does represent recommitment for nonpossession of nuclear weapons by those who go along with it. Regarded as a long-term measure, it acts as a reminder of a goal to pursue over time, if not right now.

**Conclusion**

These considerations lead to several practical steps that can be taken. First, it is important to reaffirm the essential, that being measures of general applicability that should remain irrespective of the immediate security situation. In this regard, together with staying committed to a goal of a world without nuclear weapons, the NPT stands out for its importance. The NPT is an irreplaceable cornerstone for disarmament and nonproliferation, as has been stressed by chairs of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference. We should exert our best efforts to maintain and strengthen the NPT-based regime of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

The NPT regime is upheld by its review process. The health of the NPT regime depends on a well-functioning review process. The importance of the NPT and its review process tends to be underestimated. Voices sometimes challenge its significance, but we will be confronted with many more challenges if the NPT regime does not function well. Dysfunction of the NPT review process could undermine the NPT, raising the probability of the emergence of further outliers. This is not in the interest of the international society. In order to avoid such a situation, we should reaffirm the importance of the NPT and produce a tangible result at the 2020 NPT Review Conference. We should steadfastly remain committed to this essential element even in an unfavorable security situation. Indeed, there is all the more reason to do so in such a difficult situation.

Second, backsliding must be avoided, given that it can lead to further deterioration of the security situation and the emergence of a new nuclear arms race. Under current circumstances, the United States and Russia hopefully will agree to extend New START’s duration, as permitted by the treaty, and preserve the INF Treaty while resolving the compliance disputes which jeopardize the accord. Deterioration in nonproliferation files can also be a serious setback. Hence, the unraveling of the Iranian nuclear deal should be avoided.

Third, all parties should exert efforts to move forward. Despite a deteriorating security situation, it is important to make progress on those fronts where it is possible. There are a number of areas on which to focus. We should continue to work for realization of disarmament measures of general application, such as the entry into force of the CTBT and early start of the negotiation of a fissile material cutoff treaty. We should also strive for measures to move the security-disarmament nexus...
in a positive direction through measures that promote transparency and reporting of nuclear weapons, risk reduction measures such as de-alerting and improving lines of communication, negative security assurances, and verification of nuclear disarmament.

We find ourselves in an uphill battle. It is not a good time to argue over different approaches. There is a need to transcend differences and gather forces in support of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation. Accordingly, it is important to respect other’s positions.

The aforementioned Group of Eminent Persons asserted that “civility in discourse and respect for divergent views must be restored to facilitate a joint search for a common ground for dialogue, where all parties even though they might have different perspectives can work together to reduce nuclear dangers.”

Civility derives from the frankness to recognize the limitation of one’s belief and openness to acknowledge the significance of opponents’ ideas.

ENDNOTES


7. Ibid.


11. Fred Ikle, “The Second Coming of the Nuclear Age,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 75, No. 1 (January/February 1996); Keith B. Payne, Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age (Lexington:
How to Transcend Differences in Nuclear Disarmament Approaches
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)


13. Countryman and Zagorski, “Urgent Steps to Avoid a New Arms Race.”


22. The Treaty of Tlatelolco further entered into force for 11 countries in April 1969, thereby meeting the condition for setting up and commencing the work of the Agency for Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America.


24. Some signatories are from regions with nuclear shadow: Austria, Ireland, and Lichtenstein from Europe; Nepal and Bangladesh from South Asia; and the state of Palestine from the Middle East.


27. Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, “Building Bridges to Effective Nuclear Disarmament.”

Mitsuru Kitano is Japan’s ambassador to the international organizations in Vienna and previously was director-general of the Disarmament, Nonproliferation and Science Department of the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

**Source URL:** https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-09/features/transcend-differences-nuclear-disarmament-approaches