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Embassy

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

A Much-Needed Anti-Nuclear Cheer

by Ramesh Thakur

Back in 1997, the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—issued the Tashkent Statement proposing a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ). With the technical assistance of UN experts, several rounds of meetings were held to draft a treaty. Agreement was reached on most of the modalities of the NWFZ: the scope of its prohibitions, a regional verification machinery linked to the IAEA safeguards system, and the best means of integrating the nuclear powers with the NWFZ.

Amidst all the gloom and doom confronting us today, one much needed bit of good news: the Central Asian NWFZ came into effect on March 21. Opened for signature on Sept. 8, 2006, it has now been ratified by all five regional states.

Almost the entire southern hemisphere is already covered by four such zones in inhabited regions: Latin America, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia and Africa. Uninhabited Antarctica is also denuclearized. Central Asia is the first NWFZ in the northern hemisphere.

The idea was first proposed by Uzbek President Islam Karimov at the UN General Assembly in 1993. As part of the former Soviet Union, Kazakhstan used to have the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world on its soil and was also the site of several hundred nuclear tests at its site in Semipalatinsk in the country's north.

Welcoming the development, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that the Central Asian NWFZ is the first to require parties to comply fully with the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

A NWFZ bans the possession, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons by members and their use against them. Central Asia, containing stocks of nuclear material and a number of nuclear facilities, is also keenly interested in preventing the leakage and theft of nuclear materials and skills.

Why do countries want a NWFZ, a "paper treaty" that does not eliminate the possibility of nuclear-weapons use? Because it promotes security and raises the threshold of nuclear initiation. The impetus to the first zone, established in Latin America in 1967, was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. A NWFZ adds no further legal obstacle to nuclearization. But it makes the non-nuclear assurance of the NPT doubly sure. Regional states can then co-operate in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy without raising local and international suspicions. The five member countries are required to adopt the IAEA Additional Protocol so that the IAEA can assure everyone that they do not have undeclared nuclear material.

The five "stans" believe that nuclear weapons are irrelevant to improving the welfare of their societies. The renunciation of the nuclear option will help the region integrate more fully and rapidly into international political and economic

structures.

A NWFZ will add a new normative barrier to acquiring, and a legal one to importing, nuclear weapons. The zone will take away nuclear weapons from any future regional security architecture. It will preclude the possibility of using any site in the region for nuclear testing.

Central Asia is the geopolitical crossroads of Russia, China, India, Pakistan and the Middle East. The NWFZ will be a confidence-building measure. Firstly, in the obvious sense of being a legal mechanism for members to assure each other of non-nuclear intentions. Secondly, because the process of establishing it will have created habits of dialogue, mutual trust and co-operation, which are prerequisites for tackling other regional security problems. And third, because nuclear-weapons powers will be asked for binding commitments not to use nuclear weapons against zone members.

The Cold War U.S. argument against NWFZ, that they encourage "nuclear allergy" and undermine deterrence, is no longer relevant. NWFZ play a role in the global campaign against nuclear proliferation precisely by heightening the nuclear allergy. The disarmament process could be reversed. Relations between Russia, China and the U.S. could deteriorate to the point of a new Cold War. Existing treaties could unravel through non-ratification or breakouts. Nuclear testing could be resumed by one of the five NPT-licit (China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA), one of the three extra-NPT (India, Israel, Pakistan), or even NPT-non-compliant (North Korea) nuclear states.

NWFZ are integral elements in the mosaic of international action to marginalize and delegitimize the entire edifice of nuclear weapons (possession, testing, deployment, doctrines and strategies). They consolidate non-proliferation successes and maintain the momentum for denuclearization ahead of the willingness of the haves and wannabes to renounce nuclear arsenals. A Central Asian NWFZ will embed and institutionalize the non-proliferation norm there and ensure higher levels of compliance with worldwide arms-control regimes.

These days, any small advance is worth a quiet cheer or two. The last five-yearly NPT review conference in 2005 was a dismal failure. Perhaps the Central Asian advance will be a harbinger of progress at next year's conference. Recent declarations and developments in the U.S., Russia and Britain are early, fragile, yet unmistakable signs of a revival of interest in nuclear arms control and disarmament measures.

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