

THE GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER IS UNDER STRAIN

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'Humanity has survived 75 years of the nuclear age without blowing itself up' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

To gain legitimacy, any global order needs to fulfil two conditions. First, a convergence among the major powers of the day, and, second, successfully presenting the outcome as a global public good to the rest of the world. The global nuclear order (GNO) was no exception but, today, it is under strain.

The GNO was created in the shadow of the Cold War, with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., leading the western and the Socialist blocs, respectively. Following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when the two came perilously close to launching a nuclear war, both U.S. President John F. Kennedy and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev understood two political realities. First, as the two nuclear superpowers, they needed bilateral mechanisms to prevent tensions from escalating to the nuclear level. And, second, nuclear weapons are dangerous and, therefore, their spread should be curbed. This convergence created the GNO.

During the Cuban crisis, a secret back-channel between President Kennedy's brother, Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, helped resolve the crisis. The first bilateral measure was the hotline, established in 1963, to enable the leaders to communicate directly. The hotline (later upgraded into nuclear risk reduction centers) was followed by arms control negotiations as the two nuclear superpowers sought to manage their nuclear arms race and maintain strategic stability.

To control proliferation, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. initiated multilateral negotiations in Geneva in 1965 on a treaty to curb the spread of nuclear weapons. Three years later, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signature. It began modestly with less than 60 parties but today, it is widely described as the cornerstone of the global nuclear order with 191 adherents.

The third element of the global nuclear order came into existence in 1975. India had chosen not to sign the NPT, and in 1974, stunned the world by conducting an underground peaceful nuclear explosive, or PNE. Seven countries (the U.S., U.S.S.R, U.K., Canada, France, Japan, and West Germany) held a series of meetings in London and concluded that ad hoc export controls were urgently needed to ensure that nuclear technology, transferred for peaceful purposes, not be used for PNEs. The London Club (as it was originally known) sounded inappropriate and later transformed into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, consisting of 48 countries today, which observe

common guidelines for exporting nuclear and related dual-use materials, equipment, and technologies. Though the Soviet Union and India enjoyed close relations, having signed the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1971, the USSR was committed to upholding the GNO, and a founding member of the London Club.

The GNO has held reasonably well, particularly on two fronts. First, the taboo against nuclear weapons has held since 1945. It is a matter of debate how far the U.S.-USSR arms control process helped preserve the taboo or whether it was just plain luck, but the fact is that humanity has survived 75 years of the nuclear age without blowing itself up.

Second, non-proliferation has been a success. Despite dire predictions of more than 20 countries possessing nuclear weapons by the 1970s, (there were five in 1968 – the U.S., U.S.S.R., U.K., France, and China), only four countries have since gone nuclear, i.e., India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan. Even after the Cold War ended, non-proliferation remained a shared objective and Moscow and Washington cooperated to ensure that Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan that hosted Soviet nuclear weapons and possessed some capabilities, were denuclearised. In 1995, the NPT, originally concluded for 25 years, was extended into perpetuity. On other counts, the record is mixed. Arms control did not end the U.S.-U.S.S.R. nuclear race; in fact, their arsenals grew from 28,000 bombs in 1962 to over 65,000 bombs in the early 1980s but the dialogue and some agreements provided a semblance of managing the arms race. Since the late 1980s, the U.S. and Soviet arsenals have declined sharply, to below 12,000 bombs today, though much of this can be attributed to the end of the Cold War rivalry and the breakup of the U.S.S.R.

The two nuclear hegemony shared a notion of 'strategic stability' based on assured second strike capability, guaranteed by the enormous arsenals that both had built up. This eliminated any incentive to strike first ensuring deterrence stability. Arms control negotiations led to parity in strategic capacities creating a sense of arms race stability, and fail-safe communication links provided crisis management stability. These understandings of nuclear deterrence in a bipolar world outlasted the Cold War but are under question.

Today's nuclear world is no longer a bipolar world. The U.S. faces a more assertive China, determined to regain influence, regionally and globally. This rivalry is different from the Cold War because both economies are closely intertwined and further, and China is an economic and technological peer rival. China has resented the U.S.'s naval presence in the South China and East China Seas and since the last Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, has steadily built up its naval and missile capabilities.

Changing geopolitics has taken its toll on the treaties between the U.S. and Russia. In 2002, the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and in 2019, from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on grounds that Russia was violating it. The only remaining agreement, New START, will lapse in 2026; its verification meetings were suspended during the COVID-19 outbreak and never resumed. Strategic stability talks began in 2021 following the Geneva meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, but collapsed with the Ukraine war. Last year, Russia de-ratified the CTBT to bring it on a par with the U.S., raising concerns about the resumption of nuclear testing. As U.S. relations with Russia went into a nosedive, the U.S. is facing a new situation of two nuclear peer rivals who are exploring new roles for more usable weapons. Moreover, Russian nuclear sabre rattling to warn the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the U.S. against escalation in Ukraine has revived nuclear concerns. The old definitions of strategic stability no longer hold.

The Cold War convergence on non-proliferation has run its course; also, nuclear weapons technology is a 75-year-old technology. The U.S. has always had a pragmatic streak shaping its

policy approaches. It turned a blind eye when Israel went nuclear in the 1960s-70s and again, when China helped Pakistan with its nuclear programme in the 1980s. More recently, the nuclear submarine AUKUS deal (Australia, U.S., U.K.) with Australia, a non-nuclear weapon state, is raising concerns in the NPT community.

During the 1970s, South Korea began to actively consider a nuclear weapons programme, spurred by the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. However, France withdrew its offer to supply a reprocessing plant to South Korea under U.S. pressure in 1975-76 and South Korea was persuaded to join the NPT. Recent opinion polls indicate a 70% support for developing a national nuclear deterrent and 40% for reintroducing U.S. nuclear weapons (withdrawn in 1991) on its territory.

Between 1977 to 1988, the U.S. actively subverted Taiwan's nuclear weapons programme as it stepped up a normalisation of ties with China. As a nuclear victim, the Japanese public retains a strong anti-nuclear sentiment but there is a shift, visible in Japan's decision to double its defence spending over next five years.

During the Cold War, the U.S.'s nuclear umbrella tied its European allies closer. Today, domestic compulsions are turning the U.S. inwards, raising questions in the minds of its allies about its 'extended deterrence' guarantees, especially in East Asia. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have the technical capabilities to develop an independent nuclear deterrent within a short time, given political will. It is only a matter of time before U.S. pragmatism reaches the inevitable conclusion that more independent nuclear deterrent capabilities may be the best way to handle the rivalry with China.

The GNO is looking increasingly shaky.

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