Journal of Global Peace and Security Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, 2024 ISSN: 2708-7786

The Nexus between Conventional Arms and Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract

The more prevalent and general perception about conventional arms and nuclear weapons is that both have rather scarce connections in so far as their production, use, possession, acquisition, and control are concerned. This is more a misconception rather than a deliberate or material difference between the two types of weapons. In the context of proliferation and instability that arises from nuclear weapons possession by a state, its state of conventional weaponry is as important as its nuclear capabilities are. Conventional arms superiority is as much a potential driver of nuclear proliferation and geostrategic instability as nuclear weapons are. But the concept of this nexus has been scarcely attended to by experts. There has been little attempt to describe the relationship between conventional arms and nuclear proliferation than nuclear arms and nuclear proliferation. This article is an attempt to bring into light the relationship between conventional arms and nuclear proliferation which if understood in the context of arms control can play a vital role in nuclear non-proliferation and the establishment of an era of nuclear peace.

Keywords: Nuclear weapons, conventional arms, proliferation, World War II, Crisis Stability

What Conventional and Nuclear Weapons are?

Conventional arms include all types of arms other than weapons of mass destruction they are the most commonly used weapons used in conflicts and wars they include a wide range of equipment not limited to armored combat vehicles, combat helicopters, combat aircraft, warships, small arms and light weapons, landmines, cluster munitions, ammunition, and artillery. Conventional weapons are the most common type of armament globally and historically the most commonly used in conflict[1].

While non-conventional weapons are weapons not immediately thought of as weapons these include biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. Nuclear arms are based on the technique of releasing a huge amount of energy from the nucleus of a radioactive atom mostly plutonium or uranium, which brings large-scale devastation without any discrimination of the target it brings

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destruction as it leads to fission reaction and the radioactive decay the destroys everything it comes in contact with. Nuclear fission remains in the atmosphere for a very long period and brings about genetic mutation in living things both animals and plants for centuries to come. The after-effects of nuclear detonation are highly lethal and it affects the whole living plant and animal kingdoms[2].

After World War II, when the world experienced the devastation that nuclear weapons can cause efforts for the containment of developing and proliferation of nuclear weapons were started and treaties were signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the major one. Despite efforts by the international community, the spread of nuclear weaponization could not be stopped. The reasons are many the security dilemmas of states remained pervasive. While nuclear non-proliferation remains a focused area of international politics there is a strong relationship between conventional and non-conventional weapons. The spread and development of one does affect the buildup of another and both affect interstate relationships in a meaningful manner. Balancing conventional military build-ups creates an urge for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In fact, it is the conventional war that ultimately leads to a nuclear attack the Second World War is an example of this. Similarly nuclear non-proliferation has a smoothening effect on the conventional arms race[3].

The Importance of Conventional Arms Balance

The history of the conventional arms race is interesting from the point of its importance and the stability that its reduction or buildup brings to the international political system. The concept of an arms race stems from the development, acquisition, transfer, or possession of conventional arms in the first place. The inception of the nuclear arms race is comparatively a recent phenomenon, mostly after 1945 when the atomic bomb was used in the Second World War. In the post-WW-II situation arms race has become a highly focused area in state policy-making and national interests and security paradigm. The association of the arms race with the nuclear arms race is in fact based on the degree of destruction and the fear of another atomic war, and the development of nuclear capability by the second and third-tier countries like India, and Pakistan, gave it a more pervasive connection with arms race rather than the conventional arms race[4].

For the past quarter of a century conventional arms superiority has given the major world powers a motivation to overpower each other. For example, the United States has enjoyed superiority in precision warfare over its competitors like China and Russia. Both China and Russia have continuously tried to offset this balance by developing conventional arms at par with the US or even trying to do better than the US. But when it comes to nuclear weapons there is no such fierce race for developing or acquisition of nuclear arms[5]. There is a threshold limit in the case of nuclear weapons after which most of the countries stop or slow down their development and there is not as much urge for its transfer to other states as there is in the case of conventional

arms. In fact, the sale purchase of conventional arms race is a booming business and there is a highly influential and vibrant private sector investment in the manufacturing of conventional arms in the US and Europe[6].In a global scenario where there may be fewer nuclear weapons but more conventional weapons will definitely be more challenging to the international community, in order to create a much safer world.

Generally speaking, the acquisition of nuclear arms capability by smaller states is seen as a deterrence against the conventional arms superiority of bigger states especially the US in the global political arena. An example is the ambition of Saddam Hussein to develop weapons of mass destruction to serve as deterrence against Iran and Israel in the 1970s[7]. Hence, nuclear-capable bigger states run into a dilemma in all such cases of how to contain the arms race and at the same time create stability in the arms regime.

Conventional and Nuclear Arms Race and Crisis Stability

Nuclear arms race stability has a direct bearing on conventional arms race stability. Despite, the fact that there is a big amount of difference between the two. Conventional arms differ from nuclear arms in nearly all of their aspects, they differ in terms of their operations, organization, and above all the degree of destruction that both bring in. These differences bring on distinctions in their control and proliferation as well.[8] This needs to be understood in the context of the idea that the world is not safe in the presence of nuclear weapons but comparatively safer in the presence of conventional weapons. Conventional arms have to be used en masse in order to bring in mass-scale destruction but the largest degree of destruction cannot match the destruction caused by a low-scale nuclear detonation. Moreover, the use of conventional arms involves effective teamwork and communication between other units like the air force, and naval units along with other land, air, cyber, and space defense systems[9]. Conventional arms use also needs the conventional forces to be technologically aware and well trained capable of employing conventional arms.

The term “Crisis Stability” has been given new meanings since the dawn of the nuclear age. It signifies the degree of incentivization for keeping the use of military force at its minimum and keeping a check on escalation at the same time[10]. It also encompasses the behavioral aspect of wartime, by soothing and cooling down emotions which particularly prevail in times of conflict.

In the case of nuclear war, the prevalence of the fear of the use of atomic bombs entices the parties to resolve the conflict on a priority basis. By comparison, the use of nuclear arms carries a much bigger stigma of destruction to the human race while in the case of conventional arms, there are always sympathies for human rights violations but still not a large-scale humiliation and condemnation that the use may face in future. This is demonstrated by the fact of history as no single nuclear warhead has been delivered since 1945[11]. But in the case of conventional weapons, it has remained in use consistently in conflicts like the Egyptian and Israel, the Yom

Kippur war in 1973, the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the Afghan civil war of 1988-91, and the invasion of Iraq by the US-led allied forces in the 1990s.

The duration and controllability of war are important factors as Randall Forsberg, the antinuclear advocate states: "The main role of nuclear weapons has always been to deter conventional war among the world's "big powers" (the USA, the USSR, the UK, France, West Germany, China, and Japan by posing a clear risk that such a war would escalate to nuclear war. If ballistic missiles were abolished, raising again the prime strategic question of the 1950s—could a conventional war be fought without going nuclear, and if it went nuclear, could it be won?—it would diminish nuclear deterrence of conventional war"[12].

Time factor is another important aspect of nuclear and conventional arms comparison while discussing one's effects over the other in creating stability in the arms race. Because a lower-yield small-scale nuclear explosion will still destroy the command and control system, it will disrupt communication very heavily and the intelligence apparatus will be disturbed beyond limits. In the case of conventional weapons, there will be enough time to react and strike back, there is time to think and prepare but in the case of nuclear weapons time gets compressed everything happens in fractions of time, and reaction or striking back becomes impossible in a short span of time[13]. Another concerning factor in arms race stability is the disproportionate or inverse proportionality between the reduction of the two types of arms. The reduction in nuclear arms draws an increase in the conventional or non-nuclear arms. For example, if the United States the Soviet Union, or the second or third-tier countries decide to reduce their nuclear warheads by a certain amount. This will create a nuclear void that the same states may run to fill by increasing their non-nuclear, conventional arms stockpiles[14]. This can be substantiated by the statement published in The *Nuclear Posture Review* which states that "fundamental changes in the international security environment in recent years—including the growth of unrivaled US conventional military capabilities [and] major improvements in missile defenses . . . enable us to fulfill . . . objectives at significantly lower nuclear force levels and with reduced reliance on nuclear weapons . . . without jeopardizing our traditional deterrence and reassurance goals[15].

Going by the truth of this statement if antinuclear administrators demand a reduction in nuclear arsenal they must at the same time urge to reduce the conventional arms capabilities of states in order to strike a balance and achieve the ultimate goal of arms race stability[16]. the real point is that even with the complete elimination of nuclear weapons the urge or need for deterrence, extended deterrence, and arms control regime on the part of the majority of big and smaller states won't go away. Probably the control will become more complicated[17]. This means that conventional arms control and nuclear arms control go hand in hand. Neglecting one at the cost of another will always lead to the creation of another kind of instability.

The idea of reducing nuclear weapons has taken precedence over the reduction of conventional weapons in the nuclear age, but nuclear weapons are but a single component of the stability equation. Fewer nuclear weapons will trigger a conventional arms race on the grounds of deterrence and the logic of the *more-maybe-better of Scheleing*[18], which primarily is meant for nuclear weapons will then become relevant for conventional weapons as well. All these factors signify the fact that reduction and control of conventional arms are as important and needed as nuclear non-proliferation and control.

Conclusion

If we believe in the principle of history being the experience of nations in time then it won't be unreasonable to believe that a world free of nuclear weapons will definitely experience an increase in the standing armies, its conventional arms spending as a percentage of its gross domestic products (GDP), and increased rate of conflict. Hence the world will be conflict-ridden than it would have been during the nuclear age. This stems from another historical fact that national leaders won't think and act rationally when it comes to national interests, they don't perform a cost-and-benefit analysis every time. They would rarely eliminate the risk of gaining the reward and above all the element of overvaluing one over the other thus leading to flawed decisions that will prove wrong not immediately but far later than when the damage has been caused and the loss has been accrued.

It seems from this discussion that proponents of nuclear abolition have failed to foresee the unintended consequences of a nuclear-free world. The unintended consequence of such an effort would be a world safer for conventional conflicts. The resultant proliferation of conflicts will definitely result in an enormous increase in conflict-related casualties

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