Peace, Disarmament, and the Risk of (Nuclear) War

By Paolo Cotta Ramusino ¹ and Serguey Batsanov ² ³

In the world, and particularly in Asia, there are nuclear weapons, and there are conflicts and/or open antagonisms. The risk of catastrophic wars is to be considered in this environment, and initiatives should be taken to reduce those risks. We would like to begin by considering three specific areas: North East Asia, the Middle East and South Asia.

Let us start with North East Asia, where we have seen some recent signs of opening up and possible progress. After a significant period of vitriolic declarations and open threats, Kim Jong Un and Trump met, with the help of South Korea and China. There are indications that North Korea may stop nuclear testing; that the idea of a possible nuclear-weapon-free zone in North East Asia could be, in due time, pursued; that a normalization of relations in the area could be implemented; and that the US and North Korea could establish, after 65 years, a peace agreement. We said “could” and not “will” (for sure), but still we can have a moderate optimism. Unfortunately, the US is somehow divided on how to proceed, and we can see revived attempts to return to the situation before the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore by further reinforcing sanctions pressure on North Korea and insisting on its immediate, complete, and verifiable denuclearization without regard to other important issues addressed in Singapore. In this connection, the approach suggested in the Chinese-Russian “dual suspension” or “freeze for freeze” proposal of July 2017 appears to be still valid.

There is less optimism about the situation in the Middle East. Not only do we have a string of deadly conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Palestine, Libya, etc.) with an outrageous number of victims, but there is also a set of strong and increasing sectarian antagonisms throughout the entire region (in particular of Sunni vs Shia). Attempts at building a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East failed to make any progress, despite many recommendations in its support and some key resolutions from the NPT Review Conferences (particularly in 2010). More recently, a key positive agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action [JCPOA], commonly referred to as the Iran Nuclear Deal) has been abandoned by the US. The other partners of the agreement, namely Russia, China and the EU, have kept their membership in the JCPOA, but the problem is that the US will not only impose economic and financial sanctions on Iran, but also plans to sanction all entities or companies (American or foreign) that continue to do business with Iran. In this case, the economic benefits to Iran from the JCPOA

¹ Paolo Cotta Ramusino is the Secretary General of Pugwash.
² Serguey Batsanov is a member of the Pugwash Council and the Director of the Pugwash Geneva Office.
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will possibly disappear, and Iran will be strongly induced to abandon the JCPOA and possibly even the NPT. This could even result in the further spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, or possibly stimulate some drastic military initiatives in the name of preventing a further spread.

Even less optimism comes to mind when we consider the situation in South Asia. Here we have two nuclear-armed countries (India and Pakistan) with a deep reciprocal antagonism. Moreover, there are many “non-state” actors in the entire region (including Afghanistan). We prefer not to use the term “terrorist organizations” since this term is too often used in a derogatory and partisan sense. Terrorists are often, by a weird definition, “those you do not like”. But these organizations MAY carry out terrorist attacks. Quite a number of these organizations are based in Pakistan and, contrary to what many people claim, are for the most part NOT controlled by the Pakistani military or its secret services. Were some of these organizations to carry out some terrorist attack in India, it could trigger a reaction of India against Pakistan that, given the status of conventional inferiority of Pakistan vis-à-vis India, could in turn stimulate Pakistan to react with tactical nuclear weapons, and thus start a nuclear exchange. What we described is of course a hypothetical scenario that nevertheless outlines a possible mechanism that could lead to a regional nuclear war with enormous and terrible consequences.

What could be done in order to lower the risks of possible disastrous wars? The answers are obviously complex and manifold. Here we should bear in mind the name of the organization that has organized this most important conference: “Chinese People’s Association for Peace AND Disarmament”. Peace and disarmament are in various ways the key words that should be considered.

On Disarmament, we should strictly maintain all the disarmament treaties that limit or try to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and reduce weapons in general. Moreover, all these treaties should be extended and improved. Do not forget, for example, that the US-Russia new START Treaty will expire in 2021. We mentioned before the risks for the Non-Proliferation Treaty that derive from the situation in the Middle East and, in particular, from the critical situation of the Iran Nuclear Deal. The importance of arms control should never be underestimated. Arms control and disarmament treaties contribute to a less conflictual environment and highlight the extremely severe risks for mankind that are associated with all weapons of mass destruction. A particular example is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that has not yet entered into force, and we need all the missing countries of Annex II to the Treaty to sign and ratify it. Here, the US and China have some special responsibility, being the two permanent members of the UN Security Council whose ratification is still missing. On the disarmament front, one important aspect has to do with the operational procedures that are defined for the use of nuclear weapons. Take the example of China, which has a no-first-use policy. This is a very positive step. Were there to be a generalized policy of no-first-use, the risk of a nuclear exchange would be significantly reduced. The traditional NATO policy of countervailing a real or supposed conventional inferiority with the possible use of tactical
nuclear weapons is unfortunately a very risky policy. We should also note that the present US administration is considering loosening the guidelines for the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Peace is of course the general goal of all of us. Here I want to point out some general political trends that are working against the establishment or the preservation of peace and are increasing the risks of war. In recent times, we have witnessed the extension and intensification of conflictuality based on religious beliefs that may also interact in a negative way with tensions related to national identification, the most evident case being, of course, the Islamic identification and the spread of anti-Islamic sentiments. Anti-Islamic sentiments are present in Europe, and in Asia, where we have, for example, the worrisome cases of India, and Burma (with the Rohingya crisis). The issue is further complicated by the fact that certain inevitable difficulties, challenges and disparities—which always exist in countries with a strong national identity and sizeable religious or national minorities—can also be fanned from the outside, including through financial support. China has its own share of such problems, particularly in Xinjiang, and must walk a fine line, protecting its national integrity while avoiding the risk of boosting religious discontent as a result of what could be seen as discrimination towards the Uighurs.

On the radical Islamic front, we have different kinds of movements that we can divide roughly into two categories: those having national political goals, and those aimed at spreading antagonism against the entire non-Muslim world. While the latter movements include, say, Al Qaeda, and Daesh, etc., the former include, say, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, and Hamas, etc. Putting the two kinds of movements into one category (of “terrorists”), and also defining some Islamic countries as “states that are sponsoring the terrorists”, is a recipe for increasing the antagonisms among states, and possibly orienting those movements with national political goals towards other kinds of movements.

Besides the Islamic /non-Islamic antagonisms, we have, as mentioned before, an internal antagonism within the Muslim world (Sunni vs Shia), as well as discrimination against specific religious minorities (such as the Yazidis in Iraq). As we know from the Irish example, religious antagonism tends to be more resilient than other types of antagonisms. When countries or political leaders, intentionally or less intentionally, promote religious antagonism as a political tool, they often know where they start, but invariably not where they will end up. Think, for example, of the US policy of fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, and the use made of religion at that time.

In summary, one key element for the promotion of peace in this period of time, should be to avoid by all means the encouragement of religious antagonism. If you allow us to be a little naïve, I would say that in the past, wars were initiated by rulers who issued war declarations on behalf of their nations. Now, wars are, more than in the past, the result of the existence of antagonistic identifications (based mainly on religion or on ethnic origin). Countries that feel the responsibility of preventing war in the nuclear age, should pay extreme attention to the prevention of religious-based or ethnic-based antagonisms. This becomes even more important in the light of the attempts to blur the line between war and peace, to invent or re-invent new
pretexts for the use of military force, and to weaken traditional norms and principles of international law, including those relating to the sovereignty and equality of states, non-aggression, and non-use of force. It is time to step up efforts in defense of these norms while at the same time intensifying the search for often intangible, invisible compromises that have the potential to defuse crisis situations, restore at least some degree of trust in international relations, and reduce the explosive potential that exists today – both in the material sense and in terms of policies, intentions and behavior.

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