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‘THE ARAB SPRING’: IMPACT ON THE NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION REGIME*

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Recent transformations across the globe, and in the Middle East and North Africa in particular, call for a serious discussion about the future path of development of the countries and regions involved. These transformations are being studied by many foreign researchers; they have become a leading subject of intellectual debate. The inherent contradictions of the ongoing processes and the fact that they are still in progress, with uncertain outcomes, often lead to paradoxical conclusions.

Mass protests in the Middle East and North Africa, often described as “people’s revolutions”, are portrayed by many commentators, especially in the West, as a “triumph of democracy” and “the end of the era of dictators”. Other researchers highlight the fact that these events are changing the geopolitical balance of power in the region. The third group of analysts focuses on the energy aspect of the Arab Spring, and its repercussions for oil supplies from the Middle East.

While all these aspects are undoubtedly very important, there is a clear shortage of analysis of another important repercussion of the Arab Spring: namely, its consequences for the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

People’s revolution or an orchestrated regime change?

Many Middle Eastern countries – especially those which the wave of people’s protests have not yet reached – do not subscribe to the prevalent view of the Arab Spring as a series of domestic political explosions brought about by pent-up internal pressures. These countries see the Arab Spring as a belated practical implementation of George W. Bush’s “Greater Middle East” doctrine by America and its NATO allies. According to that view, the West is using force, both openly and covertly, to bring about a change of regimes which it has labeled as “undemocratic” and to install new rulers in the affected countries. The examples that can be cited in support of that view include the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the events in Libya, and the Western-led information campaigns to lay the ground for a foreign intervention in Syria and a military strike against Iran. It is quite obvious that in the name of “democracy” and “human rights” – in their own interpretation, of course – the Western powers are not at all squeamish about disproportional use of force.

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Such ideas are often brought up in conversations and discussions between the author of this article, who currently works abroad for the Russian Foreign Ministry, with diplomats, politicians and political scientists. The most serious concerns about the potential future course of events are usually expressed by Iranian representatives.

Predictably, fears of a possible Western intervention lead to a search of possible allies, and of the ways and methods of defending against such an intervention. In the current situation reliable allies are hard to come by. The United States, Britain and France are to be regarded as parties to possible conflicts. Meanwhile, Russia and China are led by their own interests; both pursue a cautious policy and do not want their relations with the West slowly to degenerate into an outright confrontation. The international mechanisms of maintaining peace can hardly be relied upon, either. By adopting its resolutions on Libya (No 1970 and 1973)¹ the UN Security Council has violated Article 2 of the UN Charter, which forbids the organization from interfering in the internal affairs of its member-states.²

What is the view from Iran and Pakistan?

Researchers are now reaching a paradoxical conclusion which bodes ill for the nuclear nonproliferation regime: in order to preserve their sovereignty, third-world countries need to acquire nuclear weapons - and those which have already done so must not relinquish their arsenals. Many of my interlocutors express the idea that nuclear weapons possession is the only guarantee of non-interference by the Western powers.

We can cite traditional arguments about the virtues of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the destabilizing effects of nuclear weapons, the risk of nuclear terrorism, etc. But these arguments are seen by our interlocutors merely as a product of the developed countries' egoism and aspiration to maintain their dominance, and as an attempt to preserve the existing technological gap between the rich and the developing world. They believe the established powers want to take away their "legitimate right" to use the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy (Iran is a case in point), or to take control of the nuclear arsenals already built by some third-world nations, such as Pakistan.

In November 2011 I took part in Karachi in a seminar on 'Importance of Contemporary Iran in the Middle East and the World'. The event was held by the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs;³ it was attended by experts and researchers from Iran, the United States and Pakistan itself. It was clear from the name of the seminar that the Iranian nuclear program would become a central topic of the discussion. Many of the speakers argued that in a world in which Western powers resort to armed interventions to topple the regimes they don't like, many countries regard nuclear weapons as a guarantee of the preservation of their national sovereignty.

Many participants, including those from the United States, said that the Western reaction to the Iranian nuclear program was yet another proof of the Western powers' double standards. They argued that the West would prefer to see the existing



technological gap between itself and the third-world countries remain forever. As soon as the poorer countries attempt to close that gap they face economic and political sanctions, threats and actual use of force.

Another argument cited at the seminar in Pakistan was that neither the United States nor Israel objected to the development of nuclear power in Iran when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was still in power. But as soon as the current Iranian regime came to power, taking an anti-American and anti-Israeli course and supporting the Palestinians' aspiration to have their own state, the Iranian nuclear program suddenly became unacceptable to Washington.

The Iranian participants highlighted the fact that the United States and Israel insist on a military operation to destroy Iran's nascent nuclear potential - even though the Iranian government and, no less importantly, its religious leaders have repeatedly said that their country does not pursue a nuclear weapons program and that such pursuit would be incompatible with Islam.

As a result Iran, which is coming under massive amounts of pressure and facing the threat of military strikes by the United States and Israel, may actually end up reversing its course and doing just the opposite to what the Western countries want. In other words, Tehran may decide that it does after all need to go nuclear so as to be able to defend itself.

Such a line of thinking is not exclusive to the intellectual elite of the third world. The political and military leaders of other countries which are in the "risk zone" may well come to similar conclusions; indeed, some of them seem to have done so already. One participant of the seminar in Pakistan said that seeing how the West treated his country in the end, Colonel Gaddafi must have bitterly regretted his decision some years ago to yield to Western pressure and relinquish the Libyan nuclear and missile programs.

The Russian position: fine-tuning is required

Such a turn of events would erode the nuclear nonproliferation regime and undermine Russian efforts to strengthen it. Clearly, Russian diplomats, including those of my colleagues working in the area of arms control, need to take into account the transformations now under way in the third world. We must stick to our position of principle based on the vision of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a cornerstone of the international system. But this Russian position requires some fine-tuning so as to make it more acceptable to the developing countries and, even more importantly, to draw a clear distinction between the Russian and Western approaches in this area.

When they worked on the text of the NPT, the first signatories of the treaty adopted the concept of "negative assurances" (i.e. a commitment not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states) and "positive guarantees" (a commitment to come to the aid of any victim of nuclear aggression).⁴ Considering the current



situation, and in order to reduce the potential negative impact on the nonproliferation regime resulting from the events in the Middle East and North Africa, perhaps it would make sense to expand the concept of security assurances issued to the non-nuclear weapon states.

In recent years we have seen examples of nuclear-weapon states (such as Britain, France, and the United States) undertaking military interventions against non-nuclear weapon states (Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya). It is quite obvious that because Washington and its allies have nuclear arsenals, they feel much more secure and comfortable in any conflicts with non-nuclear adversaries. A country that does not have a nuclear deterrent cannot mount an adequate response to repel an aggression or intervention.

It might therefore make sense to try to amend the international system with the notion of assurances, given to non-nuclear weapon states, that they will not be attacked by nuclear-weapon states using conventional weapons. The third-world countries are likely to support such an initiative.

International governance: new mechanisms required?

Many political analysts and researchers specializing in international relations say that the end of the Cold War means there is no longer any real threat of conflicts that could spiral into a nuclear war. They draw the conclusion that the planet is no longer facing the problem of nuclear survival.

But recent events, which I believe are a consequence of Washington's increasingly aggressive policies, belie that notion. The problem still remains; what is more, it is becoming even more serious. There are still countries which are not bound by the restrictions stipulated in the NPT, and there are still conflicts in which these countries are involved.

I believe the task that is now facing the political scientists and diplomats is to show where the world may end up if it continues along its current path. They need to highlight the continuing violations of established principles. Unfortunately, in this day and age no-one even bothers any longer to call for maintaining stability and for respecting international law. In the name of their own political goals some Western countries have forgotten about proper respect for recognized governments and their leaders; they care more about the demands put forward by opposition movements. The excuse they always use is human rights, which are subject to broad interpretation. What about the concept of non-interference? It appears that we need to review many fundamental international norms because the West has simply stopped paying any attention to them. NATO countries have taken to substituting these norms with their own vision of how political problems should be solved. That vision is often based on economic interests and attempts to secure energy supplies.

The world has undergone some radical transformations. We have entered a new era in which it is impossible to operate the international system using mechanisms



developed in the 1960s. We need to build new models of international relations based on tolerance and rejection of double standards.

Notes

¹ Resolution 1970 (2011) was adopted by the UN Security Council on February 26, 2011. Resolution 1973 (2011) was adopted by the UN Security Council on March 17, 2011. For more details please visit: http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions11.htm (Retrieved on January 19, 2012).

² “Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII”. UN Charter, Chapter I, Article 2, P. 7. See, for example: <http://www.un.org/ru/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml> (Retrieved on January 19, 2012).

³ For more details about the seminar see: Moini Qasim. Attack on Iran Will Destabilise the World. *Metropolitan. (Karachi)*. 2011, November 23. <http://www.dawn.com/2011/11/23/attack-on-iran-will-destabilise-the-world.html> (Retrieved on January 12, 2012).

⁴ For more details about security assurances (in Russian) please see: Timerbaev Roland. The problem of security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states ahead of the NPT Review Conference. *Indeks Bezopasnosti (The Security Index)*, 2010. No 4.