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Issue Brief

G20, G7 and Nuclear Diplomacy

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S*ummary*

Russia's nuclear threats, China's nuclear modernisation and North Korea's nuclear and missile brinkmanship have led to global nuclear instability. Japan and India as chairs of G7 and G20 respectively have a key role to play to ensure that such instability is managed within the framework of international diplomacy.

Nuclear diplomacy is back on the agenda of prominent multilateral groupings. Two Asian powers, India and Japan, have assumed the presidency of two important international groupings, the G20 and the G7. As a symbolic gesture, Japan will be hosting the 2023 G7 summit at Hiroshima, one of the city that suffered catastrophic damage by the US atomic bombings in August 1945, to demonstrate the city’s unprecedented economic growth in the decades after the bombing.¹ The Japanese decision also brings to attention the acute nuclear challenge the international community is facing amidst political instability, health crises, arms race, wars, among others.

India assumed the G20 presidency in December 2022 and initiated a plethora of year-long initiatives. As a responsible nuclear weapon state and an ardent advocate of nuclear disarmament, India can use its G20 Presidency to ensure substantive progress on nuclear issues and continue the momentum of the initiatives taken by G7 leaders in Hiroshima.

Contemporary global nuclear security dynamics have been going through a turbulent phase in multiple nuclear hotspots around the world. The nuclear landscape in West Asia was under stress with the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015. The situation was further exacerbated by security dilemma faced by two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These two countries have indicated their desire to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran developed nuclear weapons capability.

The unstable global nuclear landscape has been further exacerbated by conspicuous nuclear threats as part of inter-state conflict. The Russia– Ukraine war and nuclear sabre-rattling by President Vladimir Putin has demolished the nuclear modus vivendi operating among the nuclear powers since the end of Cold War. Ukraine, a post-Soviet state that renounced the third largest nuclear stockpile globally in lieu of ‘security assurances’ by Russia and the United States, has been threatened by nuclear weapons in contravention of those assurances. The threat of use of nuclear weapons in the ongoing conflict has also demolished the ‘nuclear taboo’ established over the decades.

Nuclear Concerns

In post World War II phase, nuclear weapons assumed a paramount significance as the world witnessed their destructive potential, when the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. For the next 50 years, nuclear weapons remained the foremost concern for international community as nuclear arms race drove anxieties high in the Western and the non-Western world, alike. It was the arms control and non-proliferation efforts, such as Partial Test Ban Treaty, Non-

¹ [“What is the G7 Summit?”](#), G& 2023 Hiroshima Summit.

Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) among others, which inserted some predictability in states’ behaviour.

Since the indefinite extension of NPT, the debate around nuclear weapons, at least among nuclear weapons states, was assumed to be mostly settled, as they agreed more or less, to positive and negative security under the overall framework of NPT. In recent years, however, the nuclear debate has re-gained momentum, this time among nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states alike.

Nuclear modernisation

Most of the nuclear weapon states are either increasing or modernising their nuclear arsenal. Satellite images last year showed that China is building around 300 new missile silos; along with increase in its nuclear stockpile. China Military Power Report² 2022 released by U.S. Department of Defense stated that “if China continues the pace of its nuclear expansion, it could likely field a stockpile of about 1500 warheads by 2035”.

The United Kingdom, on the other hand explicitly mentioned in their 2021 Integrated Review³ document that “in recognition of the evolving security environment, including the developing range of technological and doctrinal threats, [reducing the nuclear stockpile ceiling to 180] is no longer possible, and the UK will move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads”. The document also confirms that in order to pursue deliberate ambiguity, United Kingdom will no longer give public figures of its operational stockpile, deployed warheads or deployed missile numbers.

This adjustment in nuclear posture of the countries is certainly a reflection of an unstable international security environment and, as a consequence, a negative threat perception amongst the great powers. The emergence of AUKUS can also be contextualised within an international nuclear security framework that creates a ‘wrong precedent’ for other nuclear weapon states to follow, despite the repeated assurances made by constituent countries of the transfers of ‘nuclear propulsion’ system and not the ‘nuclear warheads’.⁴

Putin’s Nuclear Brandishing

The Russia–Ukraine animosity is not new. At the time of disintegration of Soviet Union, there emerged a conflict between Ukraine (inheritor of 30,000 nuclear warheads) and Russia over the sharing of Black Sea Fleet forces and the prospects of Russian subversive attempts in eastern Ukraine. In 1994, Ukraine agreed to withdraw all the nuclear weapons to Russia and dismantle missile assets on its own soil in lieu of security assurances it received from the United States and Russia

² [“2022 China Military Power Report”](#), Factsheet, U.S. Department of Defense.

³ [“Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy”](#), Gov.UK, 2 July 2021.

⁴ [“Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS”](#), The White House, 13 March 2023.

against any nuclear weapons use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. Towards the end of negotiations, the Budapest memorandum of security assurances was signed by the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom extending security assurances to Ukraine.

Within a week of Russia’s ‘special military operation’ in February 2022, Vladimir Putin ordered Russia’s nuclear weapons to be put on high alert. In a subsequent announcement in September last year, Putin warned against West’s ‘nuclear blackmailing’ and threatened to use ‘all the means at his disposal’ to protect Russia’s territorial integrity.⁵

Once the ‘nuclear taboo’ on threat of use of nuclear weapons was broken last year, Russia took a step forward and announced nuclear sharing agreement with Belarus, the first since the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from all post-Soviet Republics. As per the announcement⁶, battlefield strategic weapons would be transferred to storage in Belarus, construction of which will be completed in July this year.

North Korean Brinkmanship

The North Korean nuclear threat looms large over the East Asian security landscape. In May 2022, on the eve of US President Joe Biden’s visit to South Korea, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated⁷that “... our intelligence does reflect the genuine possibility that there will be either a further missile tests — including a long-range missile test or a nuclear test or, frankly, both — in the days leading into, on, or after the President’s trip to the region”. In response to the United States and Republic of Korea’s joint military exercise ‘Vigilant Storm’, North Korea carried out barrage of medium to long range ballistic and cruise missile tests. Similarly in March 2023, Pyongyang fired two submarine launched cruise missiles as well as Hwasong 17, an intercontinental ballistic missile, among other more than 30 missiles. North Korea has also tested Hwasong-18, a solid-fuel, three-staged Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

To initiate political-public debate around indigenous nuclear deterrence capability, South Korean President, Yoon Suk Yeol, in January 2023 indicated his desire to introduce nuclear weapon in his country - either the US tactical nuclear weapons or an indigenously developed nuclear capability. This prompted United States to rush towards a kind of formal mutual nuclear consultation and planning arrangement, ultimately culminating in the Washington Declaration.⁸

⁵ For an analysis, see Rajiv Nayan, [“The Ukraine–Russia Conflict and Nuclear Misinformation”](#), Commentary, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 23 September 2022.

⁶ [“What did Putin say on Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Belarus?”](#), Reuters, 26 March 2023.

⁷ [“Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean- Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, May 18, 2022”](#), The White House, 18 May 2022.

⁸ [“Washington Declaration”](#), The White House, 26 April 2023.

Role of G7 and G-20 Presidency

As reflected in above discussion, developments in international security environment have lent a new lease of life to the relevancy of nuclear weapons. The momentum towards nuclear disarmament developed over last decade, culmination of which was the ‘Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons’, has somewhat waned into the ensuing nuclear sabre rattling. In this background, the two ardent supporters of nuclear disarmament, India and Japan, will have to lead the way in their respective G20 and G7 Presidency, and effect a coordinated response to the new threats emerging in this new nuclear age. A strong response will require rediscovering the tenets of nuclear diplomacy, including the role of signalling, moral suasion and risk assessment.

In the case of Russia, India and Japan can take a more prominent role in conveying that nuclear threats are a form of coercion, and incompatible with the norms of the international community. India can speak to both Russian and Western interlocutors about the profound irresponsibility as well as the counter-productivity of nuclear threats and counter-threats, as they will inevitably result in escalation as a response, needlessly ratcheting up the tension until the local conflict devolves into a global conflict.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already prepared the ground for this advocacy with his forthright remark to President Putin in March 2022. The Prime Minister’s remarks can be rephrased as ‘the current age is not one of (nuclear) war’. India can also declare its support for the Japan-established International Group of Eminent Persons for a World without Nuclear Weapons⁹ (which includes an Indian member) and held its first meeting in Hiroshima last year.

Japan for its part can use its unique perspective on atomic weapons to convey to both sides the cost of using such weapons as a part of war strategy. In this respect, the Japanese prime minister’s desire to impress upon his guests the horrifying toll of atomic bombs through the combined visit to the newly-revamped Hiroshima Peace Park and Museum is a good signal. Though Russia will obviously not be present, a strong but realistic message conveyed by Prime Minister Kishida from the site of the first atomic bomb explosion¹⁰, would do much to convey the hard realities of nuclear conflict.

In North Korea’s case, the issue is more complicated but still rewarding of initiatives. Japan must take the lead and continue to not only convey its openness to dialogue with the North Korean’s on its nuclear programme, but also to convince the other G-7 members to back the continuation of the suspended talks between the Pyongyang and Washington. India and Japan can also use their presidencies to encourage South Korea to discuss nuclear issues with the North, to ensure that any outcome is

⁹ [“Members of the International Group of Eminent Persons for a World without Nuclear Weapons”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2 December 2022.

¹⁰ Gabriel Rodriguez, [“At G7, Kishida eyes ‘realistic’ approach to nukes, with bold steps unlikely”](#), *The Japan Times*, 16 May 2023.

respected by all sides, and to prevent the destabilisation of the Korean peninsula by any provocative actions detrimental to regional security.

Both presidencies should ideally leave open the door for a future Japan–Korea meeting where both Koreas, with the possible participation of India, the US and even China, can discuss the issue of North Korea’s rapid nuclearisation and the threat that action presents to Asian security, as well as the *modus vivendi* to resolve these issues.

China’s case is of course the most complicated. If it expands its nuclear arsenal, the already hectic (conventional) arms race¹¹ occurring in the region, involving more than one nuclear weapon state, could heat up even further, and will have far-reaching consequences for regional and global security, not to mention the body blow to global non-proliferation and disarmament movements.¹² If China chooses to go forward with its nuclear expansion, the initial phase of reaction will be sure to affect Japan and South Korea, where politicians recommending an indigenous nuclear deterrent would be further emboldened.

Despite both countries being part of the US ‘nuclear umbrella’, politicians such as the late Shinzō Abe¹³ in Japan and the current president of South Korea, Yoon Suk-Yeol¹⁴, have long been vociferously campaigning for an indigenous nuclear capability that may provide a redundant layer of deterrence. It would not be out of the realm of possibility that China’s expanded arsenal may trigger both countries to accelerate their search for a domestic nuclear deterrent, despite the constraints of a nuclear taboo and a staunchly anti-nuclear public in the case of Japan, and unwillingness by the US to encourage South Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons. India and Japan should use their presidencies to convey clearly to China that its actions would have a very real impact on Asian security.

Conclusion

International politics is now seeing the re-emergence of nuclear issues in a big way due to Russia’s nuclear threats, China’s nuclear modernisation and North Korea’s continued nuclear and missile brinkmanship and provocation. Due to these issues, their respective regions are increasingly witnessing nuclear instability. Japan and India as chairs of G7 and G20 respectively have a key role to play to ensure that such instability is managed within the framework of international diplomacy in order to prevent situation of general insecurity

¹¹ Brad Lendon, [“Why Asia’s Arms Race Risks Spinning Out of Control”](#), *CNN*, 15 January 2023.

¹² [“Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use Higher At Any Time Since Cold War, Disarmament Affairs Chief Warns Security Council”](#), United Nations Security Council, 31 March 2023.

¹³ Sayuri Romei, [“The Legacy of Shinzo Abe: A Japan Divided About Nuclear Weapons”](#), *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 24 August 2022; Purnendra Jain, [“Ukraine War Triggers Debate on Japan’s Nuclear Option”](#), *Lowy Interpreter*, 14 March 2022.

¹⁴ Roman Pacheco-Pardo, [“Argument: South Korea Could Get Away With the Bomb”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 16 March 2023.

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