

SPECIAL COMMENT

In looking at the Middle East from a non-proliferation perspective, a curious anomaly presents itself. Since the Second World War, the region has been at the forefront in terms of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, the Middle East remains one of the few regions that has not seen the development of a meaningful arms control process.

Consider the following. The region is one of the highest amongst the Third World in terms of military expenditures, both in absolute dollar terms and as a percentage of GDP. For the last two decades, the Middle East has seen the unchecked expansion of weapons programmes in all classes of WMD. Many of the holdouts blocking the universality of the key global non-proliferation treaty regimes are in the Middle East, the most notable being Israel's refusal to adhere to the NPT and its retention of an advanced nuclear programme outside of IAEA safeguards. This, in turn, has prompted a number of Arab states to refrain from accession to, or ratification of, both the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention.

In looking at the region's unfortunate record of proliferation, it would be erroneous to perceive the problem as merely an extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although it is true that the Arab-Israeli conflict has exacerbated the trend, proliferation has occurred along multiple axes of conflict in the region. This assessment is also borne out by regional trends in military expenditure. Despite the peace process that has been ongoing for the better part of the last decade, the absence of any major Arab-Israeli wars, and with more and more states at peace with each other, military expenditures have remained relatively constant — at an overall annual total of about \$53 billion, with a 38% share of the world's arms imports according to official United States statistics.

It is this reality of proliferation as a region-wide trend, more than any other factor, which constitutes the strongest case for a comprehensive and aggressive arms control approach for the Middle East. Such an approach must be both inclusive and comprehensive: inclusive in that it cannot exempt any particular state from what is designed to be a region-wide arms control process, and comprehensive in that it should deal with all classes of weapons systems — non-conventional and conventional alike. It is important to stress this point because it was the inability to agree on these parameters that led to the collapse of the region's first, and so far only, experiment in arms control embodied in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group.

The negotiating history of the ACRS process, initiated within the context of the Madrid peace process, provides invaluable lessons for future arms control prospects in the Middle East. There is a prevalent misperception about ACRS that it foundered over differences concerning how to deal with the nuclear issue. The differences in fact ran deeper, and reflected a fundamental divergence in how to approach regional security issues. In essence, the debate was not over whether to focus on WMD or conventional weapons, but over whether to engage in any type of arms control at all or restrict the agenda to confidence-building measures (CBMs) of a limited and humanitarian nature.

The differences in approach were a reflection of the political postures of the parties to the process. Egypt, because it was the one state at peace with all the other participants, was in a position to envision a long-term end state for the region's security architecture centred around the establishment of a zone free of all WMD. Israel, on the other hand, initially did not have peaceful relations with any state involved in the ACRS talks — with the exception of Egypt — and thus sought to limit the agenda strictly to CBMs devoid of any arms control component. Israel's position in the ACRS process reflected what may be termed its "long-corridor" approach to regional arms control, an approach that lays down a series of demanding criteria before meaningful arms control measures can be adopted. According to this approach, regional arms control can only come about after a comprehensive peace has been established in the region, to be followed by a state of peace between peoples beyond the formal peace agreements between states, and only then can an arms control process be initiated beginning first with CBMs, to be expanded gradually to include conventional weapons systems and eventually WMD.

The record of previous experiences at regional and global arms control contradicts the assumptions inherent in this approach. Suffice it to say that the Cold War did not prevent the establishment of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe process, nor the negotiation of the ABM, SALT, START, CFE or INF treaties, the latter having been signed at the height of superpower rivalry. Furthermore, the continuation of regional conflicts did not prevent negotiations over the various nuclear-weapon-free zones established by the treaties of Pelindaba (Africa), Bangkok (South East Asia), Rarotonga (South Pacific) and Tlatelolco (Latin America).

However, the major problem with the long corridor approach, beyond the fact that it goes against any form of arms control logic, is that it is inherently politically untenable. No state engaged in serious arms control can allow the process to be tailored according to the priorities of one country alone. Such a skewed approach would, in essence, result in the exact opposite of confidence building. The essential lesson of ACRS, therefore, is that a selective arms control approach, or one that is dictated by the security concerns of one country or a group of countries, is bound to founder on the political unacceptability inherent in any lop-sided security agenda. The Iraqi experience presents a good example of this. In addition to the humanitarian situation affecting the Iraqi people, one of the reasons behind Arab public resentment towards the international effort to disarm Iraq of its proscribed WMD programmes, is that this effort has been undertaken in complete isolation from any broader regional arms control initiative. Article 14 of Security Council resolution 687 calling for the establishment of a zone free of WMD in the Middle East remains unfulfilled. Without justifying Iraq's proscribed programmes, initiating efforts to establish a WMD-free zone would have provided a more positive political context for the implementation of the said resolution.

The adoption of a comprehensive framework, however, need not preclude reliance on incremental or gradual approaches, nor does it mean ignoring the different security realities of the countries involved, so long as such measures are not divorced from the broader arms control context. CBMs can and should play an integral role in this process.

However, CBMs need not be confined only to search and rescue missions, notification of exercises and data exchange, but could also be broadened to include a more comprehensive approach. This would entail the adoption of measures of a political, legally binding and technical nature so as to instil the confidence necessary for the continuation of the overall process. For example, political CBMs could entail a series of declaratory measures which, among others, would reaffirm the commitment of the regional and international parties to the creation of a zone free of WMD in the Middle East, a renewed commitment to ensure the universality of the NPT, and a declaration on the non-use of any type of WMD. These political CBMs should be complemented by legally binding disarmament commitments, such as submission of all nuclear facilities to IAEA safeguards,

together with adherence to the NPT. Finally, technical CBMs would entail measures that contribute to the physical security of states involved, such as limited force zones, data exchange and mutual monitoring, many of which have already been implemented in the context of Arab-Israeli disengagement agreements and peace treaties.

In short, any CBM process needs to be comprehensive in scope so as to constitute an integral component of the arms control process. Such measures should not, and cannot, be confined only to a specific class of weapons systems, but rather should be broad enough so as to deal with the overall arms build-up in the region. Such steps would instil the political confidence for deferring certain issues while dealing with others on a more immediate basis. Furthermore, all such CBMs cannot constitute stand-alone measures, but must be part of an ongoing and energetic process of disarmament.

The need for a comprehensive regional approach to arms control now presents itself with ever greater urgency. In the absence of a regional arms control process, WMD programmes in the Middle East have continued unchecked. Having mastered the rudiments of missile technology, regional missile programmes are on the verge of crossing new thresholds in terms of range and payload. The past decade has also seen the diversification and expansion of chemical and biological weapons programmes. And, if we are to believe Israeli and American analysts, the trend towards creeping nuclearization of the region may produce a multi-polar nuclear Middle East within the next decade.

If this proliferation trend continues unabated, it will inevitably trigger a re-evaluation on the part of regional states, prompting some to accelerate the development of their already existing WMD programmes, while forcing others to activate programmes that have so far remained dormant. More importantly, it might precipitate a rethinking by certain states of their security postures vis-à-vis the WMD threat. Perhaps the most visible sign of this is the gradual erosion of Israel's ambiguity posture regarding its nuclear programme.

If such a scenario manifests itself, and security trends in the region certainly point towards this direction, we might be faced with consequences that prove to be irreversible, thus permanently closing the door on any efforts to reverse the proliferation trend in the Middle East. How, for example, could we restart ACRS in the context of a nuclear breakout in the region, or in the eventuality of an open (i.e. 'non-ambiguous') WMD deterrence relationship superimposed on the conflicts that already exist?

A selective approach to arms control will not forestall such a nightmare security scenario. Only a comprehensive framework for addressing the proliferation problem in the Middle East has the potential for stemming the proliferation trend in the region.

Nabil Fahmy

Ambassador of Egypt to the United States

Chairman of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters