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A Human Security Approach To Nuclear Disarmament – Analysis

January 10, 2018 IPCS 1 Comment

By [IPCS](#)

By Shivani Singh*

Despite the best intentions of nuclear disarmament groups, failure to adopt norms surrounding human security in disarmament has proved



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to be a major impediment in achieving concrete progress. Why is the human security approach needed in nuclear disarmament? Why has it taken a backseat to a country's military and strategic considerations? How can human security norms be built into the nuclear disarmament discourse?

Human security studies deal with the merging of traditional and non-traditional threats to security, narrowing down the analysis to the unit level where the individual is the subject matter of the debate.

For any use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against an adversary state, it is ultimately human lives that stand at the receiving end. The very nature of nuclear weapons defies distinctions between combatants and non-combatants in a state of war. Considering the exorbitant risk attached with the possible usage of a weapon that is technically never meant to be used, the costs fail to match the benefits.

The risks to human lives are not only limited to the actual use of a nuclear weapon but in fact span the production, stockpiling and transfer of nuclear weapons and fissile material. Exposure to nuclear radiation while cleaning radioactive leaks and spills, uncertainty regarding the extent of genetic mutation among populations that neighbour reactors and testing grounds, and the potential for disasters at the site of a nuclear reactor are some of the inadvertent yet crucial consequences of maintaining a nuclear arsenal.

Any discussion therefore that accounts for traditional, state-centric conceptions of security must also focus on individual, human security. After all, what is it exactly that nuclear weapons are supposed to secure? Whose security are they prioritising?

The human security approach becomes all important in dealing with nuclear disarmament given the scale at which nuclear weapons can affect human lives. This approach does not de-prioritise the state – instead, it complements state security and works in tandem to attain the goal of nuclear disarmament.

The place of norms surrounding human security, however, has been rather precarious. States still see nuclear weapons as intrinsically linked and even synonymous with their national security, focusing on the strategic and military considerations rather than – or in tandem with – humanitarian or ethical concerns.

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The reason is two-fold. Firstly, there is an inherent power struggle that emerges from the systemic realities of the international system. Nuclear weapons are validated by the understanding that striving for power is the ultimate aim for any state – their possession provide states with defensive (and offensive) power to ensure their survival. This power-seeking behaviour gives rise to the notion of security that gives precedence to protecting borders and maintaining the status quo over ensuring the survival of its citizens.

Secondly, the international system is plagued by innate trust deficits that motivate states to adopt security-centric approaches while formulating national security strategies. A result of this trust deficit is the logic of nuclear deterrence which is based on the principle of mutually assured destruction. Deterrence, through repeated articulation, has become the norm, thus convincing states to nuclearise in order to survive.

The problem, however, is in the very rationale of nuclear deterrence theory which encourages a spiralling arms race. In fact, what deterrence promises is a heightened state of fear to maintain the status quo – that is, guaranteeing 'security' by perpetuating 'insecurity'.

Since human security norms in nuclear disarmament are weak, the starting point in any norm-building exercise would be to explore 'security' from a humanitarian lens rather than solely viewing nuclear weapons as symbols of power and prestige. This requires a paradigm shift towards using the individual as the proper referent of security rather than the state.

To this end, states like Austria and Japan have initiated efforts on international forums to emphasise the humanitarian initiative in nuclear disarmament. Treaties like the Mine Ban Treaty and Convention on Cluster Munitions have set a positive precedent in customary international law on armament policy by stigmatising the use of these associated weapons. These treaties can act as a guiding framework for successful norm-building around humanitarian considerations for nuclear disarmament.

The traditional understanding of security must undergo a paradigm change in order to recognise the centrality of humanitarian considerations in nuclear disarmament, and subsequently incorporate them in national security strategies.

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* **Shivani Singh**

Researcher, NSP, IPCS

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One thought on “A Human Security Approach To Nuclear Disarmament – Analysis”

Jonathan Frerichs

January 11, 2018 at 4:38 pm

Permalink

Thank you for this rare exposition of the security everyone needs in the 21st Century. Curious, however, why the brand-new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is not mentioned? It caps the humanitarian initiative and features in the latest Nobel Peace Prize—to ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. As per Singh's fine point about “narrowing down the analysis to...the individual”, the TPNW recognizes victim assistance, environmental remediation, women, girls and indigenous people ‘inter alia’. 56 states have already signed. With 20th century-style nuclear instability fueling

crises in Northeast and South Asia, Japan, both Koreas, India and Pakistan need to move towards signing it too. The TPNW is an object lesson in human security. It shows the P5 nuclear powers of the last century what security for all means now.

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