

Russia-US Dialogue on Nuclear Issues

US-Russia Nuclear Policy in the Middle East, Dec. 18, 2020

Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD: Overcoming Obstacles

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Thank you, Anton, Bill, and Sarah

And I want to mention it is especially a pleasure to serve with Roman on the same panel. He and Amb. Ulyanov are great supporters of the ME WMDFZ initiative I direct under UNIDIR. Where Anton is also a contributor. Here I would like also to say that my talk is off the record, which is particularly important given my dual hat with CNS and UNDIR.

With that, let me start.

The objective of establishing a ME WMDFZ in the Middle East has been a feature in international and regional fora for almost 50 years with little to no progress. There are many reasons to this failure, but one common feature when zone negotiations proceeded in a serious and constructive way was close US-Russian coordination. This was true during ACRS, in the NPT 2010 RevCon, and during the 2012-2014 Glion/ Geneva consultations.

During ACRS, while the US was the main driver behind the process, despite the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia served as co-chair of the ACRS working group, two of the plenaries took place in Moscow, and Russia presented many papers to support the process including on Concepts and Technologies of Verification, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in general, and on CBMs at Sea and in Airspace to name only few.

In 2010, in the months and weeks leading to the 2010 NPT RevCon Russian and American diplomats actively worked on ideas and elements that could be put forth at the 2010 NPT RevCon. It took place as both countries also worked closely over those months on the negotiations for the New START Treaty, and United Nations security Council Resolution 1929 on Iran.

It was the close coordination between the two countries that paved the way to an agreement during the RevCon to hold a conference on the ME WMDFZ by 2012. Russia and the US also coordinated closely during the Glion/ Geneva consultation process which was aimed at preparing the then postponed 2012 ME WMDFZ conference.

This close bilateral coordination proved essential in other important regional nonproliferation achievements in the last decade, namely the destruction of most of Syria's chemical weapons and the JCPOA. In all of these instances, the bilateral coordination between Russia and the US was essential.

The Middle East is one of the few places where multiple strategic objectives of both states align – both countries look to prevent further proliferation, but not less important, more broadly, prevent further instability, avoid unintentional bi-lateral and regional escalation, defeat ISIS, create favorable conditions for national companies, and ensure energy security.

The two by no means always agree with each other on how to achieve these objectives, but at least in these five instances the two states found a way to work together to promote these interests and by extension, the regional and international nonproliferation agenda.

US-Russian coordination, when take place sends a strong message on several levels. It demonstrates the importance of the issue and the willingness of the two world major powers to work together despite significant differences on interests and tactics.

It is also something that states of the region take note of and when it serves their national security interests have expressed that they would like to see more of it.

When state in the region does not perceive the objective as a priority or as serve their national security interests the US-Russian corporation serves as a strong compellence factor. It put regional states in a situation where they not only may feel compel to submit to the joint US-Russian initiative, but also find it much harder to play US and Russia against each other, or extract more bargain chips.

But US-Russia cooperation while essential is an insufficient ingredient for success on regional security issues. For the process to succeed, it is not enough for the US and Russia to agree but as the focus of the paper is the ME WMDFZ, regional states first need to have a shared vision of what is the objective, and what is the mechanism to achieve it.

This is obviously not the case in the UNGA ME WMDFZ process, where Israel, and under the Trump administration, the US, opposed the process. This is not to say that the two opposed the end objective, namely, to establish the ME free of all WMD, but they disagree on the process in which the mandate was decided, the scope of the mandate, and the mechanism that was used to implement it, namely a UN-convened conference.

It is unclear what a Biden administration would decide with regards to the process. It is hard to know if a new administration will change course and decide to join the Nov. conference process. But since it will probably not be one of the top priorities for the administration, it may not make that decision until it needs to, probably in preparation for the NPT RevCon scheduled now to take place in August 2021 or ahead of the second session of the Nov Conference in late 2021.

But even if the US does join, it is very unlikely that Israel will change course. Israel was very clear that it has to be itself a co-architect of any regional process that is aimed at bringing it to disarm.

The only way that a ME WMDFZ will work is if all states in the region perceive it as serving their national security interests at best, and as not undermining it, at a minimum.

Often, those that criticize Israel's position say that the zone is aimed at addressing a very specific problem in the region: the proliferation of WMD and that the inclusion of other issues distracts from the simple and most effective solution.

Given the other recent events in the region and globally, namely the Abraham Accords as well as the incoming Biden Administration and their stated objective to return to the JCPOA, we may be in an opportune time to address both the zone as well as other regional security issues.

To do so, first, Russia and the US (ideally along with the other P-5) could start talking with regional states about what should be the regional security vision and architecture in this new post-Trump era, the Abraham Accords, and Great Power Competition worldview (US pivot to Asia did not start with the Trump administration, and will not end there, with direct implications on how much regional states could rely on the US to address their national security interests).

Second, Russia and the US will have to start discussing what a return to the JCPOA (whether the original one; JCPOA 2.0, or a comprehensive agreement with Iran) with regional states.

How addressing Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities and its other activities as well as missile program can be structured, and what realistically can be achieved. How regional states' concerns will be taken into account so they would not be the spoilers of the JCPOA process. Whether it would be through a parallel tracks, sequential tracks, or security assurances, these should be thought through and given the increased Russian involvement in the region, Moscow, and possibly the other parties of the JCPOA should be brought into the conversation.

Third, with regards to the UNGA ME WMD/FZ conference. If the three other processes above take place, namely regional security process, a some kind of JCPOA, and taking regional concerns regards the JCPOA in one way or the other, I can see a situation in which Israel will believe that its other security interests are addressed sufficiently to allow it to enter to discussion about the zone.

One of the issues that became clear from the first Nov. meeting, the one that took place in 2019, is that there are disagreements among regional states about the scope of the zone (whether it should only address nuclear weapons; whether it should be based on the 1995 ME Resolution, or the 2018 UNGA resolution).

I see the UNGA process as a very useful place where this as well as other differing positions about the zone can be debated. Given it is the first time that regional states, albeit without Israel discuss what should be the scope of the region (as well as other relevant zone related issues) in a serious and constructive way is a very important development.

If the other three processes would address some of the issues that regional states debated during the Nov. conference (namely means of delivery, Iran's nuclear weapons program, and regional security), it may make at least modest progress on the zone, more likely.