



THE CEND INITIATIVE: A VEILED US AGENDA FOR NUCLEAR HEGEMONY?

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Abstract

During the 10th Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the US proposed an initiative called Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND). This article explores and investigates the true intentions of the great power behind that initiative. The analysis is based solely on the 2010 and 2018 US Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPR) and the 2022 Nuclear Defense Strategy. These documents depict a huge contradiction between the US's stated non-proliferation and disarmament policies and its actions. Critics say that the US disarmament goals, modernization of its nuclear weapons, and withdrawal from key arms control treaties go equally/parallel. It also doubted the genuine agenda of the CEND initiative. The study follows qualitative research methodology and has used primary and secondary data sources such as government records, disarmament meeting records, and academic literature to evaluate the broader implications of CEND. The study reveals that, unquestionably, the framework of the CEND Initiative is framed as a disarmament effort, but it may largely serve the geopolitical interests of the US through ensuring its nuclear hegemony. This raises concerns among the nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states about the true impact of the initiative on global arms reduction efforts.

Keywords: CEND, US Nuclear Policy, Nuclear Disarmament, Nuclear Hegemony, Global Security

Introduction

In the contemporary span of geopolitical dynamics and the persistence of nuclear weapons, global disarmament remains a major concern for international peace and security. Under the Trump administration in 2018, the US, among other non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives, introduced the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative. The initiative addresses the conditions necessary for nuclear disarmament by engaging both nuclear and non-nuclear states in the dialogue. It aims to address the current unfavorable international security environment for nuclear disarmament (US Dept. of State,



2024). The CEND seems like the latest US effort to promote the disarmament discourse and has garnered international attention to some extent, but also sparked debate regarding its underlying motivations and potential impact.

The major objectives of the initiative are multilateral engagement, collaboration of stakeholders in tackling the drivers of nuclear proliferation, and the identification of possible ways to reduce the reliance of states on nuclear weapons. It also claims that it will focus on the broader security landscape. According to the US, such as conventional arms build-ups, regional disputes (South Asia and the Middle East), and cyber threats are the main obstacles to the current standoff in disarmament efforts (Kang, 2020). In spite of the so-called ambitious agenda of the initiative, the critique arises in several quarters of scholars and analysts. The US claims that CEND demonstrates its commitment to Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but, the critics question its effectiveness and sincerity (Evans, 2020). Some argue that nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are inextricably linked, and weakening the non-proliferation regime is counterproductive (Carlson, 2019). Critics also questioned whether it is a genuine effort towards disarmament or merely a means for the US to maintain its nuclear dominance under the guise of disarmament advocacy.

Critical analysis of the initiative seeks that while CEND presents itself as a disarmament effort, its actual outcomes may reinforce the global status quo, where nuclear-armed states retain their arsenals under the justification of maintaining global stability. These critiques often highlight the US historical reliance on nuclear deterrence as a cornerstone of its national security strategy (Bailey, 1995), and they raise doubts about whether CEND is aligned with the long-term goal of complete disarmament. Current discussions on nuclear weapons are heavily influenced by geopolitical biases, sidelining dissenting voices and rendering disarmament nearly unspeakable within the US.

Although the argument in favor of disarmament by non-nuclear countries is rather active, there is still a major gap, which confirms the necessity to have an inclusive dialogue that takes into account the various historical and political contexts that have informed nuclear debates. (Burke, 2016). The promotion of the Obama administration of advanced conventional weaponry, intended to advance disarmament, paradoxically reinforces the US military dominance, diminishing the appeal of a nuclear-free world to its rivals and isolating the US in its disarmament endeavors (Futter and Zala, 2013). The failure of crucial disarmament treaties further exemplifies such a precarious state of global nuclear disarmament, which is developing a state of disillusion among non-nuclear-weapon states. It also increases the superficiality of initiatives like the CEND, which risk devolving into mere public relations exercises rather than fostering genuine dialogue and progress needed in an increasingly militarized and divided world (IISS, 2019).

Furthermore, the examination of the US rhetoric, global reactions, key events such as the US withdrawal from arms control treaties (i.e., the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty), and the bolstering of the US's recent nuclear modernization needs special attention. Likewise, the international community is not convinced of the negligence of the



step-by-step disarmament process by the CEND initiative, as they believe that the three pillars of the NPT (i.e., nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy) are interdependent and should not be selectively ignored (Kurosawa, 2020). These developments raise important questions about the US commitment to disarmament and whether CEND is part of a broader strategy to shape the global nuclear order in a way that preserves the US strategic advantages.

The central question of this study is, Is the CEND initiative a sincere attempt at strengthening global disarmament efforts, or is it primarily a strategic tool to perpetuate the US nuclear hegemony? So, the paper critically analyzes CEND's stated goals, its implementation, its motivations, and its broader implications. The study puts CEND within its political and strategic context under the analysis of a range of primary and secondary sources. The findings suggest that CEND serves to reshape disarmament discourse in ways that align with US strategic interests rather than advancing concrete disarmament measures.

Unpacking CEND

Initially, the CEND was launched in 2018 during the 10th Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT Review Conf., 2018), and the participants in the US disarmament initiative agreed on a two-year work plan under the CEND project in 2019 (US Dept. of State, 2019). Three subgroups were formed in the meeting to pursue nuclear disarmament ahead of the 2020 NPT Review Conference. The major working group of the CEND was convened in London having 62 delegates from 31 nations that include both nuclear- and non-nuclear-weapon states, and several non-NPT signatories as well. The US Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, Christopher Ford, emphasized that addressing the security rationales for maintaining nuclear weapons is key to the CEND initiative, which seeks to overcome security barriers to disarmament and develop pathways to achieve it in a complex global environment (Bogus, 2020). This initiative aims to shift the focus of disarmament efforts from numerical reduction to the improvement of geopolitical security environment. It argues that nuclear disarmament can only progress if the underlying security concerns of states are addressed. (Kurosawa, 2020)

The Three Subgroups of CEND

There are three subgroups launched under the CEND initiative:

First Subgroup: The group, led by the Netherlands and Morocco, focuses on eliminating incentives for nuclear projects, strengthening discourse on threat perceptions, managing noncompliance, and debating nuclear deterrence and humanitarian consequences.

Second Subgroup: This group is led by South Korea and the US, this group focuses on best practices for nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament procedures, improving their operation and supporting capacity building, particularly leadership development.

Third Subgroup: The third group is led by Germany and Finland. This aims to explore



and analyze nuclear risk reduction measures and develop actionable options for reducing nuclear risks. (*Moving Forward With the CEND Initiative - United States Department of State*, n.d.)

Extensive Critical Analysis of US NPR

Previous NPRs and the National Defense Strategy 2022

The US Department of Defense has issued four policy documents called as Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs), that outline the role of nuclear weapons in the country's security strategy, evaluating nuclear capabilities, deterrent measures, and arms control policies that apprise decisions on development, deployment, and management of the US nuclear arsenal. A detailed review of these documents demonstrates the development of the US nuclear policy throughout the specified time (NPR, 2024). It reveals the underlying patterns of strategic continuity despite rhetorical shifts.

Inherent contradictions between the US' rhetorical commitments to non-proliferation and disarmament and the actual policy choices have been shown by the examination of the 2010 and 2018 NPRs, reflecting a nuanced double standard towards nuclear states (Karim and Mahmood, 2021). Although all NPRs are echoes of the US commitment to non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons, nevertheless, the investment in nuclear modernization at the same time implies that nuclear deterrence is still relied upon, which in its turn weakens the normative legitimacy of such efforts as CEND. This strategy evokes concerns of the non-nuclear states and compromises the veracity of the US non-proliferation leadership, indicating lack of contribution between the professed values and the realities of operation. On the same note, the attitude which the US has taken on some nuclear states, insisting on stricter measures on states like Iran and North Korea and yet tolerating and even strengthening the nuclear stockpile of its friends like the UK, France, and even Australia, is the indication of an unfair one-sided treatment. Such a gap is not only an obstacle to international disarmament but also creates a disjointed international system where norms and expectations surrounding nuclear capabilities are variably applied, which questions the good intentions of disarmament platforms championed by the US.

Furthermore, after reviewing the development of the US NPR and its new initiative, the CEND, it is very obvious that there is a huge contradiction between the two. The efforts of the Obama's administration to strengthen international norms and institutions for nuclear disarmament were seen as a potential solution (Landau and Malz-Ginzburg, 2011), but the recent AUKUS alliance, which includes the US, UK, and Australia, has further complicated the situation (Camia et al, 2022). Which illustrates the strategic selectivity that continues to characterize US nuclear diplomacy. The 2018 NPR focuses heavily on enhancing US nuclear capabilities and deterrence flexibility, in response to a changing security environment in order to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear threats and ensure the security of the US and its allies (NPR, 2018). Notably, it does not reflect CEND's disarmament-oriented rhetoric, suggesting the initiative operates more as a parallel narrative than an



integrated strategic shift. This reinforces the critique that CEND functions to legitimize continued nuclear dominance rather than alter core defense postures.

The US, in response to the critique, under Joe Biden’s administration, then launched a grand National Defense Strategy 2022, which included three strategic documents: the National Defense Strategy, the NPR, and the Missile Defense Review (National Defence Strategy, 2022). That policy document maintained the emphasis on deterrence and modernization of nuclear weapons, with a focus on military aspects, continuing the trend of strategic consolidation over disarmament progress (Kurosawa, 2023). The modernization program included the consideration of low-yield Nuclear-armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N) and Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) programs, with a proposed solution to maintain the W76-2 program and continue the low-yield SLCM-N program (McKinley et al., 2022). Though it includes a nominal section on arms control, its overall continuity with the 2018 NPR highlights the absence of meaningful policy change (Krivolapov et al., 2023). While a brief overview of the 2022 NPR has been published, it appears to be a continuation of Obama's nuclear policy adopted in 2010 (IISS, 2022). Therefore, the current state of the US nuclear strategy has not experienced any major alterations (Potočňák, 2023), reinforcing the argument that CEND exists more as a strategic distraction than a meaningful shift in doctrine. Thus, the US posture remains centered on sustaining strategic superiority while promoting disarmament discourse through CEND, underscoring its dual-track approach that privileges hegemony over disarmament.

Table 1: Comparison of Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPR) of 2010, 2018, 2022

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Obama Administration NPR (2010)</i>	<i>Trump Administration NPR (2018)</i>	<i>Biden Administration NPR (2022)</i>
Declaratory Policy	Emphasized reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the US national security strategy. Focused on preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism as top priorities (Executive Summary).	Reaffirmed that the use of nuclear weapons by the US would be considered only in extreme circumstances to protect vital interests. Expanded "extreme circumstances" to include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks on civilian infrastructure and early warning systems.	Aligns with "extreme circumstances" but rejects sole purpose policy. Emphasizes working towards a declaration of sole purpose while considering Allies' concerns.
Sole Purpose Policy	Did not adopt a sole-purpose policy but aimed to create conditions where it	Did not adopt a sole purpose policy. Nuclear weapons would deter non-	Biden's NPR rejects sole purpose for now but commits to working towards it in



	could eventually adopt such a stance.	nuclear attacks.	strategic consultation with Allies and partners.
Negative Security Assurances	Strengthened negative security assurances, declaring that the US would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states compliant with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with adjustments for the biological weapons threat.	Reaffirmed no use or threat against non-nuclear weapon states compliant with the NPT. Reserved the right to adjust this assurance in response to significant non-nuclear strategic attacks.	Reaffirms non-use or threat against non-nuclear states compliant with NPT, without reservations regarding biological or strategic non-nuclear attacks.
Nuclear Modernization	Committed to modernizing the US nuclear arsenal to ensure safety, security, and effectiveness without developing new nuclear warheads or conducting nuclear tests.	Continued modernization efforts with the development of the W76-1 and W88 warhead life extension programs. Initiated programs for the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), a new bomber (B-21), and the Long-Range Standoff weapon (LRSO).	Continues modernization but cancels the SLCM-N and plans to retire the B83-1 gravity bomb. Emphasizes transparent modernization to support deterrence.
Nuclear Force Structure	Sought to maintain a flexible and credible nuclear deterrent while reducing the overall number of nuclear weapons.	Maintained a triad of nuclear forces, including strategic bombers, submarines, and ICBMs. Began the replacement of the Ohio-class submarine with the Columbia-class, and the modernization of ICBMs with GBSD.	Focuses on transparency and arms control, retiring certain older capabilities and emphasizing mutual risk reduction.



<p>Arms Control and Disarmament</p>	<p>Prioritized arms control efforts, such as the New START treaty, aimed at reducing the US and Russian nuclear arsenals. Emphasized non-proliferation and reducing the role of nuclear weapons globally.</p>	<p>Emphasized that progress in arms control must be based on the security environment and enforceability. Highlighted challenges posed by Russian violations of arms control treaties like the INF.</p>	<p>Stresses the importance of arms control and risk reduction. Extended New START, aims for new frameworks with Russia and dialogue with China.</p>
<p>Relations with Russia and China</p>	<p>Viewed strategic stability with Russia and China as crucial. Focused on maintaining nuclear deterrence while promoting transparency and arms control efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation.</p>	<p>Asserted that Russia and China were expanding their nuclear capabilities and increasingly relying on nuclear coercion. Continued efforts to engage in strategic dialogue with both countries despite challenges, aiming to prevent miscalculation.</p>	<p>Prioritizes strategic stability through arms control with Russia and engaging China on nuclear risk reduction. Seeks to address concerns with diplomacy and mutual transparency.</p>
<p>Nuclear Non-Proliferation</p>	<p>Emphasized preventing nuclear proliferation and terrorism, especially from states like North Korea and Iran. Strengthened the NPT and promoted measures to secure nuclear materials worldwide.</p>	<p>Reaffirmed commitment to the NPT and efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation, especially regarding North Korea and Iran.</p>	<p>Strong commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and the NPT. Focuses on diplomatic measures to prevent nuclear weapon development in Iran and North Korea.</p>
<p>Multilateral Arms Control and Disarmament</p>	<p>Supported multilateral efforts like the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT).</p>	<p>Continued support for the NPT but did not support ratification of the CTBT. Sought verification and enforcement measures for any arms control efforts.</p>	<p>Supports CTBT ratification and negotiations on FMCT. Does not support TPNW but emphasizes realistic disarmament steps and international security considerations.</p>



Allies and Partners	Stressed the importance of reassuring allies through extended deterrence while reducing the role of nuclear weapons.	Maintained extended nuclear deterrence for the US allies and emphasized close coordination on security issues.	- Balances deterrence with the aim of reassuring Allies while working towards the sole purpose. Focuses on coordinated steps with Allies for security and arms control.
Overall Strategy	Aimed to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the US strategy while ensuring a credible deterrent. Focused on arms control, non-proliferation, and working toward the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons.	Emphasized the need for a flexible and adaptive nuclear strategy to deter adversaries in a rapidly evolving threat environment.	Strives for a balanced approach between deterrence and arms control. Aims for disarmament while maintaining a credible deterrent, influenced by diplomatic and military.

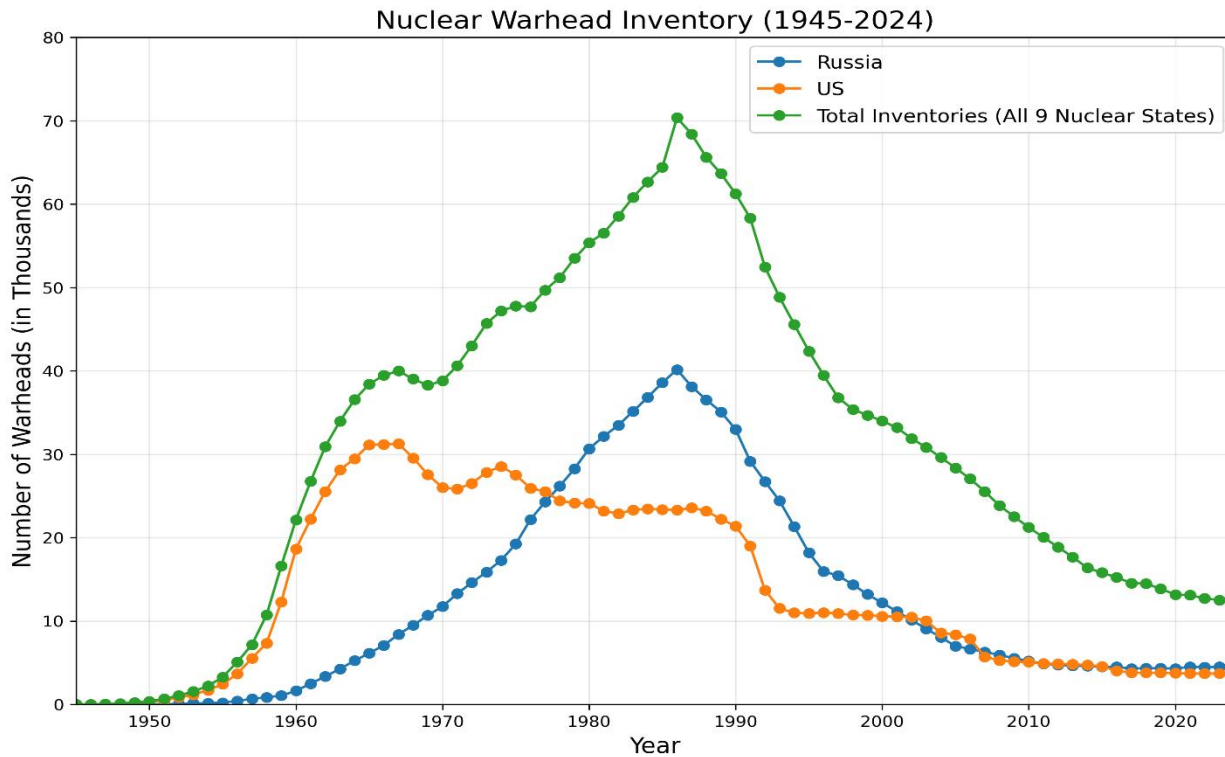
Source: NPR-2010, NPR-2018, NPR-2022 (Author’s Compilation)

Barriers in US-Russia Arms Control and Global Effects

Approximately 125,000 nuclear weapons have been produced since 1945, primarily by the US and Russia. Over 10,000 warheads are now in use by nine different countries, and there are more retired warheads in storage. Even though Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, China, and India have smaller arsenals than the UK, China's arsenal is probably larger than the nuclear stockpiles of the UK (Kristensen and Norris, 2013). This growing asymmetry illustrates how strategic capabilities are not uniformly distributed. All nuclear-armed countries are keeping up the modernization of their arsenals even though the total number of nuclear stockpiles in the world has decreased. This paradox demonstrates the gap between disarmament rhetoric and strategic realities. Despite reductions in nuclear arsenals since post-World War Two, the inventory of nuclear weapons is high globally, with nine countries possessing around 12,121 warheads as of early 2024 as per estimation of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) (Federation of American Scientists, 2023). 88% of the total nuclear weapons of the world are with the US and Russia and 84% of those are ready for military use. This overwhelming concentration underscores the bilateral centrality of the US and Russia in global nuclear dynamics. While no other nuclear-armed state feels the need for more than a few hundred warheads for their security, many of these states are

still increasing their nuclear stockpiles. This contradiction reveals a shifting perception of deterrence even among smaller nuclear states.

Figure 1: Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Stockpiles 1945-2024



Source: FAS, Statista (Author’s Compilation)

The FAS has released the "Nuclear Notebook: United States Nuclear

Weapons 2024," and the estimations of Statista provide an overview of the US nuclear arsenal and modernization trends. The report states that the US maintains a stockpile of approximately 3,708 warheads, with 1,770 of these deployed and 1,938 reserved for operational forces. Additionally, 1,336 retired warheads are awaiting dismantlement, making a total inventory of around 5,044 warheads. The US nuclear modernization program, which includes replacing every nuclear delivery system, could cost over \$1.7 trillion. Notably, the modernization plan has shifted from simply extending the life of existing warheads to developing new designs and additional weapon types, despite facing rising costs and delays. Such investments reflect a long-term strategic vision that contradicts disarmament initiatives. Strategic competition with Russia and China is driving calls for more nuclear weapons, but the increased secrecy around the US arsenals contrasts with calls for transparency about adversarial capabilities. This selective transparency signals an imbalance in strategic posturing. The New START treaty, which has helped to control the US and Russian nuclear arsenals since 2010, is also now uncertain as it is to



expire in 2026 (Kristensen et al, 2024).

The arms control landscape between the US and Russia is fraught with significant hurdles, primarily driven by political, strategic, novel technological advancement, and geopolitical factors. However, the rise of new actors, like China, contributed further to the nuclear arms race (Lissner, 2021). Politically, both nations have witnessed growing mistrust and adversarial relations, particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This mistrust has been exacerbated eventually by actions such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014, alleged interference in the US presidential election (2016) (Marten, 2017), and Russia-Ukraine war on strategic grounds and have led to increased tensions and a breakdown in diplomatic communications (Ellison et al, 2023). Strategically, both countries have different views on nuclear deterrence and defense policies (Zolotarev, 2019).

For instance, the US emphasis on missile defense systems, such as the deployment of Aegis Ashore in Europe, is perceived by Russia as a threat to its nuclear deterrent (Giles, 2015). This divergence in threat perception fuels an arms buildup cycle and limits trust-based arms control efforts. Similarly, the proposed Ukraine membership in NATO is considered as the US expansionist policy by Russia and these issues prompted Moscow to develop new weapons systems. While for the US NATO nuclear policy, including its nuclear triad, remains crucial in the face of Russian aggression, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine (Chitadze, 2022). Thus, the US nuclear policy is based on maintaining deterrence and its hegemony around the world. This strategic posturing reflects a broader pattern of securitized competition, where mutual distrust perpetuates escalation rather than cooperation. Consequently, arms control becomes a casualty of geopolitical rivalry, further destabilizing the nuclear order.

The continuous bilateral tension resulted in technological advancements in nuclear capabilities and space programs by both of the states which have further strained relations (Altmann and Sauer, 2017). For instance, Russia's development of the Avancard hypersonic glide vehicle (Aljazeera, 2024) and the Poseidon underwater drone (The Diplomat, 2024), along with the US advancement in missile defense systems and interest in space-based interceptors (Wingerter, 2011), have added new dimensions to strategic stability concerns. The militarization of space has also introduced new challenges to traditional arms control frameworks, as both countries are enhancing their capabilities to potentially disrupt satellites and other space-based assets. This expansion of the strategic domain further erodes the relevance of bilateral treaties like New START.

For instance, the New START treaty despite its extension in 2021 continues to face significant challenges which include uncertainties about what agreement will follow it and how to address technologically advanced weapons that were not covered under its original terms (Esin, 2021). There are wider implications of the hurdles in the arms control between the US and Russia that are affecting the nuclear policies of other nuclear-armed states and encouraging the rise of new competitors, like China. Thus, the differing nuclear strategies of the US, China, and Russia, in a complex multipolar nuclear world that also includes states like India, North Korea, and Pakistan, are heightening the challenges of peace and



stability (Lissner, 2021). This emerging multipolarity necessitates a broader, multilateral arms control framework beyond traditional US-Russia mechanisms.

China has continuously been modernizing its nuclear weapons and cyber capabilities. According to the analysts, this advancement is partially a response to the weakening of US-Russia arms control frameworks and has led both nations to reevaluate their strategic policies. Additionally, regional conflicts and alliances, such as NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's partnerships with countries like China and Iran, have heightened security concerns on both sides. These factors have influenced other nuclear-armed states, like India and Pakistan, which view the lack of progress in US-Russia arms control as a green light to continue their nuclear modernization programs. The faltering of US-Russia arms control efforts has also impacted the non-proliferation regime, as seen in the reduced efficacy of the NPT review conferences, where non-nuclear states express frustration over the slow pace of disarmament by nuclear-armed states. This highlights the interconnectedness of nuclear policies globally and underscores the need for renewed efforts in arms control to prevent a new arms race and enhance international security. Without such efforts, the current path risks institutionalizing instability in the global nuclear order.

Motives Behind CEND: Critiques

The CEND initiative aims to recover the international security environment as a primary requirement for nuclear disarmament.(Altmetric et al., 2020) CEND adopts an incremental approach, focusing on easing global tensions rather than immediate numerical arms reduction. The initiative provides a platform for dialogue among states to understand security concerns and threat perceptions (CEND, 2019). However, its effectiveness and sincerity are debated. Proponents believe this approach helps fill the gaps in the current nonproliferation system, but skeptics question whether it provides a pretext for inaction.(Kurosawa, 2020) While the US claims that CEND reflects its dedication to Article VI of the NPT, others doubt whether it genuinely represents a sincere and effective step toward disarmament (Evans, 2022), Critics argue that CEND might be a strategy to sidestep meaningful disarmament while preserving nuclear dominance, all under the pretense of striving for a safer, nuclear-free world.(Altmetric et al., 2020)

Geopolitical or Diplomatic Motivations

i. Preservation of Strategic Dominance - Delaying Disarmament Commitments

It is doubtful that under the umbrella of CEND, the US appears to be supportive of disarmament without making concrete commitments to reduce its nuclear arsenal. The US can justify the maintenance and modernization of its nuclear capabilities by focusing on “creating conditions” for disarmament (Roberts, 2019) rather than disarmament itself. The US NPR of 2018, which emphasizes a strong deterrent posture (Brown, 2018) also depicts that it is not genuinely moving towards disarmament, but rather seeking to manage



international expectations. By engaging in disarmament dialogues, the US can continue to shape the global nuclear order in a way that maintains its strategic advantage.

ii. Counteracting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and Deflecting Criticism

The Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which came into force in 2021 (UNODA, 2017), directly challenges nuclear-armed states by pushing for a total ban on nuclear weapons. CEND may be seen as a response to the TPNW, attempting to sideline this treaty by offering a US-led alternative that frames disarmament in vague, conditional terms. This allows the US to maintain a leadership role in nuclear diplomacy while avoiding the TPNW's demands for concrete action as well as diverting global attention away from its ongoing nuclear modernization programs (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 2023). Thus, presenting itself as a responsible nuclear power while still advancing its own deterrence and security priorities.

iii. Shifting Disarmament Responsibility and Emphasizing Shared Security

CEND places a significant emphasis on multilateral security concerns, shifting some responsibility for disarmament progress onto other nations, including non-nuclear states. By framing disarmament as conditional on global security improvements, the US can point to regional tensions (such as those in East Asia and the Middle East) as obstacles to disarmament, essentially externalizing the conditions under which it would consider reducing its nuclear stockpile. Consequently, CEND enables the US to involve multiple stakeholders in the disarmament process, effectively sharing the burden of creating a secure environment conducive to eventual disarmament.

Strategic Motivations

i. Preserving Deterrence and Strategic Stability in a Multipolar World

The US uses the CEND initiative to emphasize the importance of nuclear deterrence in maintaining strategic stability, particularly in a world where nuclear competitors like Russia and China continue to modernize and expand their arsenals (as discussed in 3.5). By framing disarmament as dependent on achieving global strategic stability, the US argues that nuclear weapons remain essential for preventing conflict and ensuring national security. The US maintains that disarmament efforts cannot proceed until the international security environment is stable, and until major nuclear powers can reach mutual trust regarding the security implications of reducing their nuclear arsenals. This perspective helps justify the continuation of its nuclear deterrence strategy, even as it engages in disarmament dialogues.

ii. Legitimizing Nuclear Modernization Programs

CEND provides the US with a platform to justify its nuclear modernization programs, which it frames as necessary for ensuring national and global security. By participating in disarmament discussions through CEND, the US can present its ongoing investment in nuclear weapons technology as a means of strengthening its deterrent capability rather than an expansion of its nuclear arsenal. This enables the US to avoid accusations of hypocrisy,



appearing to support disarmament while simultaneously modernizing its nuclear forces, by positioning its modernization efforts as aligned with the broader goals of strategic stability and responsible security. Essentially, nuclear modernization is framed as a necessary step in creating the right environment for future disarmament.

iii. Maintaining Strategic Superiority

CEND allows the US to maintain its strategic superiority by participating in global disarmament talks while ensuring that its nuclear dominance remains unchallenged. Through the initiative, the US can consequently shape the terms for disarmament by its priorities for security and thus make the global nuclear framework compatible. In this regard, multilateral disarmament talks have presented the US with an opportunity to keep its position as a predominantly nuclear power with the guarantee that no agreement on disarmament would reduce its strategic lead. CEND thus enables the US to project an image of cooperation on disarmament, while maintaining the strategic leverage provided by its superior nuclear capabilities.

iv. Addressing Security Concerns

The US frames its nuclear capabilities as part of the solution to broader security concerns; hence, disarmament can only be achieved when these deeper proliferating security issues have been resolved. Under the auspices of CEND, the US continues to develop and maintain its nuclear arsenal, deeming it indispensable for ensuring global security, as disarmament must be conditional upon security guarantees from other states. In doing so, the US justifies its nuclear armament within the greater context of deterrence while presenting itself as responsible in its approach to global security and disarmament.

The study of US nuclear posture over the years suggests that the CEND initiative is driven more by political, strategic, and diplomatic motives than by genuine disarmament efforts. Diplomatically, the US appears to be rebranding older, less effective treaties under the CEND framework to ensure compliance among non-nuclear states while asserting leadership in disarmament discussions. Strategically, while upgrading its nuclear arsenal, the US strengthens ties with other nuclear powers and positions itself as a vocal advocate for reducing nuclear risks. The US simultaneously maintains and modernizes weaponry (both nuclear and conventional) to preserve strategic superiority and deterrence, meanwhile promoting disarmament. This dual approach of the US depicts that it will proceed with incremental nuclear disarmament through confidence-building measures while retaining its status as a nuclear hegemon.

Global Implications and Concerns

CEND emphasizes the improvement of the security environment as a prerequisite for nuclear disarmament, shifting from the traditional step-by-step reduction of nuclear weapons to conditions of disarmament. Challenging the NPT's balanced approach to



nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear technology, the initiative argues that disarmament efforts should focus on geopolitical stability rather than immediate reductions. This shift has been criticized by many for undermining the established framework of the NPT and commitments made at past review conferences, as many states insisted on the equal importance of disarmament and non-proliferation. So, serious concerns were expressed by the critique that such an approach would delay progress toward actual disarmament insofar as this bypasses previous agreements, thus complicating future negotiations.

Nuclear-Weapon States

Russia and China, as the largest nuclear weapon states, expressed their reservations regarding this US-led CEND initiative and highlighted that the process of disarmament should proceed in a gradual, step-by-step manner that accounts for current security realities. They showed concerns about the security environment as a pretext for delaying disarmament and stressed the need for balanced progress that does not compromise the principle of equal and indivisible security. These states also highlighted the risk of the initiative undermining the established disarmament framework by setting conditions that could indefinitely postpone further nuclear reductions.

Non-Nuclear-Weapon States

Non-nuclear-weapon states (the EU members, Japan, and others) are also concerned that the CEND initiative could detract from the NPT's disarmament obligations by emphasizing preconditions rather than immediate action. They also argued the same concern of the delay in progress of the disarmament indefinitely and weakened the treaty's credibility, while focusing on improvement of the security environment. These states insisted on the full and balanced implementation of the pillars of the NPT and stressed that security conditions should not be used as an excuse to avoid the execution of the disarmament commitments made in previous review conferences.

Possible Implications under Skeptics

Skeptics in the international community doubt the commitment to true disarmament made by major nuclear powers, especially the US. Opponents claim that the plan might act as a cover for preserving the status quo in nuclear weapons, enabling powerful countries to avoid making significant reductions to their nuclear stockpiles while still seeming to support disarmament. Additionally, this contradiction erodes confidence and questions the genuine goals of CEND, especially regarding equal treatment with both nuclear and non-nuclear states. It does not only destroy the preexisting trust but also fosters new ones.

In a nutshell, the skeptics are concerned about the possible effects of CEND on the current non-proliferation agreements and treaties, such as the NPT. There are concerns that CEND may weaken the provisions of these well-established frameworks or draw attention away from their objectives. Additionally, there is a chance that the program may favor nuclear-



armed states over non-nuclear ones, further undermining the collaboration and confidence required for successful non-proliferation efforts.

Pakistan's Position

Pakistan might perceive the CEND effort through the prism of its particular security concerns and regional dynamics. For Pakistan, nuclear weapons are essential aspect of the country's defense strategy due to the historical friction with its neighboring country, India (Abbasi and Sufian Ullah, 2022). Pakistan views the maintenance of strategic stability and deterrence of invasion as contingent upon its nuclear capacity, particularly in light of the persistent security threats in the region (Sultan, 2021). Pakistan's response to other regional initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), is likely to be shaped by its perception of these initiatives as either aggressive or cooperative (Clarke, 2024). On the contrary, the ASEAN countries have cautiously accepted AUKUS, despite initial concerns about regional stability and the ASEAN centrality (Li, 2022). Primarily aimed at countering China's growing influence, these initiatives have sparked debates about their impact on regional security dynamics. While AUKUS is seen as a decisive step to address China's assertiveness, it has also raised concerns about potential arms races and nuclear proliferation (Delanova, 2021). And now, the US has launched another initiative, the CEND. The country may be concerned over the CEND plan, mainly that it could be marginalized or forced into poor terms for disarmament. It may result for Pakistan in the shape of imbalanced disarmament steps that disproportionately impact its security, given its strategic rivalry with India.

In a series of statements made at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in 2024 (Conference on Disarmament, 2024), Ambassador Bilal Ahmad of Pakistan highlighted some key concerns regarding the global arms control and disarmament efforts. He stressed the urgent need for comprehensive treaties that address both nuclear disarmament and the management of fissile material stockpiles. He warned that global and regional security will remain imbalanced until these issues are tackled. A major focus for Pakistan continues to be Negative Security Assurance (NSAs), with Ambassador Ahmad calling for credible, legally binding guarantees that nuclear-armed states will not use or threaten to use these weapons against non-nuclear nations. He argued that unilateral declarations and existing Security Council resolutions are inadequate and pushed for the establishment of an international convention on NSAs. He also emphasized the importance of transparency in nuclear doctrines and arsenals to build trust but pointed out that this must be balanced with national security and should be complemented by practical arms control measures, especially in regions like South Asia where conventional and nuclear asymmetries exist.

Additionally, Ambassador Ahmad highlighted the role of education and research in fostering better understanding and advancing disarmament, praising initiatives like the UN



Disarmament Fellowship for building the capacity of diplomats from developing countries. He urged for more financial support for the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) to maintain its independence and effectiveness in promoting disarmament education and research. Finally, Ambassador Ahmad welcomed the recent adoption of the Decision on the Work of the Conference for 2024, reaffirming Pakistan's commitment to key priorities such as NSAs, the prevention of an arms race in outer space, and the regulation of military applications of artificial intelligence. Throughout his statements, he consistently emphasized the importance of ensuring equal security for all states to maintain global stability.

Given these apprehensions, Pakistan's strategy towards CEND should probably be going to center on protecting its internal security and participating positively in global disarmament negotiations, which it is already doing. The state's approach to nuclear policy and regional security is evident in its minimum credible deterrence strategy and advocacy for arms control in South Asia.(Khan, 2014) It consistently promoted the establishment of a Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) in South Asia that includes measures for nuclear and missile restraint, conventional force balance, and conflict resolution mechanisms and aims to promote regional stability and reduce the risk of nuclear conflict (Arms Control & Disarmament, 2024).

These efforts reflect Pakistan's broader vision for regional stability and its desire to prevent the escalation of nuclear conflict. In light of the evolving global arms control landscape, marked by the weakening of traditional bilateral frameworks and the emergence of new multilateral dialogues such as CEND, Pakistan must transition from a reactive to a proactive role. This requires proposing and adopting well-structured measures that address domestic priorities, regional asymmetries, and global responsibilities.

Conclusion

A substantial discussion of the CEND initiative has just begun and reaching a comprehensive understanding of its implications will take some time to emerge. The US motives behind the launch of the CEND initiative seem to be twofold. Firstly, the US has intensified its efforts to reevaluate its nuclear policies, including modernizing its nuclear weapons and withdrawing from key arms control agreements such as the New Start Treaty by 2021. Instead of advancing arms control and direct disarmament, the US diverts the attention of the world towards creating a vague "security environment" potentially reinforcing existing power structures.

Second, international skepticism surrounding CEND reflects broader doubts about its disarmament credentials, particularly its departure from the traditional step-by-step approach. Many fear that the US CEND's initiative may just be a strategic tool to maintain US nuclear dominance rather than a genuine effort to boost nuclear disarmament and achieve a nuclear-free world. These concerns underline the need for rigorous scrutiny of the



CEND and similar initiatives to ensure they align with global disarmament goals and do not further entrench existing nuclear hierarchies.

The findings of the study also reveal the critics who point to several key shortcomings of CEND. First, it has the potential to marginalize critical disarmament discussions while placing undue emphasis on security concerns. Second, it tends to prioritize non-proliferation over meaningful disarmament efforts. Third, it represents a departure from the traditional step-by-step disarmament approach. Finally, it shows a disregard for previously agreed-upon commitments from prior NPT review conferences. A more constructive approach would involve direct engagement on disarmament alongside discussions on international security, recognizing their interdependence.

The study concludes with the finding that if the US genuinely wants to contribute to global peace and stability, it must support a broader framework that includes reinforcing norms against the use of force, consolidating peaceful dispute resolution mechanism, strengthening of compliance measures, and advancing disarmament. Ultimately, nuclear disarmament and international security must be pursued in tandem. Unless CEND evolves into a platform for meaningful dialogue on both fronts, it risks becoming a facade for perpetuating nuclear hierarchies rather than a step toward a nuclear-free world.

These findings, on the whole, carry important implications for the global disarmament agenda. The CEND initiative, by shifting the narrative from concrete arms control obligations to vague security concerns, risks weakening established disarmament norms, particularly those under the NPT framework. As traditional arms control agreements unravel and nuclear risks escalate, the deflection of focus away from disarmament commitments undermines both nonproliferation credibility and trust among states. This study contributes to the understanding that meaningful disarmament cannot be decoupled from verifiable, equitable commitments. In this context, CEND may represent a broader trend of nuclear-armed states seeking to reframe disarmament in terms that maintain their strategic superiority, thereby challenging the integrity and future direction of global disarmament discourse.



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