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**New US initiative: Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament
(CEND)**

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The US administration has recently announced a new initiative entitled Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND), with the idea of beginning a dialogue among states in an effort to create a security environment that would be conducive to nuclear disarmament. This initiative should be seen as an attempt to counter the momentum created in the past two years by the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and as an effort to alleviate the pressures and criticism that will accompany the 2020 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which coincides with its fiftieth anniversary. The question of which should come first in efforts to advance nuclear arms control and disarmament — the reduction of arsenals or the stabilization of relations—is an age old dilemma. In the experience of US-Soviet arms control, priority was given to building confidence between the nuclear superpowers in order to stabilize their deterrent relationship. Proponents of the nuclear prohibition initiative focus on the humanitarian dangers of nuclear weapons use, while ignoring the acute nuclear dangers emanating from Iran and North Korea. The Middle East also faces this dilemma of whether to begin by targeting weapons or by addressing the relevant security context and inter-state relations, and it has hindered progress for initiatives to commence regional dialogue in general and a nuclear-free zone in particular.

In the run-up to the 2020 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT RevCon) and in an effort to counter the momentum that has been created over the past two years with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (which still requires fifty ratifications in order to enter into force), the US administration has recently rolled out a new initiative entitled Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND). The idea is to hold a series of conferences/meetings to begin a dialogue among states to explore how they view their security environment and how it relates to nuclear deterrence and disarmament — all in an effort to create a security environment that would be conducive to nuclear disarmament.

The essence of the new initiative is captured in the words of Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation Christopher Ford. In a speech

introducing the CEND, Ford explained that the significant reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia did not bring about the easing of Cold War tensions between the two superpowers; rather, they were the *result* of the easing of those tensions. Or, as former president Ronald Reagan put it, “nations do not mistrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they mistrust each other.”

Whereas the “ban the bomb” treaty rejects nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds and refutes the logic or practice of nuclear deterrence, the administration is basing its new initiative on principles that have been enshrined in the NPT and that appear in the preamble of the nonproliferation treaty: “Desiring to further the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States in order to facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons, the liquidation of all their existing stockpiles, and the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery.” In other words, the road to nuclear disarmament necessarily involves attention not only to the weapons but — no less important — to the nature of international and inter-state relations and security perceptions, as well as the degree of trust that exists among nations. According to CEND proponents, unless the security context is improved, nuclear disarmament will prove an elusive goal.

Why is this agenda being rolled out now? In addition to the momentum created by the ban the bomb initiative that the CEND seeks to counter, this initiative should also be seen as an effort to alleviate additional pressure and criticism that will accompany the 2020 NPT RevCon. The non-nuclear weapons states will undoubtedly complain that the recognized nuclear-weapons states have failed to take additional steps to fulfill their disarmament commitment under Article VI of the NPT, and that the United States, Russia, and China are currently embarking on plans for modernizing and expanding their arsenals. Lack of progress on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and a possible Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT), as well as the lack of progress in convening a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDfZ) conference in the Middle East are all problematic in the eyes of these states. The upcoming RevCon marks the fiftieth anniversary of the treaty’s entering into force, and it might be seen as an opportune moment to air their grievances with greater force.

The question of which should come first in efforts to advance nuclear arms control and disarmament—the reduction of arsenals or the stabilization of relations (namely, easing of tensions and attention to security concerns) — is an age old dilemma. In the US-Soviet arms control experience, priority was accorded to the latter, to building confidence between the nuclear superpowers in order to stabilize their deterrent relationship. Rather than attempting to reduce arsenals in the first stage, the two nations began their arms control process with a series of confidence-building measures (CBMs)—the initial step

was the “hotline” that was established between Washington and Moscow in 1962, following the Cuban missile crisis. That crisis brought home to both the United States and the Soviet Union the understanding that mutual devastation could occur inadvertently, due to miscalculation of the other side’s intent. This recognition created for the first time a mutual interest of the two nations in clarifying intentions, and this was the basis for their agreement to implement this initial step.

Proponents of the nuclear prohibition initiative focus their attention on the humanitarian dangers of nuclear weapons use. They highlight this in the context of the established nuclear weapons states, while at the same time they tend to ignore the acute nuclear dangers that emanate from new nuclear proliferators—Iran and North Korea. Most of the established nuclear states have been nuclear for at least five decades—a period in which nuclear weapons were used only once at the end of World War II—whereas the new proliferators are directly threatening to destroy other nations. And yet, at previous NPT RevCons, the nuclear prohibition states have refused language that would censure Iran for its years of deception and blatant violation of the NPT, the treaty that they hold in high regard.

Moreover, while the United States and Russia maintain over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons and material, proponents of the CEND initiative stress that both countries have significantly reduced their nuclear arsenals as compared to the situation at the height of the Cold War. And while there are undoubtedly new and very worrying tensions in the relations between these two nuclear superpowers, the key to improving the situation is by working on their relationship, not by insisting on immediate nuclear reductions, which have little to no chance of happening.

The dilemma of whether to begin by targeting weapons or by addressing the relevant security context and inter-state relations has featured heavily in the Middle East’s experience as well. It has plagued arms control efforts going back to the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks that took place in the early 1990s, in the context of the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process. It is a dilemma that has created so far an insurmountable hurdle for initiatives to commence regional dialogue in general and on a WMDFZ in the Middle East in particular over the past decade. Egypt has taken the lead in emphasizing the need to focus on weapons in the initial stage, whereas Israel has traditionally advocated for addressing the underlying security context. In the ACRS talks, the United States incorporated the CBM logic of arms control, and the value of this approach was evident in the fact that many of the Arab participants in ACRS actually bought into the confidence-building logic once they saw that it could result in tangible benefits. Unfortunately, there has been no follow-up to the ACRS talks and beyond the discussions of CBMs, few concrete steps were taken.

It remains to be seen how states will react to the CEND proposal and the degree to which they will be willing to cooperate with an American-led initiative, as well as how the initiative will feed into the 2020 NPT RevCon dynamic and agenda. As far as the Middle East is concerned, granting priority to discussion of the security context would certainly be a welcome development for future regional arms-control efforts, but a positive attitude toward the US initiative is by no means guaranteed.