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Tilting at Windmills: Nuclear Disarmament Advocacy in an Anarchic World Order

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons and deterrence once again are in the daily spotlight given Moscow's recent excessive use of nuclear threats in its war against Ukraine. After seemingly disappearing from public consciousness following the end of the Cold War, public commentary on nuclear weapons and deterrence is once again flourishing. Immediately following the peaceful end of the Cold War, many leaders, academics and commentators were convinced that a "new world order" was emerging—one in which nuclear weapons would play little if any role and great power wars would be a thing of the past. A common theme emerged in the commentary offered by many churches and nuclear disarmament advocates that the solution to the threat of nuclear war is global nuclear disarmament. This theme continues to dominate activism on behalf of the contemporary nuclear ban treaty.¹

The typical advocacy for nuclear disarmament, past and present, begins with a graphic description of the horrors of nuclear war to capture attention and support, and from that starting point quickly moves to the claim that because nuclear war would be horrific beyond description, nuclear weapons must, and can be eliminated if leaders can be pressed to muster the good sense to eliminate them.² This long-standing approach to the policy argument



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includes advocacy of nuclear disarmament as the solution to the threat of nuclear destruction. The general thrust of this argument is that nuclear weapons are so destructive that it should be self-evident to all rational leaders that they must accept and advocate for nuclear disarmament.

In fact, there is little doubt that even a “limited” nuclear war would be horrific beyond description. But it is a banal tautology to say that the elimination of nuclear arms will end the threat of nuclear war. That claim is comparable to saying that universal wealth will end poverty, and universal home ownership will end homelessness. All are truisms, of course: by definition, in the absence of any nuclear weapons, there could be no immediate nuclear threat, and with universal wealth and homeownership, there would be no poverty or homelessness. That much is painfully self-evident. But arguing that these happy conditions would solve the corresponding problems tells us nothing useful. Indeed, the assertion of this tautology regarding nuclear weapons, however fashionable, identifies no solution to the problem; it simply leaves unanswered the real underlying questions of whether and how it might be possible to achieve nuclear disarmament.

The Real Problem

There is no international institution that can be counted on to come to the rescue of a state under attack. Allies often are unreliable, as has been demonstrated throughout history, and solemnly-signed international accords are violated with frequency and impunity – witness most recently Russia’s 2014 and 2022 assaults on Ukraine despite Moscow’s 1994 promise to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to refrain from the use of force against Ukraine.³ The well-worn argument that nuclear weapons can be eliminated if only leaders will muster the enlightened self-interest needed to agree to eliminate them ignores or misses the transformation of human behavior and international relations that would have to precede leaders of nuclear armed states and their protected allies choosing disarmament. Leaderships that decide to acquire and retain nuclear weapons, and their protected allies, value those weapons for a logical, rational reason: in a world order in which national survival is at risk to aggressors who can attack as they will, many leaderships see nuclear capabilities as contributing to their country’s security. This view is not without reason when a country faces powerfully-armed opponents.

States in the international system ultimately are “on their own.” This truth has been demonstrated so many times in world history that it should be self-evident. Every century is filled with repeated examples of aggressors that attacked and devastated or eliminated neighboring countries because the aggressors sought to and were capable of doing so. Confidence cannot be attached to their promises of cooperation and there is no international institution able reliably to control and discipline their behavior. Consequently, until the corresponding fear and mistrust that compel countries to seek the means to protect themselves is removed from the international system, some countries, including the United States, will



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seek and be capable of acquiring the arms they believe are necessary to protect themselves, including nuclear weapons. That the United States and allies do so is not immoral or ignorant; they well understand the potential destructiveness of nuclear weapons and want to harness the deterrence effect thereof for their protection in a “self-help” international system in which fear and mistrust is endemic and survival ultimately depends on the national power needed to deter or defeat an attacker. Nuclear weapons are not the cause of that fear and mistrust, they are a symptom of that well-earned fear and mistrust.

This seemingly-academic point is key to understanding why the elimination of nuclear weapons requires first the transformation of the conditions of the international system that led to the creation of nuclear weapons and to their continuing development and deployment. Armaments, including nuclear arms, would likely be eliminated easily and cooperatively in an international system in which countries could rely on their neighbors to be consistently peaceful by choice, or because they are compelled to be peaceful by a powerful, trustworthy authority that enforces the peace globally. That is, any real prospect for global nuclear disarmament will require the transformation of the existing international system in which fear and mistrust prevail because “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,”⁴ to a system in which peace can be expected because would-be aggressors are reliably peaceful or controlled. And, of course, if even one great power decides it must have nuclear capabilities to help preserve its survival in a dangerous world, its opponents and potential opponents will likely feel compelled to have nuclear protection. That is, the choice to disarm would need to be virtually universal and simultaneous – with each party trusting that all others would abide by such a decision.

Unfortunately, for good reason, that vision of international amity and trust is far from the reality of the past, the present, or the foreseeable future. Countries, for good reason, will not lay down their arms prior to the realization of that vision; nothing less is likely to provide the desired condition of reliable international security and safety that would make disarmament a reasonable, prudent move. The vision is beautiful, but it cannot be assumed into existence as the basis for life and death national policy decisions.

It is, perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the international system that because aggressors are not under reliable control, national power may be essential for national survival. Those advocates of nuclear disarmament who so easily, readily and often indignantly declare that all states must now give up their nuclear power because it is enormously destructive seem to ignore the obvious fact that, in an ultimately lawless international system, states acquire power because it can serve their cherished ends, including their survival.



The Security Dilemma

Nuclear weapons do indeed pose a real risk to survival, but the lack of a nuclear deterrent can also pose a risk to survival. There is considerable evidence that nuclear deterrence “works,” at least on occasion, to prevent war or its escalation. From their meticulous research on U.S.-Soviet relations, Richard Lebow and Janice Stein conclude that nuclear deterrence moderated superpower behavior during the Cold War: “once leaders in Moscow and Washington recognized and acknowledged to the other that a nuclear war between them would almost certainly lead to their mutual destruction....Fear of the consequences of nuclear war not only made it exceedingly improbable that either superpower would deliberately seek a military confrontation with the other; it made their leaders extremely reluctant to take any action that they considered would seriously raise the risk of war.”⁵ And, based on a careful examination of Soviet Politburo records, Russian historian Victor Gobarev concludes that America’s unique nuclear deterrence capabilities “counterbalanced” Soviet local conventional superiority and were “the single most important factor which restrained Stalin’s possible temptation to resolve the [1948-1949] Berlin problem by military means. Evidence obtained from [Soviet] oral history clearly supports this fact.”⁶

Evidence of the deterring effect of nuclear weapons is not limited to U.S.-Soviet Cold War history. Considerable available evidence indicates that Saddam Hussein was deterred from the use of chemical and biological weapons in 1991 by U.S. nuclear deterrence.⁷ And, General Shankar Roychowdhury, India’s former Army Chief, has observed that, “Pakistan’s nuclear weapons deterred India from attacking that country after the Mumbai strikes” and “it was due to Pakistan’s possession of nuclear weapons that India stopped short of a military retaliation.”⁸ Historical evidence does *not* indicate that deterrence is infallible, but that nuclear weapons have contributed to the deterrence of war and escalation in the past.⁹

It is not difficult to understand that current Russian threats to employ nuclear weapons to end Western support for Ukraine would be much more fearsome did NATO not also have a nuclear deterrent to Russian attack. How many members of NATO would like to eliminate NATO nuclear capabilities in the context of an aggressive Russia that is incredibly well-armed with nuclear weapons and is brandishing nuclear threats on a seemingly daily basis? Some Ukrainian leaders now understandably express regret over having given up the nuclear systems that had been located in Ukraine in return for Russia’s now-worthless 1994 security guarantee. The power to deter attack is the value of nuclear weapons – a value that is not easily tossed aside for those countries at potential risk, or that could be at risk if they were unprotected, which includes many countries on Earth. Power, including national power is needed in an international system that ultimately offers no other means of survival to those who are, or could be under threat.



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Consequently, as noted, while the existence of nuclear weapons poses a risk to survival, for many countries so too would the elimination of nuclear deterrence. It is not self-evident which risk is greater; what is obvious is that not all countries that face this dilemma will agree to disarm—not because they are foolish or ignorant, but because they fear the possible ugly consequences of their disarming. That is not an unreasonable conclusion because some states do indeed face existential threats now, and others assuredly will in the future. Many nuclear disarmament advocates do not appear even to recognize this profound dilemma for countries that see themselves at risk or potential risk, now including, for example, some former states of the Soviet Union that achieved independence following the Cold War.

For nuclear disarmament, the prior necessary change in conditions includes the profound transformation of international relations and an enduring, consistent pattern of cooperation and non-violence in human behavior—neither of which can be seen in all of written history. Such a transformation of the international system and in human behavior surely is to be welcomed by any sensible person. But the level of transformation in the human condition and the global order that would have to take place for nuclear disarmament to be the obviously prudent choice cannot blithely be dismissed as a detail, as so often seems to be the case.

The Past as Prelude

Unless a fundamental change in the long-existing world order takes place, along with an end to a seemingly permanent pattern of violent human interactions, the removal of nuclear weapons from internal relations would almost certainly simply return the world to the pre-nuclear age, such as first half of 20th century in which approximately 100 million lives were lost in two world wars and some countries were eliminated from existence. Indeed, simply banning nuclear weapons, were that possible, would not eliminate the underlying problems that have repeatedly led to great power wars in the past. Thomas Schelling, one of the 20th century's most renowned deterrence theorists and a Nobel laureate, offered this pertinent observation regarding the nuclear disarmament narrative as popularized after the Cold War:

Why should we expect a world without nuclear weapons to be safer than one with (some) nuclear weapons? ...I have not come across any mention of what would happen in the event of a major war. One might hope that major war could not happen without nuclear weapons, but it always did....every responsible government must consider that other responsible governments will mobilize their nuclear weapons [production] base as soon as war erupts, or as soon as war appears likely, there will be at least covert frantic efforts, or perhaps purposely conspicuous efforts to acquire deliverable nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. And what then?...The [existing] nuclear quiet should not be traded away for a world in which a brief race to reacquire nuclear weapons could become every former nuclear state's overriding preoccupation.¹⁰



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In the absence of nuclear weapons, given the existing technology for biological and chemical weapons, a new great power war could cause unprecedented loss of life globally, indeed, at levels comparable to a nuclear war. Nuclear disarmament would not preclude such a catastrophe, in fact, it could increase the probability. How so? To the extent that nuclear disarmament would remove the nuclear deterrent to war, but not eliminate chemical or biological weapons, nuclear disarmament could actually increase the prospects for such a horrific event. Again, nuclear disarmament activists generally do not even to wrestle with this problem.

Given the harsh reality of international relations, this perceived need for national power in a self-help system is not a paranoid perception; it is a reasonable response by those responsible for national security, and has been so for all of recorded history. The typical rhetoric of those who advocate for nuclear disarmament offers no solution to this reality that drives many countries to see nuclear weapons as a necessary tool of deterrence and survival. This view is not a result of perfidy or ignorance; it follows from the centuries of world history that demonstrate the fear and mistrust in the international system. It is this enduring fear and mistrust that must be replaced by reliable cooperation and trust before disarmament can be the obviously prudent choice for all.

Disarmament advocates occasionally object to this discussion by asserting that the global community already has demonstrated the capacity for transformative change: it has eliminated slavery and banned chemical and biological weapons; it can similarly ban nuclear weapons. But, it is not trifling in this regard to point out that the horror of slavery exists on an unprecedented scale, and that international agreements apparently have not eliminated chemical or biological weapons.¹¹

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War brought wide-spread expectations that, somehow, international relations and human interactions had changed: nuclear disarmament was expected, as was a cooperative new world order that would replace the constant episodes of great power warfare that had so characterized the past. As Yale Professor Paul Bracken observed: "All were on board to oppose nuclear arms....Academics, think tanks and intellectuals quickly jumped on the bandwagon. For a time, it really looked like there was going to be an antinuclear turn in U.S. strategy."¹² But, a decade later, it once again is painfully obvious that the conditions that underlie the reason countries seek armaments, including the benefits of nuclear deterrence, are much more resilient than the naïve *Zeitgeist* that followed the end of the Cold War.

It seems that this general lesson must be relearned with every new generation. The great American diplomat, George Kennan, pointed to the same dynamic seven decades ago in his



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assessment of the earlier, ill-fated 1925-1935 disarmament discussions under the League of Nations:

It had been pointed out by thoughtful people, many years before these discussions began, that armaments were a symptom rather than a cause, primarily the reflection of international relations, and only secondarily the source of them. I know of no sound reason why, even in 1925, anyone should have supposed that there was any likelihood that general disarmament could be brought about by multilateral agreement among a group of European powers whose mutual political differences and suspicions had been by no means resolved. The realities underlying the maintenance of national armaments generally were at that time no more difficult to perceive than they are today.¹³

Nuclear disarmament may, someday, be possible. But the beginning of wisdom in this regard is to understand that an enduring transformation of the global order must precede disarmament. This is not a trivial detail; it is the single most fundamental point. To misunderstand the order of this progression is to misunderstand the basic reality of international relations.

¹ See for example, Beatrice Fihn and Setsuko Thurlow, "International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) – Noble Lecture (English)," *NobelPrize.org*, December 10, 2017, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2017/ican/lecture/>.

² Ibid. See also Beatrice Fihn, "Stigmatize and Prohibit: New UN Talks on Nuclear Weapons Start Today," *Huffington Post*, February 2, 2016, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/beatrice-fihn/stigmatize-and-prohibit-n_b_9287144.html.

³ This commitment is contained in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

⁴ As the great ancient Greek historian and general Thucydides put it starkly in the Melian Dialogue. See Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 352.

⁵ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1994, p. 367.

⁶ Victor Gobarev, "Soviet Military Plans and Actions During the First Berlin Crisis, 1948-1949," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1997), p. 5; and James Acton, *Deterrence During Disarmament* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2011), p. 34.

⁷ Charles A. Duelfer, testimony, Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities: The Weapons of Mass Destruction Program of Iraq, Senate Hearing 107-573, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), pp. 92-93, at http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_senate_hearings&docid=f:80791.pdf. See also the work by Kevin Woods, task leader of the Iraqi Perspectives Project at the Institute for Defense Analyses, and David Palkki, deputy director of National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center. They presented their respective views on this subject as described at a Policy Forum Luncheon by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Knowing the Enemy: Iraqi Decisionmaking Under Saddam Hussein," September 20, 2010. This forum can be found at <http://www.cspanarchives.org/program/id/233237>.



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⁸ Quoted in, “Pak’s N-bomb prevented Indian retaliation after 26/11,” *The Indian Express*, March 9, 2009, available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/paks-nbomb-prevented-indian-retaliation-after-2611/432730/0>.

⁹ See the discussion in Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, et al., *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), pp. 13-14.

¹⁰ Thomas Schelling, “A World Without Nuclear Weapons?,” *Daedalus* (Fall 2009), pp. 125-126, 129. Decades earlier, Schelling indicated his preference – in contrast to what he called “the ‘ban the bomb’ orientation” – is for deterrence to be viewed, “as something to be enhanced, not dismantled.” See Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 241.

¹¹ See the discussion in, Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, pp. 4, 9, 10, available at <https://news.usni.org/2022/10/27/2022-national-defense-strategy-nuclear-posture-review>.

¹² Paul Bracken, “Whatever Happened to Nuclear Abolition?,” *The Hill*, March 19, 2019, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/434723-whatever-happened-to-nuclear-abolition>.

¹³ George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 20-21.

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