



## ANALYSIS

### NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: THE CONTEMPORARY GREAT ILLUSION?\*

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#### Introduction

In 1910, Sir Norman Angell first published a book entitled, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*. With numerous illustrations and detailed evidence, Angell reached conclusions that the world was eager to hear, i.e., war and military preparations were of sharply declining value and could soon be a thing of the past. *The Great Illusion* was a sensation in much of Europe—particularly among the British intelligentsia. Angell was both knighted and awarded the 1933 Nobel Peace Prize for his powerful work.

The basic thesis of Sir Norman's work was that, given the economic advancement and interdependence of European nations, territorial control and military power no longer were the basis for economic advantage and national prosperity. Continuing to think otherwise was “the Great Illusion.” Angell emphasized the point that wars waged for the purpose of territorial control and associated economic advantages would instead impoverish both winners and losers because war destroys the financial, economic and trade ties that create national wealth in an economically interdependent international system. War, he said, had become irrational because cooperative relations provide the potential for mutual prosperity; war destroys wealth for all. Correspondingly, cooperation, not war, is the only rational choice.

In short, Angell asserted that “the need for defence arises from the existence of a motive for attack,”<sup>1</sup> but the old wealth-based motives for attack no longer held. And, as leaders increasingly came to understand that warlike behaviors and preparations could not provide material benefit, *rational* citizens and leaders would retreat from supporting warlike behaviors and preparations. The motives for attack would abate, and the corresponding need for armaments to defend against attack would similarly decline.

The engine for this change, according to Sir Norman, was simply recognition of the basic facts of economic interdependence and rational national decision making. As broad communities within European states learned to appreciate the disastrous economic consequences of war for winner and loser alike, they would rationally seek cooperative transnational ties and move away from warlike patterns of behavior. This would increasingly mandate the striving for peaceful international relations, and the rejection of war and the need to prepare for war. Angell wrote that the “Law of Acceleration” could

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), p. 337.



rapidly drive more amicable and peaceful international relations, and prudent disarmament moves.<sup>2</sup>

Correspondingly, Angell suggested strongly at the time, i.e., shortly prior to World War I, that a general European war was increasingly improbable, and that, “The cessation of military conflict between powers like France and Germany, or Germany and England, or Russia and Germany...has come already. ... armed Europe is at present engaged in spending most of its time and energy rehearsing a performance which all concerned know is never likely to come off.”<sup>3</sup> To help secure this peace, Sir Norman emphasized the need for the rule of international law and an international court to adjudicate conflicts peacefully.

*The Great Illusion* pointed to a coming transition in the international system toward a new order in which peaceful relations, the rule of law, and disarmament could prevail. Peoples’ and their leaders’ increasing recognition of the realities of economic interdependence and their rational response to those realities would drive growing opposition to war and the armaments necessary for war.

The actual history of the Twentieth Century demonstrated, without doubt, that much of Sir Norman’s sanguine argument was deeply mistaken. In World Wars I and II, most winners and losers did indeed suffer enormous human and economic loss. But, in contrast to Angell’s expectations, the prospect thereof had not deterred the paths to war. Indeed, had London taken Angell’s predictions and disarmament recommendations more to heart, Britain would have been even less prepared to meet Hitler’s existential challenge.

### ***The Great Illusion Redux***

Modern church-based and secular proposals for nuclear disarmament are similar to Norman Angell’s *The Great Illusion* in many ways and are as favorably received. For example, in recent years, multiple Nobel Prizes have been awarded for nuclear disarmament advocacy.

In addition, advocacy for global nuclear disarmament, for all its variety, is substantively comparable to Sir Norman’s thesis. For example, it virtually always identifies the need for, or presumes, a forthcoming cooperative transformation of international relations as the path to disarmament. For example:

A security system without nuclear weapons, while not easy to realize, is not an unachievable dream...Such a regime would need to be coupled with a legal prohibition against nuclear weapons possession, deployment and use, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 119, 220.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Rühle, “The End of the ‘Great Illusion’: Norman Angell and the Founding of NATO,” *NATO Review*, January 14, 2019, available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/01/14/the-end-of-the-great-illusion-norman-angell-and-the-founding-of-nato/index.html>.

with the policies, institutions, and capabilities necessary to implement, verify, and enforce such a prohibition.<sup>4</sup>

Nuclear disarmament, it is said, will “...require global cooperation. Anything short of global cooperation will doom the system to failure...The only way to do this is to insist that the war-centric system be transformed into a peace-centric system that embraces nonviolent geopolitics.”<sup>5</sup> And, “To reach nuclear zero it is necessary to achieve...a state of political relations among nations in which there is no desire or need to possess nuclear weapons, where tensions and animosities that lead nations to fear their neighbors have declined to zero.”<sup>6</sup> Nuclear disarmament proposals invariably project that this greater amity and cooperation among nations can move the international system to some form of benign but powerful global governance that mandates and enforces nuclear disarmament.

It is, of course, self-evident that unprecedented “global cooperation” could lead to the establishment of a new “peace-centric” international system, including nuclear disarmament. Disarmament advocates obviously are correct making this point—and often present it as if it were a profound breakthrough in thinking. But that point hardly is insightful or useful in advancing any understanding of how to get “from here to there.”

Such a transition would first require unprecedented, enduring cooperation among nations. Pointing to it simply shifts the question from how does the international system achieve nuclear disarmament to another impenetrable question, i.e., how do international relations become so amicable and cooperative that nuclear disarmament can be the commonly preferred choice of the many national leaderships who now see nuclear arms and deterrence as critical for their national survival in a dangerous world? In short, what is the dynamic that leads to the cooperative transformation of international relations and to nuclear disarmament?

### ***The Dynamics for International Transformation?***

Akin to Angell’s 1910 thesis, modern nuclear disarmament proposals attribute great power and effect to new dynamics in international relations that will lead to the transformation of the global order and nuclear disarmament. The desired enlightened and unprecedented global cooperation typically is presented as a natural continuation of an ongoing trend in human progress and reason—driven in this case by leadership decision making that responds *rationally* to global “nuclear dangers.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Rohlfing, “The Myth of ‘Just’ Nuclear Deterrence: Time for a New Strategy to Protect Humanity from existential Nuclear Risk,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2023), p. 47, available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679423000023>.

<sup>5</sup> David Krieger in, Richard Falk and David Krieger, *The Path to Zero* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> David Cortright and Raimo Väyrynen, *Towards Nuclear Zero* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of cooperation and progress can be enumerated: “...optimism is the most logical, sound, and defensible position to arrive at after a rigorous study of history. We do not live in a perfect world. *But we live in a perfectible one.*”

Yet, unlike Sir Norman's elaborate and detailed work in *The Great Illusion*, nuclear disarmament advocates typically ignore the question of how to "get from here to there," or point to dynamics for transformation that are obscure, arcane, ambiguous, and/or transcendental. For example, the establishment of a new cooperative world order and nuclear disarmament, it is said, can be a "black swan phenomenon" that "consists of those parts of reality that shape historical change but are currently hidden from our perception or understanding..."<sup>8</sup> Momentum for disarmament, it is said, "calls on every person to disarm his or her own heart and to be a peacemaker everywhere....personal and communal conversion and change of heart."<sup>9</sup> And, "When it becomes possible, it will be as a result of the intervention in our history of some totally unanticipated happening: a shock of some sort to the system, a charismatic leader who mobilizes a new public consciousness, a new cultural turn toward spirituality and universal humanism, even a repudiation of war as a legitimate institution."<sup>10</sup>

In their highly acclaimed 1983 Pastoral Letter, American Catholic Bishops advanced the goal of cooperative global governance and corresponding nuclear disarmament. They identified the power of "public opinion" and "the genius of man" as dynamics for this transformation of the global order.<sup>11</sup> Others suggest that "revolutions of the mind," "rising powers in the non-West," and "countries that embrace soft power" can drive national "accountability" under "international law," "the needed nonviolent revolution," and thus a new "peace-centric system." These, it is said, can lead "toward peace" and the needed global transformation and disarmament.<sup>12</sup> The corresponding rejection of deterrence policies in favor of disarmament is said to be "rooted in morality, law, and a sense of the spiritual destiny and potential of the human species."<sup>13</sup>

Additional dynamics for global transformation and disarmament identified in recent decades are, "citizen movements that cry for peace so loudly that the world's leaders cannot ignore us,"<sup>14</sup> "a lot of courage, a lot of faith in the new order,"<sup>15</sup> "a sense of urgency," "human consciousness," and "action...grounded on a solid foundation of hope." These can lead to "change so profound that the status of man himself is drawn into question..."<sup>16</sup> Powerful

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History shows that, over the long run, we collectively have made progress work." David Rothkopf, "The Case for Optimism," *Foreign Policy*, No. 221 (Nov.-Dec. 2016), p. 56. (Emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Falk in, Falk and Krieger, *The Path to Zero*, op. cit., pp. 200, 204.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Turkson, "Foreword," *A World Free from Nuclear Weapons: The Vatican Conference on Disarmament*, edited by Drew Christiansen and Carole Sargent (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2020), pp. x-xi.

<sup>10</sup> Falk in, Falk and Krieger, *The Path to Zero*, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>11</sup> See the American Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter in, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," *Origins*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (May 19, 1983), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Falk and Krieger in, *The Path to Zero*, op. cit., pp. 208-209.

<sup>13</sup> Falk in, *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Sider and Richard Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust & Christian Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1982), pp. 227-228.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Cronkite, quoted in, "Cronkite Champions World Government," *Washington Times*, December 3, 1999, p. A2.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Falk, *This Endangered Planet* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), pp. 292-293.

dynamics more recently identified include, “the normative force of the prohibition of acquiring nuclear weapons,” the common desire for nuclear non-proliferation, existing treaty obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and “unofficial advance work” done “by international experts.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps pointing to these dynamics is prescient; perhaps “courage,” “faith,” “morality,” “law,” “communal conversion,” a “sense of urgency,” human “genius,” “public opinion,” a “charismatic leader,” “a new public consciousness,” “revolutions of the mind,” and “advance work” by experts, *inter alia*, can lead to the creation of a much more cooperative international order and disarmament. But there is no denying that how and when these dynamics might do so, at best, is opaque and unpredictable on any anticipated time frame.

### ***Rejecting Armaments to Advance Transformation***

Just as Angell's *The Great Illusion* argued strongly *against* the military armaments of the day as increasingly unnecessary and contrary to the transition he projected, contemporary disarmament advocates are extremely critical of nuclear deterrence policies and capabilities. Sustaining nuclear deterrence policies and related forces, they believe, works against nuclear disarmament as the far safer and more effective alternative to policies of deterrence.

Consequently, proponents of nuclear disarmament often seek to “stigmatize” nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon states, and discredit policies of nuclear deterrence, so that leaders will recognize that the only rational choices are global cooperation and nuclear disarmament. The existing international order can then transition to a system governed by an orderer able to mandate rules and enforce disarmament. With this transition, national policies of deterrence can be replaced with reliable global nuclear disarmament. Efforts to so stigmatize nuclear weapons and discredit deterrence in the service of global transformation and disarmament have been ongoing for decades.<sup>18</sup>

### **A Contemporary “Great Illusion”?**

Contemporary church-based and secular proposals for nuclear disarmament typically share Angell's premise of a global transition driven by unprecedented dynamics and rational decision making. Within three decades following the 1910 publication of *The Great Illusion*, it was abundantly clear that Angell had grievously misjudged his times and international relations—as he himself later recognized. Whether contemporary nuclear disarmament

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<sup>17</sup> George Perkovich and James Acton, “Abolishing Nuclear Weapons,” *Adelphi Papers*, No. 396 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008), pp. 7-8, 13, 84.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Sider and Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust & Christian Hope*, op. cit., Chapter 3; more recently see, Rohlfing, “The Myth of ‘Just’ Nuclear Deterrence: Time for a New Strategy to Protect Humanity from existential Nuclear Risk,” op. cit., pp. 42-45. See also the discussion in, Matthew Gault, “The Lawyer Working to Dismantle the World's Nuclear Weapons: Beatrice Fihn, executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, dreams of a world free from the threat of nuclear war,” *Vice News* (Motherboard), December 16, 2020, available at <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvx7vv/the-lawyer-who-is-working-to-dismantle-the-worlds-nuclear-weapons>.

proposals are prescient, or similarly misjudge international relations, is now the critical question. If prescient, they deserve greater acceptance and consideration as the basis for national policy decisions. If not, they should not be accorded policy priority or moral superiority over policies of nuclear deterrence; there is nothing laudable about chasing an out-of-reach illusion and the opportunity cost of doing so.

### ***Three Reality Roadblocks***

The conclusion here is that contemporary proposals for the cooperative creation of a new global order and disarmament are implausible, and thus an imprudent basis for serious security policy formulation. These proposals should be treated with appropriate disapprobation because, as the basis for policy decisions, they could easily undermine Western security. The enduring general reasons for this conclusion have long been understood by Realist scholars.<sup>19</sup> But their reasoning is largely ignored or preemptively dismissed in much contemporary commentary on the subject.

Is disarmament governed by a benign global orderer impossible? Perhaps not; but such a transition certainly appears implausible on any foreseeable timeline—hardly a basis for prudent national policy planning. Why implausible? Because at least three seemingly insoluble roadblocks exist, whether the nuclear disarmament proposals come from church-based or secular advocates. These three roadblocks follow from *separate but related dynamics at different levels of analysis*.<sup>20</sup>

***A First Roadblock: “If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”*** At the level of individuals, if all humans were cooperative pacifists, and reliably so, a new world would be at hand and the road to disarmament easily open. In 1788, James Madison observed in *The Federalist* No. 51, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Madison’s point, of course, is that humans are *not* angels and *governing institutions are not led by angels*; they are led by humans with all too-well-known foibles.

Institutions and individuals obviously are different in many ways—the following does *not* suggest that individuals and institutions are fully analogous. But institutions, consisting of and led by humans, often reflect the frequently less admirable characteristics of their leaders and personnel, including willful deception, inconsistency, the lack of reliability and trustworthiness, and aggressive ambition, *inter alia*. As James Stoessinger concludes in his

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1962); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); and, William O’Brien, *The Conduct of Just and Limited War* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> As in Waltz’s classic three levels of analysis—the individual, the state and the international system. See, Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, op. cit., passim.

monumental historical survey of wars, “With regard to the problem of the outbreak of war, the case studies indicate the crucial importance of the personalities of leaders. I am less impressed by the role of abstract forces, such as nationalism, militarism, or alliance systems.... In all these cases, a leader’s personality was of critical importance and may, in fact, have spelled the difference between the outbreak of war and the maintenance of peace.”<sup>21</sup> This reality of institutional behaviors reflecting the choices of their leaders contributes to the *first* seemingly insoluble problems.

In addition, institutional decision-making processes can introduce their own wayward patterns of behavior that appear to parallel human imperfections, independent of any individual. These behaviors include a failure to abide by commitments, inattention to key developments, poorly informed decisions, deceptive practices, the squandering of resources, biased favoritism, the reckless use of force, and a general lack of trustworthiness, *inter alia*. For example, in any prospective global regime, the changing of administrations and personnel (planned or not) or disagreements among them could create considerable inconsistency in the conduct of the global orderer—rendering it unreliable and untrustworthy in carrying out its commitments for constituents.

Absent a transition of all humanity to Madison’s angels and the attendant, reliably scrupulous and well-informed behavior of the global orderer, there is no reason to expect that any global regime could actually function to ensure that all prospective constituent members of the global body could be trusted to, or be compelled to, conform reliably to cooperative global norms and laws. Those constituent members with aggressive designs and intentions could seek to retain military capabilities covertly or prepare covertly for a breakout of capabilities after others had disarmed in whole or part. The latter more scrupulous nations could then be *highly vulnerable* to the former uncooperative nations, particularly during the perhaps lengthy period of establishing the global orderer’s authority and necessary power to enforce rules.

This reality alone is likely to preclude the establishment of the envisaged global orderer. Why so? Because prior to willingly giving up sovereignty and power to the global orderer, national leaders would have to consider this risk of vulnerability and find it acceptable. For those great powers with well-armed and untrustworthy foes, this risk could easily outweigh the expected benefit of subordination to a global orderer. For these leaderships, deciding to retain sovereignty and national power for protection need not be ignorant or foolish; it could indeed be the most prudent choice.

Of course, if all individuals and national leaderships were reliably cooperative and trustworthy, this prospect would be no roadblock; there would be no such risk and nations could prudently lay down their sovereignty and arms. But, if all individuals and leaderships

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<sup>21</sup> James Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War* (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2008), pp. 390-392. Another monumental survey of historical case studies also illustrates the role of individual leadership characteristics in decisions for war. See, Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 8, 569. See also, Bert Park, M.D., *Ailing, Aged, Addicted* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky), passim; and, Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 220-231.

were reliably cooperative and trustworthy, there would be no need for a transition of the international system to facilitate disarmament. Cooperation and peace would reign without the need for a powerful global orderer.

There are two related problems under the rubric of this first roadblock that is pointed to by Madison. In addition to the risk that some, perhaps many, unscrupulous members of the global system could continue to pose security threats to their neighbors, prior to relinquishing sovereignty and power to an international orderer, national leaders would have to be confident that the prospective global orderer itself, led by humans and potentially having its own sources of institutional error and misbehavior, would *not* have aggressive ambitions, a lack of attention to its advertised mandates and goals, deceptive practices, and/or engage in the reckless use of force. That is, beyond the potential failure of the global regime to protect members reliably against the aggression of others through error or connivance, lies the risk that a powerful global orderer itself could become a threat to its constituents.

This prospect is the basis for the comment by renowned scholar and Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling that a powerful global orderer could itself become the despotic source of repression and horrific violence, and thus the engine not of peace and cooperation but of rebellion and revolutions. As Schelling says, “some of us would have to turn around and start plotting civil war...”<sup>22</sup>

These are critical points because the question confronting national leaders when considering nuclear disarmament is not whether, in theory, a powerful and reliably scrupulous, well-informed global authority would be a far superior alternative to the existing anarchic system; that much is self-evident. The question is whether national leaders could ever have sufficient confidence in the operation of a new global order and its orderer, on a foreseeable timeline, to subordinate national sovereignty and relinquish the arms they see as needed for national security in the existing anarchic system. To do so, as would be necessary for the establishment of the global orderer, national leaders would need confidence that the global authority would, in fact, ensure protection against potential national outlaws, and not itself become the source of oppression and the misuse of force.

This is a wonderful vision, of course, but problematic because the global orderer envisioned would itself be run and staffed by individuals with human imperfections and foibles—again, unless they are Madison’s “angels”—and likely have its own sources of failure. Past and existing institutions do not allow optimism in this regard. In the United Nations itself, the divisive effects of inconsistency, parochial nationalism, and competing personal and national interests and ambitions, are evident in virtually every aspect of its activities. The experience of all known history, including at the national level where some particular affinities tend to help hold peoples together, is that governments and human institutions of all varieties, once established, have engaged in behaviors to the extreme

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Schelling, “The Role of Deterrence in Total Disarmament,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (April 1962), p. 405.



disadvantage of at least some constituents—as is illustrated by the continuous lineage of political upheavals, rebellions, revolutions, and civil wars across the globe.

The prospect of a new global regime that is afflicted with imperfections and errors, as inevitably would be the case, is unlikely to inspire the needed confidence in national leaders on a universal and near-simultaneous basis. They could have no certainty that the new regime would reliably provide the necessary protection while also refraining from the unwarranted use of force—to the advantage of itself or favored constituents.

Why, now, should it be expected that any plausible form of global governance would *not* reflect occasional or frequent errors of inconsistency, ill-informed moves, aggressive ambition and pugnacity? Why should it be expected that, somehow, a new global orderer of some variety would be fully reliable and transcend seemingly enduring human and institutional foibles?

Disarmament advocates, understandably, have no answer to this fundamental question. Indeed, they typically avoid the question altogether, or, as noted, offer vague speculation regarding “some totally unanticipated happening,” “a new cultural turn toward spirituality and universal humanism,” a “black swan phenomenon,” widespread “personal and communal conversion,” or “one must first imagine it and desire it.”<sup>23</sup> These, however, are unlikely to inspire the necessary confidence for the creation of a new global order.

For example, as noted above, a renowned proponent of a new global regime emphasized that a cooperative global transition would require “a lot of courage, a lot of faith in the new order...”<sup>24</sup> The question, of course, is faith and courage on the basis of what—the hope that, somehow, this new governing institution would reliably, consistently operate as no other has in history? Many leaders responsible for national security could instead understandably see basing national survival on hope for the realization of such an institution not as courageous and faithful, but as foolishly placing their nations at potentially even greater risk than otherwise would be the case. There could be no assurances whatsoever that they would be wrong in that expectation.

Those leaderships with aggressive ambitions *today*, including contemporary Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, are least likely to transfer power and sovereignty to a prospectively strong global authority that would then be charged with thwarting their aggressive designs and would have the power to do so. National leaders with more benign intentions could have reasonable doubts that a new global orderer—subject to the same imperfections of seemingly all human institutions and interactions—would perform so reliably and judiciously as necessary, whether established in gradual steps or more rapidly.

Given these realities, establishing and sustaining the near-universal consensus needed for the creation and preservation of a high-functioning global orderer would seem unlikely in the extreme. Indeed, in those cases where national leaders appear to have demonstrated

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<sup>23</sup> For the final item in this listing see, Rohlfing, “The Myth of ‘Just’ Nuclear Deterrence: Time for a New Strategy to Protect Humanity from existential Nuclear Risk,” *op. cit.*,” p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> “Cronkite Champions World Government,” *op. cit.*, p. A2.

an unusual willingness to subordinate national power to some conception of a greater good, foes and potential foes typically have looked on their moves with unbridled suspicion—*not* an unreasonable response in an anarchic international system with frequently untrustworthy, inconsistent national leaderships.

This suspicion certainly was apparent most recently in Russian and Chinese negative responses to the U.S. decade-long push for global nuclear disarmament and, similarly, in Russia's overwhelmingly skeptical response to Washington's repeated assurances that the United States would limit its missile defense capabilities in deference to notions of mutual deterrence "stability."<sup>25</sup> Even had Russian and Chinese leaders fully accepted the sincerity of a particular U.S. administration to so limit U.S. capabilities, they could have little confidence that subsequent U.S. governments would be similarly self-restrained. Again, the uncooperative Russian and Chinese responses to these U.S. initiatives were reasonable given an anarchic international system and U.S. leaderships that are subject to human and institutional foibles and imperfections, including inconsistency. Yet, it is these same reasonable suspicions and mistrust that would have to be overcome on an enduring basis for the establishment and sustainment of any global orderer that could mandate and enforce nuclear disarmament.

In short, the first seemingly insoluble roadblock to a new global order and disarmament is that—until all humans become Madison's angels and/or human institutions operate reliably as needed—national leaders understandably must be reluctant to abandon or hand over the critical means of national protection to a global regime that might then *not* provide adequate protection reliably against misbehaving members, and could itself become a grievous threat. This reluctance is not ignorant, ignoble or foolish.

Of course, if the seemingly enduring unscrupulous patterns of human and institutional behavior could be excised or reliably self-controlled, and cooperation and amity became the consistent norm—then national subordination to the envisaged global orderer would be prudent and plausible. In that case, however, as noted, a global institution to prevent war and enforce disarmament would hardly be needed. Ironically, a global orderer able to mandate and enforce disarmament would likely become feasible when it is no longer needed.

Until then, there seems little likelihood that all great powers will, essentially simultaneously, take the potentially great risk of giving up sovereignty and their national means of protection on the hope that other parties would reliably do the same, and that the world orderer thus created would escape history and human foibles, and reliably provide the protection they need when necessary. Nuclear disarmament advocates have little or nothing to say as to how and why the enigmatic dynamics they identify for the needed global transformation should be expected to overcome these hurdles—hardly a reasonable basis for national security planning.

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<sup>25</sup> See for example, David Axe, "Why Does Russia Hate the THAAD Missile Defense System?" *The National Interest*, January 25, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/why-does-russia-hate-thaad-missile-defense-system-199715>.

***A Second Roadblock: Why Not a Powerful International Orderer?*** The *second* seemingly insoluble problem follows from the first. National leaders may well find some national or even altruistic value in relatively weak international institutions, such as the past League of Nations and the contemporary United Nations. Indeed, the great powers have found some value in global institutions, but understandably have refused to provide them with the combination of power and authority that might seriously challenge their own security requirements and ambitions.<sup>26</sup> That is, great powers may, for some purposes, welcome relatively *weak* global institutions that do not pose a threat to their own national power, security and existential goals. The problem, of course, is that while relatively weak global institutions cannot challenge the great powers' ambitions, and thus may be acceptable, they also are incapable of reliably mandating and enforcing global order, norms, and law—as has been demonstrated for over a century, first by the League of Nations and since by the United Nations.

In short, *weak* global institutions obviously are acceptable to great powers, witness the United Nations, but are incapable of the needed global enforcement of laws and norms. A global institution so powerful as to control and reliably protect all powers, great and small, *could* in principle provide global governance, but is not acceptable to great powers for that very reason. The reluctance of national leaders to embrace a high-powered global institution is not unreasonable; it is a rational response to the fact that, as discussed above, absent the prevalence of Madison's angels, there can be little confidence that a global orderer would reliably exercise its power for the adequate protection of all and to the disadvantage of none, and would not itself become an existential threat.

Some national leaderships could, in theory, accept the risks and take the great leap of faith needed to subordinate their national sovereignty and power in the hope for a grand outcome. But, as Professor Mearsheimer has observed, "It is unlikely that all the great powers will simultaneously undergo an epiphany...";<sup>27</sup> and, "there is little reason to think that change is in the offing."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the available evidence is virtually entirely contrary to any expectation of such an "epiphany" and consequent great powers subordination to a powerful global orderer.

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<sup>26</sup> As an illustration of this point, the United Nations itself is designed to provide the permanent members of the Security Council with veto power over prospective U.N. actions. Consequently, when members of the Security Council disagree, the U.N. is effectively prevented from actions necessary to defend a member state—as has been illustrated yet again by the U.N.'s wholly toothless response to Russia's ongoing, naked aggression against Ukraine. This power arrangement within the U.N. is not an accident. As Richard Gowan, a senior U.N. official reportedly has observed, "It was Franklin Roosevelt who wanted to set up an organization that would police the world...But the only way he could get Russia and the other powers to agree to that deal, was if they had the ability to block any actions against themselves." Quoted in, Ashley Semier, "Why Isn't the UN Doing More to Stop What's Happening in Ukraine?" *CNN*, April 15, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/15/politics/united-nations-ukraine-russia/index.html>.

<sup>27</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Realists as Idealists," *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2011), p. 428.

<sup>28</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 362.

***A Third Roadblock: The Suggested Solutions to International Anarchy Do Not Address the Problem.*** A third problem confronting the disarmament agenda is that the two interrelated roadblocks discussed above are not obviously subject to correction via the dynamics advocates generally identify as the basis for transformation, e.g., reason, human “genius,” some new organizational structure, “rising powers in the non-West,” “countries that embrace soft power,” “action...grounded on a solid foundation of hope,” or, “the normative force of the prohibition of acquiring nuclear weapons.” These factors, powerful as they may be or become, are largely unrelated to the fundamental and often reasonable lack of confidence in the reliably cooperative behavior of humans and their institutions.

The supposedly powerful dynamics identified do not address the need because ignorance or a lack of reason are not the causes of international mistrust. Mistrust and fear of the prospective behavior of other nations (or an aspiring global orderer) may be fully informed and reasonable. These are the underlying reasons for insecurity and the corresponding need for national arms to deter and defend. The fundamental problem appears unlikely to yield to genius, reason, public opinion, imagination, or some new analytical or communication tools because insecurity and arms ultimately are symptoms of this much deeper cause, i.e., the suspicion and fears that flow from the combination of enduring, unfortunate patterns of human and institutional behavior, and the anarchic structure of the international system. These often compel fully informed, reasonable, even brilliant national leaderships to seek, and cling to, national power, including nuclear weapons, because nuclear deterrence *can contribute* to national security in an anarchic and conflict-laden international system.

This ongoing reality cannot be eliminated or concealed by soaring speculation about a new human consciousness, hope and courage, or by efforts to stigmatize nuclear weapons and shame nuclear states. Indeed, in the absence of a reliably cooperative or controlled world order, the more informed a leadership may be about the aggressive intentions and capabilities of powerful neighbors, the more reasonable is its likely desire to accumulate and retain power for national defense.

In short, the lack of reliable cooperation and amity often is not a matter of missing intellect or reason on the part of national leaders, but their recognition of the seemingly enduring human and structural realities that bound the behavior of all countries that prioritize survival in an anarchic system. In spite of impressive advances in technology, medicine, farming, etc.,<sup>29</sup> there is little, if any, apparent evidence that the root causes of international insecurity and mistrust are abating. In truth, evidence of the conflicting national interests, irreconcilable goals, and lawless behavior that drive mistrust and mutual suspicion is manifest on a daily basis.

Disarmament advocates “educating” national leaders that nuclear weapons are dangerous and lack value cannot somehow create the needed international trust and amity. Those leaders generally well understand that nuclear weapons are highly lethal and dangerous. They also understand that past and immediate history readily demonstrates to

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<sup>29</sup> See Rothkopf, “The Case for Optimism,” *op. cit.*

anyone paying attention that nations can be unpredictable, untrustworthy, aggressive, and violent—mistrust, suspicion and fears often are fully justified in international relations. To be sure, nuclear deterrence is only a palliative in this context, but for many leaderships facing well-armed and dangerous foes, the hope for a global orderer and nuclear disarmament does not provide a practicable alternative to deterrence on any workable timeframe.

In 2020, summarizing a lifetime of scholarly work on the subject, Professor Emeritus Colin Gray essentially repeated a prescient conclusion on the enduring need for prudent national defense efforts that he had made four decades earlier:

To be blunt about it, the international political order just is what it is—an ultimately lawless “self-help” system. We cannot responsibly decline to pursue security because we do not like the available options. ...Any rational person, one might think, should be able to design a very much more reasonable and safer global security system than we have today. I suspect that this is true but alas, entirely beside the historical point. Our current security and insecurity context is the unplanned, certainly unintended, product of centuries of political history... the best we can do is to make sensible use of our immense empirical experience. This will enable us to judge prudently what should, and what ought not be done as we strive, perhaps hopefully, to endure the darker possibilities of historical narrative.<sup>30</sup>

### ***No Opposition to the Ideal, But Recognition of Seemingly Enduring Realities and the Cost of Chasing Illusions***

This discussion should not be read as opposition to the ideal of a reliably cooperative world order. The existing anarchic system, dominated as it is by parochial ambitions, insecurity, mistrust, violence and corresponding competing quests for national power, works against the type of global cooperation that could help address global problems. That point, again, is self-evident.

However, it is unhelpful or worse for disarmament proponents to point to a new global orderer to mandate and enforce disarmament when the dynamics for transformation that they suggest will drive the creation of a global orderer and disarmament are vague, obscure, arcane, transcendental, and unclearly related to the root problems. Advocates typically focus on graphic descriptions of the effects of nuclear war and the need for change, perhaps rightly so. But they are effectively silent with regard to *how* the dynamics for transformation they suggest will overcome the fundamental roadblocks to the transition they advocate and render the realization of their vision *so apparent* that it can be the basis for prudent national policy planning. Pope Francis undoubtedly is correct when he observes that disarmament cannot be predicated on mutual nuclear deterrence strategies and that “true peace can only

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<sup>30</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Foreword,” in Keith Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), pp. xi-xii.

be built on mutual trust.”<sup>31</sup> The remaining question is, what can the needed mutual trust be based on in an anarchic international system populated by imperfect humans and institutions? Universal governance by Madison’s angels or by reliably scrupulous humans could solve the problem, but those sanguine scenarios are outside logical prediction.

In addition, nuclear disarmament advocates’ frequent disparagement of deterrence and their corresponding efforts to “stigmatize” nuclear weapons threaten to undermine a tool *known* to provide limits on the prospect for nuclear aggression, at least on occasion (i.e., deterrence),<sup>32</sup> in pursuit of a vision unlikely to be realized in any foreseeable timeframe for fully understandable reasons. Indeed, renowned academic, Kenneth Waltz, contends that the disarmament narrative’s emphasis on the horrors of nuclear war and the denigration of deterrence “has obscured the important benefits [nuclear weapons] promise to states trying to coexist in a self-help world,”<sup>33</sup> and that nuclear disarmament, in addition to being “fanciful,” would “deny the peaceful benefits of nuclear weapons to those [states] who need them.”<sup>34</sup>

A vision beset by seemingly insuperable roadblocks, unacknowledged potential regrets, and the complete failure to identify how to get “from here to there” is no real alternative and should not be considered the basis for rejecting the alternative known to provide a measure of limitation. Indeed, the ongoing campaign to so denounce nuclear weapons and deterrence is much more likely to have some restraining effect on Western democracies than on their authoritarian foes. This potential imbalance in the likely political effects of their advocacy may contain the seeds of future international crises and catastrophe; this serious caveat seems not to restrain such disarmament activism.

## Summary and Conclusion

A century after the publication of *The Great Illusion*, Sir Norman’s “great illusion” appears to have been replaced by a wholly different illusion. That new illusion is the contemporary proposition offered by many church-based and secular advocates that nuclear disarmament can replace the need for nuclear deterrence and should be the focus of national policies.

The common conclusion of these two distinct groups often is that the United States should reject both nuclear weapons and deterrence as too potentially risky and destructive. Energy and attention must be directed away from the maintenance of nuclear weapons and

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<sup>31</sup> “Pope-‘Pacem in Terris,’ Disarmament,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 10, 2023, available at <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/60th-anniversary-pacem-terris-pope-calls-disarmament>.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament*, pp. 30-32; see also 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.

<sup>33</sup> Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better,” *Adelphi Papers*, Number 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), available at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/waltz1.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> In Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton and Co., 2003), p. 152.

deterrence, and toward the pursuit of global transformation and disarmament as the alternative to nuclear deterrence. Deterrence, if acceptable at all, is only so on an interim basis—pending the creation of a cooperative global order and orderer capable of governing a disarmament process. Even the suggestions of many church-based and secular nuclear disarmament advocates regarding the dynamics that supposedly can drive the transition to a new cooperative world order and establishment of a global orderer are similarly obscure, arcane, ambiguous, and/or transcendental.

The end of the Cold War brought widespread expectations that, somehow, international relations and human interactions had changed. President George H. W. Bush welcomed “a new world order,” searched for by “a hundred generations,” in which, “the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.”<sup>35</sup> Nuclear disarmament was widely anticipated as this cooperative new world order replaced the constant episodes of great power warfare that had so characterized the past.

Fewer than three decades later, however, it was once again painfully obvious that the structural and behavioral conditions that underlie the reasons countries seek and need 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. In 1954, the great American diplomat, George Kennan, pointed to the same dynamic and idealist *Zeitgeist* in his 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.<sup>36</sup>

Nuclear disarmament may, someday, be possible. But the beginning of wisdom in this regard is to understand that a manifest transformation of the global order must precede disarmament, and that some powerful dynamic that is now, at best, nebulous, will have to drive that transition. The realization of that vision would almost certainly have to wait until

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<sup>35</sup> President George H. W. Bush to a joint session of Congress, quoted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled times...A New World Order,’” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, available at, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

<sup>36</sup> George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 20-21.

that dynamic—whatever it may be—and resulting transition are so mature as to be fully apparent to leaders responsible for national security. The global orderer must be seen as capable of the task of mandating and enforcing disarmament *without* also itself being a potentially despotic threat. The need for this transformation is a high bar and not a trivial detail; it is the single most fundamental point. Yet, the dynamics for this transformation identified by disarmament proponents are, at best, of dubious power and effect.

To misunderstand the challenges to the realization of disarmament is to misunderstand the basic realities of international relations—that the existing anarchic international system is highly resistant to the type of structural transformation recognized by virtually all as necessary for disarmament, i.e., a cooperatively-created global orderer able to mandate and enforce disarmament. This resistance is not because national leaders typically are foolish in this regard. It is because they are responsible for national security in an often unpredictable, dangerous, and anarchic international system.

The disarmament alternative to policies of deterrence clearly is attractive. Following again in the pattern set by Sir Norman Angell in 1933, disarmament advocacy led to the 2009 and 2017 Noble Peace Prizes. As Yale professor Paul Bracken has observed, calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons, “shows that one’s heart is in the right place.”<sup>37</sup> A cooperative new world order and nuclear disarmament is a vision that clearly inspires rousing exhortations and noble-sounding sentiment. In contrast, as Oxford Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman has rightly observed, nuclear deterrence, “was never likely to inspire a popular following. Campaigners might march behind banners demanding peace and disarmament...but successful deterrence, marked by nothing much happening, is unlikely to get the pulse racing.”<sup>38</sup>

However, a careful examination of the assumptions, evidence and logic of the proposed disarmament alternative to deterrence just as clearly demonstrates that it is unlikely to be practicable. This is *not* because leaderships reluctant to give up their national deterrents in favor of disarmament are ignorant, irrational or ignoble—and thus subject to remedial correction. It is because the anarchic structure of the international system and enduring patterns of human and state behavior combine to create roadblocks to transformation, i.e., security concerns that compel states toward the accumulation of power for national defense and survival.

Given historical experience, the prospect is very real that one or more nations would cheat on a multilateral nuclear disarmament agreement. All compliant nations would then be vulnerable to their less scrupulous foes. Consequently, a powerful global authority capable of monitoring and enforcing agreements is likely necessary for disarmament to be deemed a prudent choice. Yet, the establishment of such a global authority has consistently proven impossible given the enduring, sharp conflicts of interests among nations that often

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<sup>37</sup> 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>.

<sup>38</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), p. 25.



lead to violence. How these are to end on any realistic, foreseeable time frame is the unanswered and seemingly insoluble question.

In addition, yielding sovereignty and power to the hypothetical global authority would demand that national leaders also first trust that the global authority itself would reliably act in a conscientious and pristine manner. Yet, unless all prospective leaders and agents of that global authority could be expected to shed seemingly enduring patterns of inconsistent and unscrupulous human behavior, it could immediately pose its own potential threat to its members. Rebellion and ongoing conflict would be likely.

Barring the fundamental transformation of humankind, and thus international relations, there appears to be little or no basis for trusting foes or a prospective global authority as necessary for disarmament. That trust has been absent in the past and shows no sign of emerging, and the dynamics for change identified by disarmament advocates shed no light on how to correct this seemingly enduring characteristic of international relations. It is in light of this harsh reality that leaderships now reliant on nuclear deterrence must weigh various church-based and secular proposals for disarmament. It seems unlikely that many ever will judge them to be prudent.

Some leaderships may elect to advance policies geared toward disarmament, but until a new world order emerges, or an alternative, new form of deterrence is at hand, when disarmament aspirations are incompatible with sustaining nuclear deterrence, as they inevitably must be, for many the prudent priority option almost certainly will remain deterrence. This reality is reflected in the fact that, in a rare display of unity, all permanent members of the U.N. Security Council joined in rejecting the U.N.'s Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and, as yet, not a single state reliant on nuclear deterrence for its security has signed it, including those that have otherwise been very active in the nuclear disarmament movement. The Biden Administration emphatically rejected it with the wholly realist observation that, "The United States does not share the underlying assumption of the TPNW that the elimination of nuclear weapons can be achieved irrespective of the prevailing international security environment. Nor do we consider the TPNW to be an effective tool to resolve the underlying security conflicts that lead states to retain or seek nuclear weapons."<sup>39</sup>

Deterrence policies must, of course, be as safe, secure and non-provocative as possible, but disarmament as the alternative to nuclear deterrence appears implausible. Why so? Because, as Professor Kenneth Waltz concluded, "Nuclear weapons decisively change how some states provide for their own and possibly for others' security, but nuclear weapons have not altered the anarchic structure of the international political system."<sup>40</sup> In sharp contrast to prevalent church-based and secular calls for disarmament based on obscure dynamics and a wholly uncertain transformation of the international system, deterrence

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<sup>39</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 19, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 5.

policies have a demonstrated measure of effectiveness for preventing war and its escalation in the existing anarchic environment.

Deterrence is only a palliative with inherent risks and the possibility of failure; a practicable, safer alternative to nuclear deterrence would be a great and unalloyed good. However, achieving global disarmament is not about convincing an intelligentsia that is not responsible for its nation's security; that appears to be easy. The requirement is for a fundamental, global transformation in human patterns of thinking and international behavior. That is not a plausible alternative on any foreseeable time frame pertinent to policy planning for national leaderships.

This conclusion that the vision of a cooperative world order and nuclear disarmament is an illusion for planning purposes does not reflect any lack of appreciation for that vision. It does, however, reflect deep skepticism regarding its plausibility as envisaged, and thus comparable skepticism about the prudence of U.S. policies that would prioritize that vision over sustaining deterrence. For those leaders responsible for national survival and reliant on deterrence, moving to replace it with a vague and seemingly unattainable alternative, understandably and rightly, is unlikely to be judged a prudent policy choice.

The resilience of this truth and its significance for recurring hopes for a new world order and disarmament seemingly must be relearned by every new generation—at least in Western democracies. This need is illustrated by George Kennan's observation (quoted above) regarding the ill-fated disarmament conferences of the 1920s and 1930s, Sir Norman Angell's even earlier frustrated expectations, and the successive failures of the League of Nations and United Nations to meet expectations. Unfortunately, the elegance of disarmament advocacy and the unarguable beauty of the goal do not put it within reach, and there is nothing commendable about chasing an illusion or the cost of doing so. President John Adams's well-known observation fully applies here: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence..."

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