February 2025 OCCASIONAL PAPER Volume 5, Number 2

Struggling with The Bomb: Competing Discourses in the Nuclear Disarmament Movement

Christopher A. Ford

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Struggling with The Bomb: Competing Discourses in the Nuclear Disarmament Movement

Christopher A. Ford

National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

After the waning of Cold War tensions had permitted the United States and the Soviet Union to begin a process of nuclear arms reduction for the first time since the advent of the nuclear age, it was possible for many world leaders to imagine a future with fewer and fewer nuclear weapons in it. Today, however, such optimism has faded. As the Biden Administration's 2022 Nuclear Posture Review observed, it is now the case that "[b]y the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in its history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries," and nuclear tensions have been increasing rapidly.

Historically, periods of rising nuclear tensions have often tended to produce blooms of anti-nuclear protest in democratic societies, in which some citizens react to such tensions by attempting to escape the challenges of nuclear deterrence and risk management entirely, through disarmament. As we struggle with contemporary tensions, therefore, it is important to understand the history of and dynamics of such disarmament protest so that U.S. leaders can understand how well—or perhaps how poorly—such efforts have played out in the past.

This paper offers an organizing construct for thinking about such issues, exploring the development of disarmament thinking through the prism of two "intersections," and also of two "tensions." The "Two Intersections" represent the two times in which American leaders seem seriously to have considered trying to reach an eventual state of nuclear weapons abolition: the U.S. Government's early disarmament proposals in the Acheson-Lilienthal Report and in the "Baruch Plan" offered at the United Nations in 1946; and the revival of disarmament thinking in some leadership circles after the end of the Cold War, as illustrated, for example, by President Barack Obama's 2009 "Prague Speech." The

"First Tension" results from the fact that civil society disarmament activism has a sharply asymmetric impact, being much more likely to affect democracies than dictatorships. The "Second Tension" lies within the nuclear disarmament community, between those who focus primarily upon the weapons themselves and those who focus more upon the conditions of the global political or security environment that encourage leaders to seek such weaponry.

It is hardly surprising that the magnitude of nuclear explosive power and the growth of the U.S.-Soviet arms race led to a degree of popular protest against nuclear armaments in the early Cold War period. And indeed, the nuclear disarmament movement arguably began even before the first atomic explosion, when the Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard circulated a petition among his colleagues against using the atomic bomb on Japan. The nuclear disarmament movement has waxed and waned over the years for various reasons and in reaction to various events, but it first became a political force—at least in Western societies—in the 1950s as the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the USSR accelerated, as thermonuclear weapons (H-bombs) came to be deployed, and as the nuclear powers' aboveground nuclear weapons testing created radioactive fallout all around the world.

The "First Intersection" between such sentiments and the actual work of government national security planners, however, actually occurred before the disarmament movement had acquired any particular heft or momentum in the public arena. As early as November 1945, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada declared that "international action" should be taken to "prevent the use of atomic energy for destructive purposes." They thus proposed establishing a United Nations effort to "control … atomic energy to the extent necessary to insure its use only for peaceful purposes" and eliminate "national armaments

of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction" under a system of "effective safeguards." This led to the creation of the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) to explore such proposals.

In March 1946, a committee reporting to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson produced a report on this topic, offering the outlines of such a plan. This was the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, and it argued for the creation of an international agency—an "Atomic Development Authority"—that would take control of all technologies involved in making nuclear weapons, removing such technologies from national hands so as to preclude their misuse in building atomic weaponry while still permitting humankind to benefit from peaceful nuclear applications such as power generation. This international system, it was argued, would eliminate international rivalry in fissile materials—and thus, assumedly, end the danger that international competition for advantage in nuclear explosive power would corrupt and collapse the international disarmament effort.

There is every sign that this proposal was seriously intended, making this the "First Intersection" between disarmament thinking and real-world planning by real-world strategists. U.S. officials even proposed a version of this plan at the United Nations in June 1946, in the form of the "Baruch Plan." This plan was rejected by the Soviet Union, however, which was by that point already racing to develop atomic weaponry of its own, and the nuclear arms race indeed soon began with the detonation of Moscow's first device in 1949.

The "Second Intersection" of disarmament thinking and real-world policymaking occurred decades later, after the end of the Cold War, when some real optimism for the possibility of disarmament revived, at least in Western states. In this period, in which even the head of the Russian Federation at one point declared that he "considers the

United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies," arms control shifted from merely trying to impose limits on the nuclear arms race to achieving actual arms reductions. Correspondingly, enthusiasm grew in certain civil society and also in some Western leadership circles for the possibility of eventually reaching "Zero."

As noted, the "First Tension" relates to the disproportionate impact of disarmament protest upon democratic leaders in the context of a nuclear arms race between two opposing alliance blocs, only one of which organized itself on a generally democratic basis and was ruled by leaders who had to answer to public opinion and their country's voters. In these circumstances, the civil society activism of the disarmament movement thus inherently had an asymmetric effect. It risked helping the authoritarians in their contest with the democracies by making nuclear weapons-based deterrence harder to sustain in those democracies, while having essentially no effect upon the nuclear postures of dictators who cared little for the views of their subjects. This problem has dogged, challenged, and limited the appeal of the disarmament movement from its earliest days.

Soviet leaders seem to have appreciated how advantageous this asymmetry could be for them in their Cold War rivalry with the United States. With this in view, they frequently publicly made propagandistic disarmament proposals that were designed to play to anti-nuclear elements within Western societies and sought—including through covert means, as an aspect of "active measures" subversion undertaken by Eastern Bloc intelligence services—to support domestic disarmament activism against Western governments and their defense policies, hoping that the Western peace movements could function as an instrument working to the Soviet Union's advantage in the Cold War. One observer termed this a "Trojan Dove."

It would be wrong to say that Moscow actually ran the Western anti-nuclear peace movement, though it certainly tried. Nevertheless, the Kremlin certainly liked it very much that there existed a Western anti-nuclear movement, and worked hard to encourage that movement in the confident expectation that the impact of anti-nuclear activism would be felt in the Western democracies far more than in the dictatorships of the Soviet Bloc. And this effort did produce at least some successes—perhaps most of all in the form of Soviet encouragement of the civil society campaign that persuaded U.S. President Jimmy Carter to cancel the so-called "neutron bomb," an effort that Moscow considered "one of the most significant and successful" of its "active measures efforts" since end of the Second World War.

The "Second Tension" related to the disarmament movement is more internal to the movement, in the form of a long-running debate about how to diagnose the cause of the nuclear arms race and nuclear war risks, and hence also to a great extent how to imagine a solution to that problem. This debate is loosely between those who focus upon nuclear weapons themselves as the primary locus of policy attention en route to abolition and those who focus more upon the conditions of the global political or security environment that encourage nations to compete with each other by means of such weapons.

This paper conceives this as a tension between "weapons-idealism" and "conditions discourse." For weapons-idealists, the main problem is existence of the weapons themselves, and both diagnosis and cure for our nuclear dilemma are seen as flowing all but inevitably from a proper recognition of their terrifying nature and the imperative of immediately eliminating them. A prominent modern example of this thinking can be seen in the International Committee to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

By contrast, "conditions discourse" thinkers tend to focus less on the tools of war and geopolitical rivalry than upon addressing its causes, emphasizing broader questions of pacifism, dispute resolution, and world government. Conditions discourse exists on the hawkish side of disarmament debates as well, where it is argued that arms races result from underlying security challenges and geopolitical rivalries which must be addressed directly, rather than assuming that they will magically disappear if only nuclear weapons were declared anathema. But conditions discourse has also long represented at least one important current within the disarmament movement, in some ways expressed most interestingly by disarmament activist Jonathan Schell in his 1984 book *The Abolition*, which grappled thoughtfully with the possibility of what he termed "weaponless deterrence."

In terms of a general assessment of the impact of these dynamics, the aforementioned "Two Tensions" within the disarmament movement seem to have contributed to dampening the movement's effectiveness, popular appeal, and impact upon real-world policymakers in Western states. Some scholars of the anti-nuclear movement—notably Lawrence Wittner and Jeffrey Knopf—have made strong claims that it helped limit the arms race and drove arms control and disarmament progress. These appear to be significant overstatements, however, and such strong claims stand up poorly even to the evidence that Wittner and Knopf themselves adduce.

In fact, rather than resulting from U.S. leaders doing what protesters urged, U.S. arms control efforts have historically been far more successful when American leaders have resisted the movement's entreaties by placing security and deterrence interests first—e.g., not agreeing to arms control concessions unless and until U.S. nuclear security and deterrence objectives could be assured, using arms limits to slow Soviet efforts to catch up to and surpass

U.S. capabilities, and pressing Moscow into arms control concessions by building up countervailing U.S. capabilities.

Perhaps for this reason, it has historically been the case that, as Wittner has admitted, "the appeal of nuclear disarmament decline[s] in proportion to perceived threats to national security." And even U.S. leaders initially strongly sympathetic to disarmament generally understand the unwisdom of its pursuit unless conditions in the security environment can be made suitable. In a notable partial vindication for conditions discourse, for instance, the end of the Cold War demonstrates that real reductions can become possible when security conditions do become more conducive, but it is also important to get the causality straight: it is not that nuclear arms reductions brought about the end of the Cold War, but rather that the waning of Cold War tensions made arms reductions possible.

This insight is also something of an indictment of the disarmament movement. However well-intentioned its members may have been, the movement has never made a compelling case for the weapons-idealism that so often appears to be its default mode, nor offered a coherent response to concerns about the asymmetric impact of civil-society protest upon the security of democracies threatened by autocratic geopolitical revisionism. Especially in a geopolitical context of growing threats from authoritarian revisionists who hate Western democracy and wish it ill, for so long as that movement remains unable to provide compelling answers to these challenges, it is likely to continue to be the case that the disarmament movement's specific policy prescriptions form more reliable models of what to avoid in arms diplomacy than they do of what to seek.

Introduction

There was a time—after the waning of Cold War tensions had permitted the United States and its longstanding superpower rival, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), to begin a process of nuclear arms reduction for the first time since the advent of the nuclear age—when the major powers seemed to be on a road that might diminish or even entirely exorcise the specter of nuclear warfare that had hung over mankind since the first atomic bomb was used on the city of Hiroshima in August 1945. For some years after the end of the Cold War, it remained possible for many world leaders to imagine a future with fewer and fewer nuclear weapons in it.

In those years, for instance, it was still possible for a Russian leader such as Boris Yeltsin to describe "the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies,"[1] even as U.S. President Bill Clinton proclaimed himself devoted to "integrat[ing] all the former Communist countries into a Europe ... unified for the first time in its entire history."[2] Nor, in the United States, was this merely a partisan hope, for President George W. Bush also viewed his country as having "moved from confrontation to cooperation ... with Russia" in "building a new strategic relationship based on a central reality of the twenty-first century: the United States and Russia are no longer strategic adversaries." Indeed, it was perceived that in the face of shared threats such as that from international terrorism, all the great powers were now "on the same side—united by

---

[1] Boris Yeltsin, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, January 31, 1992, [hereinafter "Yelstin UNSC"], available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1992-book1/html/PPP-1992-book1-doc-pg175.htm

[2] William J. Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 25, 1994, available at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-12.

common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos."[3] (Meanwhile, U.S. leaders continued to believe that cooperative embrace of China would lead it to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the global system.[4])

In such a benign strategic environment, it was felt possible to reduce nuclear stockpiles considerably, and beginning with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987,[5] accelerating with the reciprocal promises of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs)[6] and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)[7] in 1991-92, and then continuing with the New START agreement of 2010,[8] Washington and Moscow implemented enormous cuts. By 2020, the United States had brought its stockpile down to 3,750 nuclear warheads, stunning reductions in an

---

[3] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, from the introductory letter, pp. 13 & 26-28, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=oyVN99aEnrAWijAc_O5eiQ%3d%3d (accessed January 17, 2024).

[4] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, Part VIII(c)(7), available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/.

[5] Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Elimination Of Their Intermediate-Range And Shorter-Range Missiles, signed December 8, 1987, entered into force June 1, 1988 [hereinafter "INF Treaty"], available at https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm.

[6] See, for example, Susan J. Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992," National Defense University, Case Study Series no. 5, September 2012, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf.

[7] Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, signed July 31, 1991, entered into force December 5, 1994 [hereinafter "START"], available at https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/146007.htm.

[8] Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, signed April 8, 2010, entered into force February 5, 2011 [hereinafter "New START"], available at https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf.

arsenal that had stood at upwards of 31,000 at its peak in the mid-1960s, and still at some 22,000 at Cold War's end.[9]

During this remarkable period of nuclear reductions made possible by perceptions of enduring benignity in the strategic environment, Cold War-era terrors of nuclear annihilation faded, to be replaced—for a time, at least in the West—by optimistic hopes that it would finally prove possible to bring about "a world without nuclear weapons."[10] Elder statesmen in the U.S. policy community weighed in, endorsing such dreams of "Zero,"[11] and the United Nations declared into existence an "International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons" devoted to furthering this objective."[12]

Today, however, such optimism has faded. Rather than embracing the post-competitive strategic environment Western leaders had assumed would continue to exist *ad infinitum*, both Russia (under Vladimir Putin since the early 2000s) and China (both more quietly and more consistently ever since the end of the Cold War) have leaned headlong into geopolitical revisionism. Today, both powers are full-throated in their contempt for the current international order and both are building up their nuclear arsenals—in China's case, at quite a shocking rate, apparently sprinting toward a posture of *at least* parity with Washington and

---

[9] See, for example, U.S. Department of State, "Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Stockpile," October 5, 2021, available at https://www.state.gov/transparency-in-the-u-s-nuclear-weapons-stockpile/.

[10] Barack Obama, "Remarks By President Obama in Prague as Delivered," April 5, 2009 [hereinafter "Prague Speech"], available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered.

[11] See, for example, George P. Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636.

[12] United Nations General Assembly, Resolution A/RES/68/32, December 10, 2013, operative ¶ 7, available at https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n13/441/37/pdf/n1344137.pdf?token=U6QDyRlpdD3LOpWtx4&fe=true.

Moscow.[13] Russia, moreover, is engaged in an ongoing campaign of brutal aggression under a "shield" of nuclear weapons threats[14] as it invades and seeks to annex its neighbors' territory,[15] while China gives every impression of preparing to take a similar path with Taiwan.[16]

As the Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* observes, "[b]y the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in its history, face *two* major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries."[17] Clearly the security environment is benign no more, and it is hardly surprising—especially amid escalating nuclear threats by Vladimir Putin[18]—that nuclear tensions have been increasing rapidly.[19]

Historically—at least in democratic societies in which leaders are elected by and accountable to the people—periods of rising nuclear tensions have often tended to produce blooms of anti-nuclear protest, as some citizens

---

[13] For more on China's nuclear trajectory, see Christopher A. Ford, "Nuclear Posture and Nuclear Posturing: A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing China's Nuclear Weapons Policy," National Institute for Public Policy *Occasional Papers*, vol. 4, no. 2, February 2024, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Vol-4-No-2-final.pdf.

[14] 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, op. cit., p.1; see also, e.g., Christopher Ford, "Offensive Nuclear Umbrellas and the Modern Challenge of Strategic Thinking," remarks to the Congressional Nuclear Security Working Group, February 10, 2016, available at https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2007.

[15] See, for example, "Ukraine in maps: Tracking the war with Russia," *BBC*, February 21, 2024, available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682.

[16] See, for example, Ford, "Nuclear Posture and Nuclear Posturing," op. cit., pp. 53-54.

[17] 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, op. cit., p.4 (emphasis added).

[18] See, for example, Georgi Kantchev & Ann M. Simmons, "Putin Warns an Anxious West Over Nuclear War," *The Wall Street Journal* (February 29, 2024), available at https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-warns-west-of-risk-of-nuclear-war-in-annual-address-2707501c.

[19] See, for example, W.J. Hennigan, "The Brink," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2024, available at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/04/opinion/nuclear-war-prevention.html.

and civil society organizations react to such tensions by stepping up calls for the elimination of the nuclear tools that made it possible to wreak such appalling destruction in such a short period of time.[20] This inherently makes nuclear protest at least one of the factors that national and international leaders must consider as they struggle with the challenges of defense, deterrence, and survival in the nuclear age.

In the hope of helping make future such decision-making wiser and better informed, this paper offers a historical and conceptual overview of the nuclear disarmament movement in order to shed light upon important themes and dynamics in its development. By way of an organizing construct, the following pages will address the development of disarmament thinking through the prism of two *intersections*, and also of two *tensions*.

In exploring "Two Intersections," this paper will discuss the two times at which nuclear disarmament planning and thinking seems to have intersected with real-world U.S. national security planning—that is, the times at which American leaders seem to have seriously considered how it might be possible to reach an eventual state of nuclear weapons abolition. The first of these intersections was at the very dawn of the nuclear era, as U.S. scientists and strategists struggled with what to do with the terrible new technology that the wartime Manhattan Project had created. In looking at this "First Intersection," this paper will outline the very earliest disarmament thinking in the U.S. policy community, focusing upon the U.S. government's remarkable early disarmament proposals in the Acheson-

[20] See, for example, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, "What happens if nuclear weapons are used?" undated, available at https://www.icanw.org/catastrophic_harm#:~:text=They%20lead%20to%20high%20levels,including%20cancer%20and%20genetic%20damage.

Lilienthal Report[21] and in the "Baruch Plan" proposed to the United Nations of 1946.[22]

The "Second Intersection" is much more recent, and came about after the end of Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union—and, more specifically, the *collapse* of the USSR and the democratization of its former client states in Eastern Europe that used to be part of the Warsaw Pact military alliance that had squared off for decades against NATO. As noted above, that huge geopolitical change ushered in not just a sort of new "Golden Age" for arms control in which the negotiated limits of the 1970s were succeeded by negotiated reductions, and the policy community—or at least parts of it—began thinking about how it might, *perhaps*, be possible to get, eventually, to "Zero." This revival of nuclear disarmament thinking in U.S policy circles to some extent stayed alive into the mid-20-teens.

With those historical accounts as background, this paper will thereafter explore two tensions *within* nuclear disarmament thinking. The "First Tension" refers to the tension that civil-society-based nuclear disarmament activism creates by having a sharply asymmetric impact on democratic societies compared to authoritarian ones. If one's mechanism for achieving disarmament is civil society activism and education—which aspired to drive changes in popular opinion and thereby exert pressure upon political leaders—this is *necessarily* likely to have more impact upon democracies than upon dictatorships. This is not a tension

---

[21] Chester I. Barnard, J. R. Oppenheimer, Charles A. Thomas, Harry A. Winne, & David E. Lilienthal, "A Report on the International Control of Atomic Energy Prepared for the Secretary of State's Committee on Atomic Energy," March 16, 1946 [hereinafter "Acheson-Lilienthal Report"], available at https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/acheson-lilienthal/index.html.

[22] Bernard Baruch, "Plan Presented to the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission" June 14, 1946 [hereinafter "Baruch Plan"], available at https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/deterrence/baruch-plan.html.

that disarmament activists themselves generally like to discuss, though it is frequently emphasized by their critics, but it is one that nonetheless needs to be understood because of its potential policy relevance in any geopolitical context in which nuclear weapons-possessing democracies perceive themselves to face geopolitical threats from similarly weapons-possessing autocracies.

The "Second Tension" that will be discussed in these pages is a deeper and more philosophical one. It refers to the tension between those in the nuclear disarmament community who focus primarily upon the weapons *themselves*, on the one hand, and those who focus more upon the *conditions* of the global political or security environment, on the other. As we shall see, this is not a tension solely within the disarmament movement—for "conditions discourse" critiques of what I shall term "weapons-idealist" disarmament narratives are also commonly voiced by critics of that movement. Yet it *does* exist within the ranks of civil society anti-nuclear activists, and has indeed given rise to some rich and interesting debate over the years.

The paper will then conclude with some suggestions about how a deeper understanding of these conceptual currents can help Western leaders deal both with deterrence challenges and disarmament protest in a time of revisionist geopolitical threats and nuclear saber-rattling.

The Problem of the Bomb

Whatever one thinks of the merits of the various specific policy proposals advanced by nuclear disarmament activists over the years, it is not hard to see why at least some level of popular protest against nuclear weaponry exists. After all, these tools are ones of mind-boggling power, capable of wreaking unspeakable destruction, and it would be surprising if they did not evoke at least some revulsion in some people.

Arguably, the first nuclear scientist to start worrying about the implications of a nuclear arms race was the great Leo Szilard himself—the physicist who had first conceived of the idea of a nuclear chain reaction in 1933, and who (fascinatingly, but apparently entirely unprofitably) actually *patented* the concept in 1934.[23] As early as September 1942, Szilard wrote a memorandum warning of the implications for peace and war of the spread of atomic bomb technology, and in Lawrence Wittner's sprawling, three-volume history of the nuclear disarmament movement, Wittner credits Szilard with being the father of a new movement of scientists against nuclear war.[24]

But one did not have to be a visionary scientist to become worried about the terrible and awe-inspiring destructive power that the competitors in the nuclear arms race were soon building up for themselves. Before long, the figures reached magnitudes that seem simply shocking. Already, as early as 1948, it was estimated that a month-long U.S. bomber campaign against 70 Soviet cities with 133 atomic bombs would kill 2.7 million people. Even as early as 1955, a Pentagon study estimated that the then-current

---

[23] "Leo Szilard," Atomic Heritage Foundation, undated, available at https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/profile/leo-szilard/.

[24] Lawrence S. Wittner, *A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, Volume One: One World or None*: *A History of the World Disarmament Movement Through 1953*, Stanford University Press, 1993 [hereinafter "Wittner I"], pp. 20-25.

U.S. war plan for an atomic offensive would obliterate 118 out of 134 major Soviet cities and cause 60 million deaths.[25] That same year, 1955, a NATO short-range *tactical* nuclear exercise envisioned stopping the Red Army's conquest of Western Europe by setting off a notional 355 atomic bombs (a.k.a. "A-bombs") between Hamburg and Munich, thereby killing or wounding some 5.2 million Germans immediately.[26]

And the problem went far beyond Western weaponry, for after the Soviet Union conducted its first test in August 1949, a real nuclear arms race was on between Washington and Moscow, with both target lists and weapon numbers expanding rapidly. We lack a great deal of knowledge of Soviet planning, but from the U.S. side, from a few dozen targets in 1948, the U.S. target list grew to more than 2,500 in 1960. The U.S. stockpile reportedly soon grew from around 1,000 weapons in the summer of 1953 to more than 23,000 in 1961.[27] The U.S. arsenal is believed to have peaked at 32,500 weapons in 1967, while the Soviet arsenal reportedly peaked at 36,300 in 1980[28]—though some accounts put it at "around 40,000."[29]

Those are obviously *huge* numbers. Already, in the first U.S. Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) of 1960—

---

[25] See Christopher A. Ford, "Debating Disarmament: Interpreting Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, November 2007, pp. 414-15, available at https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/143ford.pdf.

[26] See Lawrence S. Wittner, *A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, Volume Two: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954-1970*, Stanford University Press, 1997 [hereinafter "Wittner II"], p. 18.

[27] See Ford, "Debating Disarmament," op. cit., p. 414.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See Guy Foulconbridge, "Russia's nuclear arsenal: How big it is? Who controls it?" *Reuters*, October 5, 2023, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-nuclear-arsenal-how-big-is-it-who-controls-it-2023-10-05/#:~:text=Such%20numbers%20mean%20that%20both,U.S.%20peak%20was%20around%2030%2C000..

long before peak warhead numbers on both sides of the Cold War arms race—the Pentagon selected 2,600 separate installations in Warsaw Pact countries and China for attack, which translated into more than 1,000 ''Designated Ground Zeros'' (DGZs) for attack by nuclear weapons, including 151 urban-industrial targets. Even on short notice, it was envisioned that an ''alert force'' of 880 bombers and missiles would attack some 650 DGZs with more than 1,400 weapons and a total yield of 2,100 megatons. With sufficient warning, the SIOP called for launching essentially the entire U.S. nuclear force, carrying 3,500 weapons with a yield of more than 7,800 megatons.[30]

(A megaton, by the way of grim reminder, is equivalent to a million tons of TNT being exploded. The bomb that devastated Hiroshima in August 1945—the first nuclear weapon used in anger—totaled only some 16 kilotons,[31] with a kiloton being the equivalent of a mere *thousand* tons of TNT. A single one-megaton thermonuclear weapon [a.k.a. hydrogen bomb or "H-bomb"], therefore, has the explosive yield of *more than 62* Hiroshima bombs.)

These numbers thus almost beggar belief: 7,800 megatons is the equivalent of 7.8 billion tons of TNT, or nearly *half a million* times the explosive power of the atomic bomb that instantly obliterated Hiroshima in August 1945. Full execution of the 1961 nuclear war plan was estimated as likely to kill 285 million people in the Soviet Union and China. Quite understandably, when briefed on this plan for the first time in November 1965, President Dwight D.

---

[30] Ford, "Debating Disarmament," op. cit., p.415.

[31] See World Nuclear Association, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Subsequent Nuclear Weapons," March 2016, available at https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/non-proliferation/hiroshima,-nagasaki,-and-subsequent-weapons-testin.aspx#:~:text=About%2064%20kilograms%20of%20highly,of%20the%20city%20was%20destroyed.

Eisenhower told his naval aide that the briefing had ''frighten[ed] the devil out of me.''[32]

By 1974, the destructive power of the U.S. stockpile was estimated as being the equivalent of 615,385 Hiroshima bombs.[33] If one includes the Soviet stockpile, the peak explosive force of the two superpowers' arsenals during the Cold War thus perhaps came to *more than a million times* the nuclear yield that obliterated the city of Hiroshima.

In this author's view, even this kind of terrifying data need not necessarily *compel* one to be a nuclear disarmament activist. After all, it matters hugely what alternatives one actually *has* for dealing with this problem of terrifying destructive power. As Keith Payne has pointed out, policies that will not *work* should not count as real options,[34] and critics of the disarmament movement frequently depict its policy agenda as naïve and unrealistic, concluding (or at least implying) that "living with" nuclear weapons through some kind of deterrence framework might be the "least bad" option among a number of worse ones.

That said, and without taking a position on that question in this paper, it would be churlish not to acknowledge that disarmament activists are *right*, at least, that the nuclear arms race presented—and perhaps now again presents—a truly terrifying potential for catastrophe should deterrence fail. This author has frequently taken issue with the policy prescriptions advanced by many in the disarmament community[35] and vociferously supported

---

[32] See Ford, "Debating Disarmament," op. cit., p. 415.

[33] See Wittner II, op. cit., p. 470.

[34] Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence with Disarmament*, National Institute Press, 2023, p. 20 ("…[A] solution that cannot be put into practice is no solution—if not practical, it is an illusion and potential distraction from paths that might actually be of help.").

[35] See, for example, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Well-Intentioned Mistake," remarks at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik, October 30, 2018, available at https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2290.

nuclear deterrence,[36] but it would be wrong to deny just how terrifying nuclear weaponry is—and how mind-numbingly huge the world's accumulated nuclear arsenals became during the Cold War. We are clearly discussing the most enormous of topics here, and the most enormous of dangers, but there is no way to begin a serious discussion of the disarmament movement without acknowledging the horrifically dangerous nature of the forces in question.

[36] See, for example, Christopher A. Ford, "Nuclear 'Hedging,' Arms Control, and Today's Strategic Challenges," remarks at the Nuclear Triad Symposium at Louisiana State University—Shreveport, July 20, 2023, available at https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/nuclear-hedging-arms-control-and-todays-strategic-challenges; Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "Strengthening Deterrence and Reducing Nuclear Risks, Part II: The Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N)," U.S. Department of State, ACIS Papers, vol. I, no. 11, July 23, 2020, available at https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2011%20-%20SLCM-N.pdf; Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "Deterrence and the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure," U.S. Department of State, ACIS Papers, vol. I, no. 18, September 9, 2020, available at https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2018%20--%20Nuclear%20Infrastructure.pdf.

The Disarmament Explosion

The nuclear disarmament movement arguably began with Leo Szilard organizing a petition among his fellow scientists in July 1945, a month before Hiroshima, against using the A-bomb on Japan. That effort—meant, of course, to influence only the seniormost U.S. military and political leadership rather than the public, for the very existence of the Manhattan Project was still then a closely-held secret—elicited some 68 signatures at the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago,[37] where his colleague Enrico Fermi had in 1942 created the first nuclear reactor under the football stadium.

Over time, the disarmament movement would come to include not just a diverse range of civil-society organizations, but also religious leaders. In this respect, Pope Pius XII led the way in 1948 by calling for the A-bomb to be outlawed.[38] Thereafter, many Christian groups were active in the disarmament movement—as indeed, also, were Buddhists, especially in Japan.[39] Pope John XXIII also inveighed against the nuclear arms race in 1963,[40] and despite the Catholic Church's long tradition of "just war" theory, multiple popes have taken positions on nuclear weapons, including the current Pope Francis, who has recently praised the "courageous vision" of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW),[41] decried

---

[37] See "Leo Szilard," Atomic Heritage Foundation, undated, available at https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/profile/leo-szilard/.

[38] See Wittner II, op. cit., p. 5.

[39] See, e.g., Jonathan Watts, "Which Way to Peace? Part I: The Role of Japanese Buddhism in Anti-Nuclear Civil Protest" undated, available at https://jneb.net/activities/buddhistenergy/protest20112012/whichwaypeace/#:~:text=As%20victims%20of%20the%20first,Soka%20Gakkai%20and%20Rissho%20Koseikai.

[40] See Wittner II, op. cit., p. 296.

[41] Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, opened for signature July 7, 2017, entered into force January 22, 2021, available at

reliance upon nuclear weapons as providing a false sense of security, and proclaimed that "a world free from nuclear weapons is both necessary and possible."[42]

The movement even acquired its own iconography. The famous peace symbol—looking a bit like a Mercedes logo with an extra arm on the bottom—originated with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the United Kingdom, a group formed in 1958 that argued for unilateral nuclear disarmament by the British Government. As Wittner recounts, this symbol was the brainchild of a graphic artist involved with CND, who envisioned it as

> a circle encompassing a broken cross. The drooping cross, he explained, contained the semaphore signals for the *n* and *d* of 'nuclear disarmament.' But the emblem also symbolized human despair in a world facing the looming threat of nuclear catastrophe.[43]

The nuclear disarmament movement has waxed and waned over the years for various reasons and in reaction to various events, but it became a political force—at least in Western societies—in the 1950s as the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the USSR accelerated, as thermonuclear weapons (H-bombs) came to be deployed, and as the nuclear powers' aboveground nuclear weapons testing created radioactive fallout all around the world.[44]

---

https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVI-9&chapter=26&clang=_en.

[42] "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to his Excellency Ambassador Alexander Kmentt, President of the First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," June 21, 2022, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220621-messaggio-armi-nucleari.html.

[43] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 48.

[44] See generally, e.g., U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Radioactive Fallout from Nuclear Weapons Testing" (July 3, 2023), available at https://www.epa.gov/radtown/radioactive-fallout-nuclear-weapons-testing.

This issue of nuclear testing was an early flashpoint for public debate.

The idea of a prohibition on nuclear testing became an item in U.S. electoral politics in 1956, when Democratic Party candidate Adlai Stevenson proposed a cessation of H-bomb testing.[45] In Britain, the Labour Party called for end of testing in the mid-1950s, though it backed off this during its election fight with the Conservative Party in 1955. In 1957, the first Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs—an international scientists' group—called for a test ban, helping to legitimize the idea, and the World Council of Churches (a worldwide ecumenical religious organization) came out in favor, too.[46] The issue of fallout made the testing question particularly politically powerful, and soon journals such as *Science* and *Scientific American* were running warnings about the risk presented by nuclear fallout, and in congressional hearings in 1957 even the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) admitted that fallout might cause cancer and produce genetic damage.[47]

This is hardly to say that popular opinion swung firmly against nuclear weaponry. Many—and perhaps most—segments of Western populations *supported* their governments' positions on nuclear deterrence of the Soviet Union and its East Bloc allies, seeing such weapons as essential to preventing Communist aggression. In the United States, in fact, a poll in 1963 saw an overwhelming majority of Americans express the view that given the choice of "fighting an all-out nuclear war or living under communist rule," they would fight.[48] And in France, the idea of nuclear weapons as a key to national status was

---

[45] See Wittner II, op. cit., pp. 13 & 131. This became somewhat awkward for Stevenson, however, when—at the height of the Cold War—the Soviet Union praised his embrace of this policy. Ibid., p. 14.

[46] See Ibid., pp. 35 & 40.

[47] See Ibid., p. 52.

[48] See Ibid., p. 261.

apparently so deeply ingrained that even the French *Communist Party* supported *France*, at least, having nuclear weaponry![49] Nevertheless, the disarmament movement did become a force at least to be *considered* in Western polities from the mid-1950s.

[49] See Lawrence S. Wittner, *A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, Volume Three: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*, Stanford University Press, 2003 [hereinafter "Wittner III"], p. 158.

The "First Intersection" — At the Nuclear Dawn

But there is some distance between being a force for decisionmakers to consider and one that actually drives the public policy agenda. This is what makes what this paper terms the "First Intersection"—specifically, the first intersection between disarmament thinking and actual real-world U.S. policy planning—so interesting. That intersection represented the first and clearest point at which American leaders seem to have taken the possibility of nuclear weapons abolition seriously, and it occurred *before* the disarmament movement had acquired any particular heft or momentum.

As early as November 1945, U.S. President Harry Truman, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, and Canadian Prime Minister William Mackenzie King issued a statement noting that nuclear technology "has placed at the disposal of mankind means of destruction hitherto unknown, against which there can be no adequate military defense, and in the employment of which no single nation can in fact have a monopoly."[50]

The three leaders—representing the three countries involved in the Manhattan Project, and that at that time possessed the only working knowledge of nuclear weapons—also urged the world to explore "international action" to "prevent the use of atomic energy for destructive purposes" and "promote the use of recent and future advances in scientific knowledge." Though they declared that "the only complete protection for the civilized world from the destructive use of scientific knowledge lies in the

---

[50] "Declaration on Atomic Bomb By President Truman and Prime Ministers Attlee and King, Washington," November 15, 1945 [hereinafter "Truman-Attlee-King"], available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2005/11/01/nonproliferation-turns-60-pub-17664.

prevention of war"[51]—thus staking out an early position in favor of the "conditions" approach that will be described hereinafter—they also urged the worldwide sharing of information on peaceful nuclear uses.

Because so much harm could come from misusing such technology, however, Truman, Attlee, and King also called for setting up "a commission … under the United Nations Organization to prepare recommendations for submission to the organization." Its mission would be to explore, among other things, international "control of atomic energy to the extent necessary to insure its use only for peaceful purposes" and "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction" under a system of "effective safeguards by way of inspection and other means to protect complying states against the hazards of violations and evasions."

A month later, the foreign ministers of the United States, Britain, and Russia met and proposed the establishment of a U.N. Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) for this purpose—which was indeed duly established by a resolution of the U.N. General Assembly in January 1946.[52] The UNAEC was placed under the Security Council.[53]

Even at this early date, U.S. officials had been struggling with these policy issues internally for some time. President Truman held meetings on this in November 1945, only a couple of months after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after Japan's surrender. In those meetings, his science advisor Vannevar Bush proposed a plan in which the United

---

[51] Truman-Attlee-King, op. cit.

[52] See Baruch Plan, op. cit.

[53] See Ryan A. Musto, "First UN Resolution Holds Lessons for Latest Nuclear Treaty," *Arms Control Association*, January/February 2021, available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/features/first-un-resolution-holds-lessons-latest-nuclear-treaty#:~:text=The%20UN%20General%20Assembly%27s%20first,for%20"the%20elimination%20from%20national.

Nations would facilitate sharing information about peaceful uses of nuclear technology and establish a system for inspecting whether nuclear materials were being kept in the peaceful domain. After this system was set up—but *only* afterwards—the U.N. would somehow dismantle existing atomic weapons (which at this point still meant only *American* ones) transfer their fissile material to peaceful nuclear power plants, and set up mechanisms to ensure that the future production of fissile material be used solely for peaceful purposes. [54]

Vannevar Bush did not envision that nuclear weapons would actually be outlawed, for he felt this would be ineffective and wanted to leave open the possibility of nuclear weapons *reconstitution* by the United States if the system collapsed.[55] (This is an idea to which we shall return later.) But this thinking was the beginning of the Truman Administration's development of an actual nuclear disarmament proposal.

In March 1946, a committee reporting to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson produced a report on this topic, offering the outlines of such a plan. Known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, after Secretary Acheson and the chair of the committee that produced the report—a committee that included J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had run the Manhattan Project—this early U.S. thinking was remarkable in its scope and ambition.

Quite interestingly for a government document prepared by officials from the country that at the time possessed a complete monopoly on nuclear weaponry, the Acheson-Lilienthal Report argued strongly for the need to put nuclear technology under *international* control and get it out of the hands of individual countries—even the United States. The Report's authors cited the Truman-Attlee-King

---

[54] Musto, op. cit.

[55] Ibid.

statement that nuclear weapons are ones "in the employment of which no single nation can in fact have a monopoly," and argued that while "our present position, in which we have a monopoly of these weapons, may appear strong, this advantage will disappear and the situation may be reversed in a world in which atomic armament is general." This led them to agree upon the "necessity for international control."[56]

The Report, however, took a strong position *against* simply relying upon nuclear inspections to safeguard against national weapons development. It contended that "international agreements to foreswear the military use of atomic weapons cannot be enforced solely by a system of inspection—[and] that they cannot be enforced in a system which leaves the development of essentially dangerous activities in the field of atomic energy in national hands and subject to national rivalry."[57] Because "[t]he development of atomic energy for peaceful purposes and the development of atomic energy for bombs are in much of their course interchangeable and interdependent,"[58] as long as governments retained control over those capabilities it would be infeasible to rely on international control agreements backed by good faith alone. This was in part true precisely because of the unique power of nuclear weapons:

> This danger is accentuated by the unusual characteristics of atomic bombs, namely their devastating effect as a surprise weapon, that is, a weapon secretly developed and used without warning. Fear of such surprise violation of pledged word will surely break down any confidence in the pledged word of rival countries

[56] Acheson-Lilienthal Report, op. cit., from Section I.

[57] Ibid., from Section III, ch. 1.

[58] Ibid., from Section I.

> developing atomic energy if the treaty obligations and good faith of the nations are the only assurances upon which to rely.[59]

Accordingly, "without international enforcement no system of security holds any real hope at all."[60]

But the Acheson-Lilienthal Report *also* did not think that it would be possible to create an international organization possessing the kind of police powers necessary to enforce disarmament rules against governments possessing the full range of nuclear technical capabilities. "To 'outlaw' atomic energy in all of its forms and enforce such a prohibition by an army of inspectors roaming the earth would," the Report said, "overwhelm the capacity and the endurance of men, and provide no security."[61]

Instead, the Report argued that the answer was to *remove* such capabilities from national hands altogether, putting them into the hands of an international agency, referred to as the "Atomic Development Authority."

The key to this concept was to divide all nuclear technology work into "safe" and "dangerous" activities. An activity is "dangerous," according to the Report, if it "offers a solution either in the actual fact of its physical installation, or by subtle alterations thereof, to one of the three major problems of making atomic weapons." This included the provision of raw materials, the construction and operation of production plants for plutonium and the U-235 isotope of uranium, and the use these materials for making atomic weapons.[62]

All such "dangerous" activities should be entrusted exclusively to an international agency, "with individual nations and their citizens free to conduct, under license and

---

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., from Section III, ch. 3.

[62] Ibid., from Section II, ch. 5.

a minimum of inspection, all non-dangerous, or safe, operations" such as non-explosives-related research and the construction and operation of non-dangerous power-producing reactors:[63]

> National activities in these fields would be subject to moderate controls by the international agency, exercised through licensing, rules and regulations, collaboration on design, and the like. The international agency would also maintain inspection facilities to assure that illicit operations were not occurring, primarily in the exploitation of raw materials. It would be a further function of the Atomic Development Authority continually to reexamine the boundary between dangerous and non-dangerous activities.[64]

As they envisioned it, "the only legal ownership and development" of uranium ore would be in the hands of the international Authority, and it would "bring under its complete control world supplies of uranium and thorium." It would own all stockpiles of these materials, and also sell the by-products, such as vanadium and radium.[65]

The Authority would also construct and operate all nuclear reactors and fuel separation plants—including, the authors noted, those the United States had already built at Hanford (Washington state) and Oak Ridge (Tennessee), which would be turned over to the United Nations organization after the Authority was up and running. Eventually, in fact, the Authority would "assume responsibility for research in the field of [nuclear] explosives."[66] (This reference to research into nuclear explosives for an agency the purpose of which was to

---

[63] Ibid., from Section III, introduction.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid., from Section III, ch. 1.

[66] Ibid., from Letter of Transmittal.

ensure the enduring non-existence of nuclear weapons may seem odd today, but it was then envisioned that it would be possible to use nuclear explosive devices for *some* purposes such as in large-scale excavation—*e.g.*, carving out a canal, or making a harbor where there had previously been only straight coastline.[67])

This international system, it was argued, would eliminate international rivalry in fissile materials—and thus, assumedly, end the danger that international competition for advantage in nuclear explosive power would corrupt and collapse the international disarmament effort. Said the authors of the Report:

> It has become clear to us that if the element of rivalry between nations were removed by assignment of the intrinsically dangerous phases of the development of atomic energy to an international organization responsible to all peoples, a reliable prospect would be afforded for a system of security. For it is the element of rivalry

[67] For some time, it was felt that possible applications for peaceful nuclear explosions (PNEs) included: large-scale excavation to create reservoirs, canals and ports; stimulating oil and gas recovery; creating cavities for underground oil, gas or waste storage; extinguishing gas field fires; space propulsion; interception of potentially dangerous space objects such as asteroids; recovering oil from oil shale; energy production via molten fluorides underground producing steam for electricity, and breaking up copper and phosphate ore preparatory to mining. According to the World Nuclear Association, some 151 PNE experiments were carried out before the idea fell very much out of favor. The United States conducted 27 tests to explore PNE applications and the USSR 124, not counting 32 Soviet tests that "helped develop explosive devices used in PNEs." World Nuclear Association, "Peaceful Nuclear Explosions," December 2018, available at https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/non-power-nuclear-applications/industry/peaceful-nuclear-explosions.aspx#:~:text=The%20Plowshare%20Programb%20was,Atomic%20Energy%20Commission%20(AEC). Remarkably, some countries—most prominently China—continued to support the idea of PNEs until at least 1996. See, e.g., Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished Business: The Negotiation of the CTBT and the End of Nuclear Testing*, UNIDIR 2009/2, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2009, pp.100-01, available at https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/unfinished-business-the-negotiation-of-the-ctbt-and-the-end-of-nuclear-testing-346.pdf.

> and the impossibility of policing the resulting competition through inspection alone that make inspection unworkable as a sole means of control. With that factor of international rivalry removed, the problem becomes both hopeful and manageable. … We conclude that the international development and operation of potentially and intrinsically dangerous activities in connection with atomic energy would bring the task of security within manageable proportions because of the elimination of the hazards of rivalry between nations.[68]

One might, of course, fault the authors of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report for their apparent assumption that removing from national hands rivalry in fissile materials would end the problem of "rivalry between nations" more broadly. And here one might indeed see an early instance of what will be discussed later in this paper under the term "weapons idealism"—insofar as it did not seem to occur to the authors that rivalry between nations is a *cause* of rivalry over things such as fissile materials, and that it is hard to imagine the pressure of the latter going away while the former still exists. (This idea of removing the "factor of international rivalry" by internationalizing fissile materials, in other words, might seem to put the cart before the proverbial horse, since in reality it seems more likely that rivalry in fissile materials results from broader dynamics of international competition rather than the other way around.) That said, the Acheson-Lilienthal idea was unquestionably a bold one.

To be fair, moreover, it is also true that the authors did not simply naïvely assume that a world with such nuclear activities conducted under the lawful monopoly of an international Atomic Development Authority would

[68] Acheson-Lilienthal, op. cit., from Section II, ch. 4.

automatically be proof against *all* competitive national mischief. Indeed, in one passage, the Report argued for what one might call a sort of "virtual" nuclear deterrence, in which the potential ability of one nation to "break out" of this international control system would be balanced by the potential ability of *others* to do so in response:

> At present with Hanford, Oak Ridge, and Los Alamos situated in the United States, other nations can find no security against atomic warfare except the security that resides in our own peaceful purposes or the attempt at security that is seen in developing secret atomic enterprises of their own. Other nations which, according to their own outlook, may fear us, can develop a greater sense of security only as the Atomic Development Authority locates similar dangerous operations within their borders.
>
> Once such operations and facilities have been established by the Atomic Development Authority and are being operated by that agency within other nations as well as within our own, a balance will have been established. It is not thought that the Atomic Development Authority could protect its plants by military force from the overwhelming power of the nation in which they are situated. Some United Nations military guard may be desirable. But at most, it could be little more than a token.
>
> The real protection will lie in the fact that if any nation seizes the plants or the stockpiles that are situated in its territory, other nations will have similar facilities and materials situated within

> their own borders so that the act of seizure need not place them at a disadvantage.[69]

As will be discussed hereinafter, this presaged the writing of antinuclear activist Jonathan Schell in the 1980s, in which he suggested that if two states each possessed a dormant weapons production capacity, each could thus perhaps deter the other from actually *using* such capacity.[70]

Looking at the Acheson-Lilienthal Report with eyes perhaps more jaundiced by decades of historical experience in the Cold War and thereafter, one might perhaps deem this 1946 U.S. plan naïve or unworkable. But there is every sign it was indeed seriously proposed—making this the "First Intersection" between disarmament thinking and real-world planning by real-world strategists. To the present author's knowledge, this was also the only time that an actual plan for achieving the "Zero" of nuclear weapons abolition has seriously been advanced by government officials representing a nuclear weapons possessor state.

The Acheson-Lilienthal Report was quite clear that although the plan didn't require the United States to give up its nuclear weapons and nuclear technology monopoly at the outset—for the Atomic Development Authority would have to be established and begin its function first, proving itself workable before Washington would take that leap—but the plan envisioned this nonetheless. "It has been recognized," said the Report "that this monopoly [by the United States] could not be permanent. … International control implies an acceptance from the outset of the fact that our monopoly can not last."[71]

And the United States at this point didn't merely publish a report, but also actually proposed a version of this

---

[69] Ibid., from Section III, ch. 2.

[70] See Jonathan Schell, *The Abolition*, Knopf, 1984.

[71] Acheson-Lilienthal Report, op. cit., from Section IV. (The wording "can not" appears in the original.)

plan at the United Nations. In June 1946, a few months after the publication of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, a U.S. official named Bernard Baruch officially presented what became known as the "Baruch Plan" at the U.N. He told the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission that:

> The United States proposes the creation of an International Atomic Development Authority, to which should be entrusted all phases of the development and use of atomic energy, starting with the raw material and including: (1) Managerial control or ownership of all atomic-energy, activities potentially dangerous to world security. (2) Power to control, inspect, and license all other atomic activities. (3) The duty of fostering the beneficial uses of atomic energy. (4) Research and development responsibilities of an affirmative character intended to put the Authority in the forefront of atomic knowledge and thus to enable it to comprehend, and therefore to detect, misuse of atomic energy. To be effective, the Authority must itself be the world's leader in the field of atomic knowledge and development and thus supplement its legal authority with the great power inherent in possession of leadership in knowledge. …
>
> When an adequate system for control of atomic energy, including the renunciation of the bomb as a weapon, has been agreed upon and put into effective operation and condign punishments set up for violations of the rules of control which are to be stigmatized as international crimes, we propose that: (1) Manufacture of atomic bombs shall stop; (2) Existing bombs shall be disposed of pursuant to the terms of the treaty; and (3) The Authority shall be in possession of full

> information as to the know-how for the production of atomic energy.[72]

Baruch also urged that "penalties of as serious a nature" be established for:

> (1) Illegal possession or use of an atomic bomb; (2) Illegal possession, or separation, of atomic material suitable for use in an atomic bomb; (3) Seizure of any plant or other property belonging to or licensed by the Authority; (4) Willful interference with the activities of the Authority; (4) Creation or operation of dangerous projects in a manner contrary to, or in the absence of, a license granted by the international control body.[73]

Interestingly, these specific proposals Baruch made were not *quite* what the Acheson-Lilienthal Report had recommended. For one thing, as noted, he emphasized specific punishments for violations. The Baruch Plan also envisioned having the Atomic Development Authority under the U.N. General Assembly rather than the Security Council.

He apparently made these changes because he felt the Acheson-Lilienthal drafters hadn't been hard-headed enough, and he wanted to ensure that the U.N. body could actually *act* to punish violators—hence the need to spell out punishments and to get the organization *out* of the reach of a Security Council veto in hopes of ensuring it could act without international political paralysis.[74] So in that sense, the Baruch Plan tried to be an even *more* serious effort at international institution-building than Acheson-Lilienthal.

One side effect, however, was to make doubly sure that the Soviets would never support the plan. It is hard to

---

[72] Baruch Plan, op. cit.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Wittner I, op. cit., pp. 251-53.

imagine that Moscow would have supported it anyway, of course. Stalin was at that time already racing to get his *own* atomic bomb,[75] and he would surely not have stopped that program—if ever—merely on the basis of U.S. assurances that once a U.N. authority eventually got going the Americans would turn over their own capabilities to it.

Making matters worse, the Baruch Plan's removal of the proposed organization to the General Assembly not only envisioned specifically-defined punishments for violators, but also took the international Authority out of the reach of the Security Council veto—which is to say, out of the reach of a potential *Soviet* veto—by putting the Authority under the General Assembly, where at that time most governments were strongly favorable to U.S. positions and could probably be relied upon to support Washington in a majority vote. The Soviets, then already sprinting towards the Bomb themselves, were not interested in the Baruch Plan, and the nuclear arms race soon kicked off—officially, as it were—with the detonation of Moscow's first device in 1949.[76] Thus ended the "First Intersection."

---

[75] After returning from Potsdam where U.S. President Harry Truman made a vague reference to the atomic bomb, Joseph Stalin called a meeting of his scientists at the Kremlin and told them: "A single demand of you, comrades. Provide us with atomic weapons in the shortest possible time." According to Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin was "frightened to the point of cowardice" by the American atomic monopoly. Wittner I, op. cit., p. 285.

[76] This Soviet device—which the West called "Joe 1" and the Soviets "RDS-1"—was a "near replica" of the U.S. "Fat Man" plutonium implosion weapon that had been tested at Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1945. (The plans for that weapon had been provided to the Soviet Union by the British atomic spy Klaus Fuchs.) See Atomic Archive, "Soviet Breakthrough: 'Joe 1' Soviet Nuclear Test," undated, available at https://www.atomicarchive.com/history/hydrogen-bomb/page-9.html#:~:text=This%20replica%2C%20named%20Joe%2D1,yield%20was%20about%2022%20kilotons.&text=A%20few%20weeks%20later%2C%20a,suggesting%20a%20recent%20atomic%20explosion.

The "Second Intersection"—Post-Cold War Disarmament Dreams

The "Second Intersection" between U.S. nuclear posture planning and disarmament—which occurred some years after the end of the Cold War—is in some ways less interesting than the first, because U.S. leaders even then never *fully* engaged with the issue of complete disarmament. That said, with the waning of Cold War tensions, some real optimism for the possibility of disarmament revived, at least in Western states. This was especially the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union entirely in 1991 and its succession by a kaleidoscope of successor states—including a then apparently democratizing Russian Federation under President Boris Yeltsin, who told the U.N. Security Council in 1992 that he "considers the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies."[77]

This was during the period when arms control—previously focused on trying to impose *limits* on the nuclear arms race—came to focus upon *reductions*. The U.S. and USSR had already agreed to eliminate an entire class of nuclear delivery systems in 1987 with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987.[78] Then, in 1991, with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty,[79] they began a process of nuclear *cuts* which saw both powers eventually cut their arsenals by nearly 90 percent compared to Cold War levels.[80]

---

[77] Boris Yeltsin, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, January 31, 1992, available at https://apnews.com/article/e5458697cf06bbb518a9ffafffd650e5.

[78] INF Treaty, op. cit.

[79] START, op cit.

[80] See U.S. Department of State, "Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," October 5, 2021, available at https://www.state.gov/transparency-in-the-u-s-nuclear-weapons-stockpile/.

To be sure, Cold War nuclear numbers were high enough that even these huge cuts—carried out through START, the Moscow Treaty of 2002,[81] and the New START agreement of 2010[82]—still left a considerable number of nuclear weapons in existence: perhaps some 12,500 worldwide today.[83] For a long time, however, the trend was emphatically downward, and this helped give rise to no small amount of enthusiasm that it might somehow be possible eventually to reach "Zero."

To be sure, for much of this period the nuclear disarmament movement did not seem terribly strong. The collapse of Cold War tensions and the beginning of that long cycle of reductions had made the world—quite understandably—seem a much less dangerous nuclear place, and this somewhat took the wind out of the sails of a movement that had relied for popular support on fear of nuclear holocaust.

To some extent, therefore, much of the disarmament thinking during this "Second Intersection," which ran from the early 1990s until the mid-2010s, can perhaps be attributed not to a mass movement *per se* but rather to the degree to which some of the ideas of that mass movement from previous years had lodged in the heads of policy elites who found themselves in power in the West, particularly in the United States during the Clinton and then Obama Administrations.

Previous U.S. leaders such as Jimmy Carter (early in his administration) and Ronald Reagan (late in his) had had their own nuclear disarmament sympathies at various

---

[81] Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation On Strategic Offensive Reductions, signed May 24, 2002, entered into force June 1, 2003, available at https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/trt/18016.htm.

[82] New START, op. cit.

[83] See, for example, Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, & Kate John, "Status of world Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists (March 31, 2023), available at https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/.

points.[84] But Cold War tensions had made significant movement in that direction very difficult to defend for officials whose job, after all, included the responsibility of safeguarding U.S. national security interests in the face of Soviet threats. After 1991, however, much more conceptual "space" opened up for thinking about "Zero"—particularly for Democratic presidents.

This enthusiasm started slowly. Very early in the post-Cold War period, when START reductions were just getting underway, there were still some concerns that Russia might backslide in the program of political liberalization that had made Moscow seem much less threatening in the West.[85] In this context, the administration of President Bill Clinton made clear that while it wanted to "hedge" against such potentially resurgent threats, its objective was to "lead" the way toward nuclear disarmament.[86] The 1990s also saw the negotiation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)[87]—a prohibition on *all* nuclear testing that

---

[84] Most famously, of course, the two leaders met in 1986 at Reykjavik, Iceland, and *almost* agreed—they said—to eliminate all nuclear weaponry. See, e.g., James Goodby, "Looking Back: The 1986 Reykjavik Summit," *Arms Control Association*, undated, available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006-09/looking-back-1986-reykjavik-summit; see also, for example, Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 391-94.

[85] See, for example, The White House "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," February 1994, p. 1 (noting that "Russia's future is uncertain"), available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=YPdbuschbfpPz3tyQQxaLg%3d%3d; The White House, "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," February 1996, p. 1 (noting that "Russia's historic transformation will face difficult challenges"), available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1996.pdf?ver=4f8riCrLnHIA-H0itYUp6A%3d%3d.

[86] See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, "National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century," September 2008, p. i (discussing Clinton Administration nuclear policy), available at https://programs.fas.org/ssp/nukes/doctrine/Document_NucPolicyIn21Century_092308.pdf.

[87] Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, opened for signature September 24, 1996, available at https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/16411.htm.

disarmament advocates may have hoped would lead to nuclear weapons atrophying in place, toward obsolescence, as they became progressively less reliable for lack of such testing[88]—and a range of other arms control negotiations ranging from fissile material production to conventional forces to chemical weapons.[89]

---

[88] Such a *de facto* "atrophy in place" problem was very much on the minds of U.S. leaders in the early years of the United States' 1992 policy moratorium on nuclear testing and during the negotiation of the CTBT. See, for example, Johnson, op. cit., p.44 (recounting debates). The problem in this respect is that U.S. "nuclear weapons were not designed or intended to last indefinitely." U.S. Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration, "Maintaining the Stockpile," undated, available at https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/maintaining-stockpile. The U.S. moratorium thus "ended an era in which the U.S. modernized its nuclear weapons stockpile by the steady replacement of aging systems with new systems and in which nuclear testing served as the ultimate arbiter of the safety, reliability, and performance of the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile," and confronted American leaders with "the challenge of maintaining its existing nuclear weapons stockpile with other tools and different kinds of tests." P.S. Brown & L.J. Ferderber, "The Stockpile Stewardship Program," Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, June 1, 1998, p.1 available at https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/325167. To ensure such reliability without explosive testing required the establishment of a huge scientific and technical apparatus that had not previously existed, and which by the end of the 1990s reportedly already cost upwards of $4.5 billion a year. See Stephen I. Schwartz, "Atomic Audit: The Cost and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940," Brookings Institution, June 30, 1998, available at https://www.brookings.edu/the-hidden-costs-of-our-nuclear-arsenal-overview-of-project-findings/#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20Department%20of%20Energy,scale%20production%20of%20new%20weapons. So far, with the aid of such investments, the weapons complex has continued to be able to certify the safety and reliability of U.S. weapons, but questions persist about the ability to do this indefinitely. See, for example, John C. Hopkins and David H. Sharp, "The Scientific Foundation for Assessing the Nuclear Performance of Weapons in the US Stockpile Is Eroding," *Issues in Science and Technology*, vol. XXXV, no. 2, Winter 2019, p. 23, available at https://issues.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Hopkins-Sharp-The-Scientific-Foundation-23-25-Winter-2019.pdf; JASON group, "Electronic Materials Aging," MITRE Corporation, November 2020, p. 5 ("A goal of reliable performance after 40-60 years of un-monitored storage poses difficult, and perhaps unrealistic, challenges for electronic components to electrical subsystems and systems ….") available at https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/jason/electronic-aging.pdf.

[89] See, for example, Arms Control Association, "Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty at a Glance" (undated), available at https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/fmct; Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and

Some years later, President Barack Obama built on this "lead and hedge" strategy, upping the ante—at least rhetorically—with a speech in Prague, in the Czech Republic, in April 2009 that promised his commitment to achieving a "world without nuclear weapons."[90] Obama said that he did not feel the achievement of "Zero" likely in his lifetime, he promised that the United States would not let down its nuclear guard unilaterally, and he remained committed to modernizing the strategic delivery systems of the U.S. nuclear "Triad" lest they age out of service before "Zero" could be achieved. Yet he sent strong signals endorsing the objective of abolition,[91] and was given the Nobel Peace Prize for the message.[92] His administration not only negotiated New START, moreover, but also urged *further* cuts, suggesting that the United States would be willing to cut its operationally deployed strategic warheads further—that is, from 1,550 under New START to a lower figure of about 1,000—if the Russians would do so as well.[93]

The late 2000s were also the time in which a renewed civil society movement for nuclear disarmament stepped up its activity. This time, it was also buoyed by contributions from some U.S. national security grandees, including former officials from Republican administrations. Most

---

Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, opened for signature January 13, 1993, entered in to force April 29, 1997, available at https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/CWC/CWC_en.pdf.

[90] Prague Speech, op. cit.

[91] Ibid. ("We have to insist, 'Yes, we can.'").

[92] Norwegian Nobel Committee, "Press Release," October 9, 2009 (declaring that Obama had "created a new climate in international politics" … and his "vision of a world free from nuclear arms has powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations"), available at https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/press-release/.

[93] "Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate—Berlin," June 19, 2013 ("I've determined that we can … reduc[e] our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third. And I intend to seek negotiated cuts with Russia to move beyond Cold War nuclear postures."), available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany.

famous in this respect were the "Four Horsemen" of 2007—Henry Kissinger (Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor and Secretary of State), George Shultz (Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State), William Perry (Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense), and Sam Nunn (a former Georgia Senator)—who published a letter in the *Wall Street Journal* advocating nuclear abolition.[94] For a time, left-of-center think tank studies and research programs focused intently on ways in which it might be possible to continue the post-1991 strategic teleology onwards to "Zero."[95]

By the time the TPNW was opened for signature in 2017 and then entered into force in 2021,[96] however, the strategic environment—in particular, the rise of bellicose Russian and Chinese geopolitical revisionism[97] and those two countries' nuclear weapons buildups[98]—had made the idea

---

[94] Schultz, et al., op. cit.

[95] See, for example, George Perkovich and James Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, Routledge, 2008.

[96] See U.N. Institute for Disarmament Research, "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—First Meeting of States Parties," 2022, available at https://meetings.unoda.org/msp/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons-2022#:~:text=Expand%20all%20sections-,Overview,force%20on%2022%20January%202021.

[97] See, for example, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017) [hereinafter "2017 NSS"], pp. 8 & 25, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf; U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," p. 1 ("[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security"), https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

[98] See, for example, Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, "Putin's 'Invincible' Missile Is Aimed at U.S. Vulnerabilities," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/world/europe/russia-putin-speech.html; U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022: Annual Report to Congress*, Department of Defense, November 3, 2022, pp. ix & 94 (projecting that by 2035 China will have a nuclear stockpile of "about 1,500 warheads"), available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF.

of further progress toward disarmament difficult to imagine. Nor, even at the height of President Obama's "Prague Speech" enthusiasms, was any official analogue ever offered to the boldness and ambition of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report of 1946. Nevertheless, at least for some time, this "Second Intersection" between disarmament thinking and U.S. national security planning represented a powerful current within the American policy community.

Just *why* such "intersections" between security planning and the disarmament agenda have been so rare is surely the result of many factors. Most prominent and surely powerful among them, of course, is the longstanding difficulty of persuading national security establishments that have long felt nuclear weaponry to be essential to deterring aggression and preserving or advancing their national security that such tools can safely be dispensed with.[99] Less remarked upon, however, are two ongoing conceptual tensions *within* disarmament discourse that may also have helped make disarmament thinking less attractive, or affirmatively problematic, to would-be policy audiences. The following pages will explore these "Two Tensions" in more detail.

[99] See, e.g., Payne, op. cit., pp. 21-30.

The "First Tension": Asymmetric Impact

Pressuring Democracy but not Autocracy

It is inherent in the nature of the disarmament movement that it *is* a movement—and, more specifically, a movement of *popular protest*, dedicated to pressing global leaders to do what they have hitherto been, and implicitly would otherwise continue to be, unwilling to do. (After all, if those in positions of political and military leadership saw things the same way as those in the movement, there wouldn't *need* to be a disarmament movement in the first place, nor would there presumably be a nuclear arms race at all.) A considerable degree of *oppositionalism* has therefore been baked into the concept from the outset: this is about elements within civil society working to mobilize public opinion *against*—and explicitly in order to *change*—prevailing government policy.

The problem with this, however—and the source of what is here termed the "First Tension"—is that the nuclear arms race against which the disarmament movement evolved was an outgrowth of rivalry between two opposing alliance blocs, only *one* of which organized itself on a generally democratic basis and was ruled by leaders who had to answer to public opinion and their country's voters. In a contest between the United States and its military allies, on the one hand, and the USSR and *its* military allies, on the other, the civil society activism of the disarmament movement thus *inherently* had an asymmetric effect.[100]

---

[100] Cf., e.g., Ford, "The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," op. cit. ("The asymmetric impact of 'Ban' activism upon free, democratic states suggests the disturbing conclusion that to the extent that the TPNW effort were to actually *succeed* in goading any countries to abandon reliance upon nuclear weaponry, it risks creating a dynamic of *de facto* unilateral nuclear disarmament by the world's democracies vis-a-vis nuclear-armed authoritarian states such as Russia and China.").

By its very nature, in other words, the disarmament movement would inescapably tend to have a much more powerful impact in stigmatizing and undermining nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence policies in democratic states than it would in the authoritarian regimes against threats from which those democratic states felt they needed to possess nuclear weapons in the first place. In a sense, therefore, it inherently risked *helping* the authoritarians in their contest with the democracies by making nuclear weapons-based deterrence harder to sustain in those democracies while having essentially no effect upon the nuclear postures of dictators who cared little for the views of their subjects. This gives rise to the "First Tension," for this asymmetry of impact has dogged, challenged, and limited the appeal of the disarmament movement from its earliest days.

And, of course, there effectively *was* no meaningful nuclear disarmament movement in Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War. Lawrence Wittner's history of the movement, for instance, makes clear that "brutal repression" under Joseph Stalin "dampened resistance to nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union," with the result that "organized pacifist activities ground to a halt" before WWII, and did not revive thereafter.[101] Behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, Communist governments "circumscribed the opportunities for citizen activism" and "the policies of Communist nations remained relatively unaffected by the upsurge of … nuclear disarmament activity." Government restrictions on free expression kept peace activists from "playing a major role in influencing Soviet public opinion."[102]

In fact, it was the official view in those states that—as one Soviet Peace Committee official put it in the early

---

[101] Wittner I, op. cit., pp. 143-44.

[102] Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 35, 93, & 286.

1980s—"public opinion and official opinion are the same in our society."[103] As the Soviet foreign policy monthly *International Affairs* explained things, "there can be no political or moral basis for an antiwar movement that is directed against the policy of the socialist governments."[104] To the degree that Soviet scientists participated in *Western* anti-nuclear activism at all, it seems to have been to protest *Western* nuclear weapons policies and *defend Soviet* ones—as, for instance, the Soviet scientist Alexander Topchiev did when he attended went a Pugwash gathering in London and defended Moscow's resumption of nuclear testing in 1961.[105]

To be sure, there were some Soviet scientists and certain members of the intelligentsia who opposed the arms race, among them the physicist, human rights activist, and 1976 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov.[106] On the whole, however, the Soviet government "raised significant barriers to domestic critics of its military programs" and its "walls of silence" ensured that anti-nuclear activism in the Eastern Bloc remained—in Wittner's words—"miniscule by Western standards."[107]

As for Andrei Sakharov himself, after he acquired a reputation as a political dissident, he was sent into internal exile in Gorky in 1980, and was termed "domestic enemy number one" by KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov in 1976.[108] He was also made the subject of a number of KGB "active

---

[103] Ibid. p. 251.

[104] Ibid., p. 268.

[105] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 279.

[106] Ibid., p. 282.

[107] Ibid., p. 290.

[108] Quoted by Robert Coalson, "The Humanizing Influence of Andrei Sakharov," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 22, 2016, available at https://www.rferl.org/a/soviet-collapse-andrei-sakharov-humanizing-role/28191653.html.

measures" disinformation campaigns to discredit him.[109] Civil society antinuclear protest in the USSR, in other words, had essentially no impact upon nuclear policy, and hardly could have.

Soviet leaders, moreover, seem to have fully appreciated how advantageous this asymmetry could be for them in their Cold War rivalry with the United States. Premier Nikita Khrushchev, for instance, explicitly factored in what he called the impact of Western "peace forces" in reaching his conclusion in dealings with his Politburo colleagues in the Kremlin that war with capitalism was not actually inevitable after all (as his predecessor Joseph Stalin had tended to presuppose).[110] In effect, Khrushchev felt that the Western peace movement could be relied upon to help undermine U.S. and NATO nuclear policies and improve the odds of Soviet success without having to fight the West.

A book published in 1986 by the Soviet government that summarized the Soviet Union's history of making nuclear disarmament proposals throughout the Cold War summarized things as follows:

> Disarmament is not a one-time action, but a long-term stage-by-stage process requiring great efforts in the struggle against militarist circles. … The Soviet concept of disarmament attaches great significance to using all factors to promote peace and assigns a special role in this to the public. The Soviet concept is based on the fact that the *idea of disarmament, having taken possession of the broad masses of the people, can become a major material force in world politics*.[111]

---

[109] See generally, for example, Ella Shmulevich, et al., *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov*, Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, eds., Yale University Press, 2005.

[110] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 105.

[111] *The USSR Proposes Disarmament (1920s-1980s)*, Ye. Potlarkin & S. Kortunov, eds., Progress Publishers, 1986, p. 9 (emphasis in original).

Naturally, in expecting that "the broad masses of the people" would mobilize as "a major material force in world politics," the Communist oligarchy in the Kremlin did not envision *Soviet* citizens rising up against *Soviet* nuclear weapons policy. To the contrary, it seems clearly to have been expected that the *Western* peace movement could function as an instrument working to the Soviet Union's advantage in the Cold War—functioning, as Lawrence Wittner suggests at one point in riffing on the famous idea of the Trojan Horse in Homer's *Odyssey*, as a kind of "Trojan Dove."[112]

Weaponizing Disarmament

In fact, however, this "First Tension" created even greater challenges for the legitimacy and persuasiveness of the disarmament movement than that. The Soviets did not just anticipate *taking advantage* of weakened support for nuclear deterrence and defense policy in Western countries caused by the peace movement, after all. They also actively worked to *weaponize* these dynamics quite aggressively, seeking to manipulate and steer the movement for Moscow's advantage.

During the Cold War, for instance, it was routine for Soviet leaders to use diplomatic arms control proposals as propaganda weapons. Early in the Cold War, the Kremlin saw disarmament diplomacy as a way to retard the United States' ability to take advantage of the head start in nuclear weaponry provided it by the Manhattan Project and America's superior industrial and technical base. Later, the Soviets supported a comprehensive nuclear test ban—not merely for propaganda advantage vis-à-vis the United States,[113] but likely also in order to freeze in place their *own*

---

[112] Wittner I, op. cit., p. 271.

[113] See, for example, Wittner II, op. cit., p. 14 & 182.

advantages at that time vis-à-vis Mao Zedong's China,[114] which had split with the Soviets and become a major adversary of the USSR within the world Communist movement. Moscow also promoted nuclear testing prohibitions, as one memo within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it, to "serve the goal of increasing pressure on the USA and England" through anti-nuclear political movements there.[115] As Wittner summarizes, Soviet support of a test ban was

> in large part, just what Western analysts considered it—a shrewd propaganda ploy designed to enlist world public opinion behind the Soviet effort to force the United States and Britain to halt nuclear testing. And it worked.[116]

This sort of gamesmanship was so commonplace that senior Soviet diplomat Anatoly Dobrynin—the longtime Soviet ambassador in Washington—admitted in his memoirs that Soviet disarmament proposals were "nothing more than a good piece of propaganda."[117]

Indeed, if one cross-correlates Soviet disarmament and arms control proposals with the concrete balance of nuclear and conventional forces during the Cold War, it produces a rather striking pattern. At a time when Moscow had just deployed a new generation of strategic delivery systems facing the U.S. homeland and new intermediate-range SS-20 missiles facing Western Europe in the late 1970s,[118] for instance, Moscow began offering "nuclear freeze" resolutions at the United Nations that would fix the nuclear

---

[114] For their part, and for the same reason, the Chinese detested the idea of ban. Ibid., pp. 423 & 428.

[115] Ibid., p. 172.

[116] Ibid., p. 173.

[117] Ibid., p. 102.

[118] See John T. Correll, "The Euromissile Showdown," *Air Force Magazine*, February 1, 2020, available at https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-euromissile-showdown/.

balance in place before Washington could respond with its own deployments.[119]

At a time when enormous Red Army and Warsaw Pact forces faced outnumbered NATO divisions in Central Europe—raising the specter of an invasion that NATO planners felt they could only meet or deter with nuclear weapons[120]—the Soviets promoted a treaty on "[n]ot to be the first to use nuclear weapons, against one another, on land, at sea, in the air[,] and in outer space."[121] A few months after U.S. President Ronald Reagan had alarmed the Kremlin in 1983 with a speech on potential space-based missile defenses, the Soviets proposed a "Draft Treaty on the Prohibition of the Use of Force in Outer Space and from Space Against the Earth."[122] And in the early 1980s, as Reagan oversaw a significant U.S. defense buildup intended to match Soviet advances made during the 1970s, Moscow

---

[119] See *The USSR Proposes Disarmament*, op. cit., p. 18; see also ibid., p. 293 (text of Soviet proposal for "Nuclear Weapons Freeze" resolution at United Nations General Assembly); see also generally, for example, Christopher A. Ford "' Information Confrontation with Russia and Dynamics of 'Positive' and 'Negative' Deterrence," July 26, 2023, available at https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/information-confrontation-with-russia-and-dynamics-of-positive-and-negative-deterrence; Wittner III, op. cit., p. 29.

[120] See, for example, Paul Schulte, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons in NATO and Beyond: A Historical and Thematic Examination," in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart, & Jeffrey C. McCausland, eds., U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, April 2012, p. 13 (quoting British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, then deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe [SACEUR], in 1954 that "We … are basing all our planning on using atomic or thermonuclear weapons in our defence. . . . It is no longer 'they may possibly be used,' it is very definitely: they will be used if we are attacked."), *available at* https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiyh_Ol-cSCAxXGFlkFHY3_C3EQFnoECBMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hsdl.org%2F%3Fview%26did%3D706112&usg=AOvVaw23pbyl6HLONj5Szh31rNN7&opi=89978449.

[121] "[Treaty] Proposal by the Warsaw Treaty Member States (November 26 ,1976)," at Art. I, in *The USSR Proposes Disarmament*, op. cit., pp. 220-21.

[122] *The USSR Proposes Disarmament*, op. cit., pp. 289-92.

proposed "Talks on the Non-Increase and Reduction of Military Expenditures."[123]

But the Soviets' effort to weaponize Western disarmament activism was not just limited to propagandistic diplomatic proposals. Communist governments during the Cold War also spent lavishly to fund their *own* peace groups in Western countries—funding and directing what were basically proxy organizations within Western society that quite literally took Soviet orders and followed Moscow's line on nuclear disarmament issues.

Beginning in the early years of the Cold War, a Communist-led prong of the Western peace movement was established to "organize[] a mass movement to condemn Western foreign and military policy."[124] As Witter recounts, this involved

> an effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons and thereby undermine the military advantage of the United States in this area. Furthermore, by directing their own peace movement, Communist leaders hoped to project the image of the Soviet Union as a peace-loving nation, attract new recruits to their party, and overshadow non-aligned nuclear disarmament campaigns, which raised embarrassing questions about the Soviet Union's role in the Cold War and the arms race.[125]

By the early 1950s, the Communist-led peace movement "had organized a large, highly visible peace and disarmament organization—the World Peace Council—under its control."[126] According to Wittner, "[g]iven the considerable resources available to them from Communist

---

[123] Ibid., pp. 314-17.

[124] Wittner I, op. cit., p. 171.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid., p. 190.

governments and Communist parties, their efforts were sometimes quite substantial,"[127] and "[l]avishly funded by Communist governments and fervently supported by Soviet sympathizers, the Communist-led peace movement remained a force to be reckoned with" in the West.[128] By the late 1970s, the World Peace Council (WPC), for instance, could describe itself as "the largest non-governmental organization in the world, encompassing 125 national peace movements with their tens of millions of members."[129]

These Communist-backed peace groups "remained thoroughly aligned with the policies of Communist nations,"[130] with groups such as the WPC and its many affiliates being "simply arms of the state" in the Communist Bloc, and which thus "avoided any criticism of the Soviet government."[131] (One former WPC official himself described them as taking a "nakedly pro-Soviet approach."[132])

Such shamelessly pro-Moscow propaganda was certainly on prominent display in 1975 when the WPC presented a special Peace Medal to Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, and praised him extravagantly (and also Brezhnev's successor, former KGB chief Yuri Andropov) for being far-sighted men of peace. The WPC also supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—a war which it declared to be the fault of the West and China! The Council also fiercely opposed Western nuclear weapons policies, such as NATO's deployment of intermediate-range missiles in 1983 in response to the Soviet Union's own deployments.[133]

---

[127] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 83.

[128] Ibid., p. 97.

[129] Wittner III, op. cit., p. 88.

[130] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 88.

[131] Ibid., p. 89.

[132] Wittner III, op. cit., p. 16.

[133] Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 38, 85-86, 242.

To be sure, the "nakedly pro-Soviet" approach of these Soviet-backed and Soviet-funded "peace groups" in the West was quite obvious, and they existed in an uneasy relationship with what Wittner calls the "nonaligned" portions of the peace movement in Western countries—that is, groups which did (at least sometimes) criticize the Soviets as well as the Americans.[134] The Soviet groups tried hard to control those "non-aligned" groups, but never really succeeded. It would be wrong, therefore, to say that Moscow *ran* the Western anti-nuclear peace movement, though it certainly tried. Nevertheless, the Kremlin certainly liked it very much that there *was* a Western anti-nuclear movement, and worked as hard as it could to encourage that movement in the confident expectation that the impact of anti-nuclear activism would be felt in the Western democracies far more than in the dictatorships of the Soviet Bloc.

Nor was this Soviet effort to manipulate the Western antinuclear movement confined to fairly obvious dupes and proxies such as the WPC. As the Johns Hopkins University Professor Thomas Rid recounts in a recent book,[135] Moscow also engaged in a huge, worldwide, *clandestine* disinformation effort to promote anti-Western nuclear disarmament narratives—not the least of which involved secretly funneling money to favored disarmament organizations in the West, as well as planting false stories calculated to feed the movement and encourage it in anti-American directions, through secret channels managed by East Bloc intelligence services. Support for the peace movement in the West was carried out under the rubric of what the Communist spy agencies called "active measures."

As Rid tells it, Soviet bloc support for Western peace movement activists represented "by far the largest, longest,

---

[134] See Wittner I, op. cit., p. 171; Wittner III, op. cit., p. 271.

[135] Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, Picador, 2020.

and most expensive disinformation campaign in intelligence history." For its part, East Germany's notorious Stasi intelligence service called this a campaign of *Friedenskampf*—or "peacewar"—while the KGB simply managed it under the codename "MARS," after the Roman god of war.[136]

According to the CIA, the Soviets reportedly spent the equivalent of $3 billion a year on disinformation, a campaign that involved more than 70,000 people.[137] Not all of this, of course, was devoted to disarmament issues in the West. (It also included disinformation efforts such as planting the story in an Indian newspaper that the AIDS virus was a U.S. military weapon created to target Black people, and many other falsehoods.) But as Alvin Snyder recounts in his memoir of working at the U.S. Information Agency at the time, there was a major Soviet effort to promote nuclear disarmament in the West through the use of planted stories.[138] According to Thomas Rid, this work included things such as a Soviet forgery about supposed reckless U.S. nuclear weapons planning that was planted in two British peace magazines, as well as covert sponsorship of a group of former NATO generals—"Generals for Peace"—who argued publicly against U.S. nuclear weapons policy. (Apparently, the latter operation was so easy and effective as anti-American propaganda that the Soviet KGB and East German Stasi competed to run it.)[139]

As part of such efforts, the Soviets and their allies also spent a huge amount of money and effort spinning up the Western peace movement against the proposed U.S. deployment in the late 1970s of the so-called "neutron bomb." This weapon—formally, the "enhanced radiation

---

[136] Rid, op. cit. pp. 197, 263-65.

[137] Alvin A. Snyder, *Warriors of Disinformation: American Propaganda, Soviet Lies, and the Winning of the Cold War*, Arcade Publishing, 1995, pp. 96-97.

[138] Snyder, op. cit. p. 100.

[139] Rid, op. cit., p. 283.

weapon" (ERW)—had only a modest blast signature but put out an especially powerful immediate pulse of radiation in the form of neutrons,[140] which was thought likely to make it especially effective against advancing Red Army armor and infantry should deterrence fail, while doing at least *somewhat* less damage to the West German countryside through which those Communist units were expected to advance in time of war.

The Eastern Bloc disinformation campaign against the ERW, however, tried to turn these characteristics—which were precisely the reason Western planners viewed the weapon as having special deterrent value, and precisely what the Kremlin did not like about it—into a propaganda trope depicting it as sinister and inhuman. The neutron bomb, as Western media dutifully picked up the general line, was said to be a "'supercapitalist weapon'—preserving property while killing and sickening people."[141] So successful was the Soviet-supported campaign against the neutron bomb that public sentiment swung hugely against it in Europe—where it was supposed to be deployed, notwithstanding the fact that it would (if used) cause *less* harm there than existing NATO war plans—and President

---

[140] See generally, e.g., John T. Correll, "The Neutron Bomb," *Air & Space Forces*, October 30, 2017 ("The neutron bomb did not leave property intact; by limiting collateral damage, it just destroyed less of it. The objective was to restore the sagging credibility of 'tactical nuclear weapons'—as they were then called—as a deterrent against an attack by Soviet and Warsaw Pact tank armies. … The neutron bomb would release more of its energy in the form of lethal radiation. Physical damage would be limited to a relatively tight area while the radiation reached further out to penetrate Warsaw Pact armor, which was shielded against nuclear blast and heat. Since the neutron bomb produced little or no radioactive fallout or residual radiation, the target area could be reoccupied within a matter of hours."), available at https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-neutron-bomb/.

[141] See, for example, Herbert Scoville, Jr., "A New Weapon to Thing (and Worry) About," *New York Times*, July 12, 1977, available at https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/12/archives/a-new-weapon-to-think-and-worry-about.html.

Jimmy Carter got cold feet and canceled the program in April 1978.[142]

A KGB Major named Stanislav Levchenko, who defected in 1979, claimed that the cost of the anti-ERW disinformation campaign had been about $200 million at the time—which in today's dollars might be upwards of $600 million—but the Kremlin seems to have gotten good value for its money. According to one official from the Hungarian Communist Party, Moscow considered this anti-neutron bomb effort "one of the most significant and successful [active measures efforts] since World War II."[143]

As described in a 1981 memo from the East German intelligence service, the Communist bloc spy agencies also worked to provide secret support to the peace movement in the West, to "thwart[] NATO's plans to deploy qualitatively new atomic medium-range ballistic missiles by the year 1983."[144] This push was not as successful as the anti-neutron-bomb campaign from a few years earlier, of course, for NATO *did* deploy those missiles. But the NATO deployments were hugely costly for NATO governments in political and public opinion terms—an effect that the Eastern Bloc naturally did everything in its power to magnify through disinformation and covert support for disarmament groups.

The Soviets even got involved in trying to promote scientific theories of "nuclear winter" in the West, under which it was argued that essentially any use of nuclear weapons would produce catastrophic climate consequences. As Thomas Rid recounts—citing various

---

[142] Technically, Carter "deferred production" of the weapon, but it was clear what that meant: it would not be built and deployed. See, e.g., Rid, for example, pp. 256-60; Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 48-49; Correll, op. cit. (President Ronald Reagan reopened the issue in 1981, and began production—but opted to keep ERW devices in storage rather than deploy them. Correll, op. cit.; Wittner III, op. cit., p. 295.)

[143] Rid, op. cit., p. 260.

[144] Ibid., p. 275.

sources, including but not limited to KGB officer Sergei Treyakov, who defected in 2000—a Russian scientist named Vladimir Alexandrov was sent by the KGB to work with the famous U.S. scientist and peace activist Carl Sagan and the other original authors of the "nuclear winter" paper they first published in 1983. According to Rid, Alexandrov also attended a workshop in the Vatican on this topic and appeared on U.S. television with Sagan, and they testified together to Congress in 1985.[145]

This is not to say that the U.S. scientists' work was necessarily flawed, but it does seem that Alexandrov was expressly employed by the KGB to encourage "nuclear winter" conclusions that were as extreme as possible. The theory apparently was that this would help make nuclear weapons more and more unpopular in countries where political leaders had to answer to democratic accountability at the ballot box.

As with other aspects of the Soviet and East Bloc campaign to whip up and support disarmament activism in the West, this was considered advantageous precisely because of the asymmetric impact that such a civil-society and popular-opinion-focused movement would likely have upon democratic governments. As Thomas Rid recounts, the Soviet strategy was to weaponize Western political freedoms for strategic advantage. (According to Ivan Ivanovich Agayants, who had been a key disinformation official in the KGB in the 1960s, "[s]ometimes I am amazed at how easy it is to play these games. If they did not have press freedom, we would have to invent it for them.")[146] The point was to undermine *Western* nuclear postures while leaving *Eastern* ones unaffected.

This, then, is the "First Tension" that has bedeviled the disarmament movement from the start. Civil society

---

[145] Ibid., pp. 291-97.

[146] Ibid., p. 165.

movements for disarmament all but inevitably tend to place more pressure upon democratic governments than upon the dictatorships that seek to oppose and undermine those democracies, and those dictatorships often seek to take advantage of this asymmetry for strategic advantage.

The "Second Tension" — Feuding Conceptual Strains

The "Second Tension" we will explore in this paper refers to what is in effect a long-running debate about how to diagnose the *cause* of the nuclear arms race and nuclear war risks, and hence also to a great extent how to imagine a solution to the problem. Describing it loosely, this debate is between those who focus upon nuclear weapons *themselves* as the primary locus of policy attention *en route* to abolition and those who focus more upon the *conditions* of the global political or security environment that encourage nations to compete with each other *by means of* such weapons. This may be conceived, in other words, as a tension between "weapons-idealism" and "conditions discourse."

Weapons-Idealism

It is certainly quite common within the disarmament community for it to be assumed that the terrifying power and destructive potential of nuclear weapons is all one needs to know in order to favor of abolishing them as rapidly as possible. Disarmament activists commonly assume, for instance, simply that "because nuclear war would be horrific beyond description" that therefore "nuclear weapons must be eliminated"—and, impliedly, that such elimination *can* happen if only national leaders are vigorously enough "pressed to muster the good sense needed." Because this objective is "self-evidently reasonable," the idea goes, disarmament is at root little more complicated than pointing out—and then acting on—the obvious.[147]

Some years ago, for instance, disarmament activists keen to rekindle support for their movement began a major

[147] Payne, op. cit., pp. 19 & 41.

push to draw attention to the potential effects of nuclear exchanges on human societies. It was hardly news that nuclear weapons could be horrifically destructive, of course, but this Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) movement—which held a series of conferences and served to build support for the TPNW[148]—sought to emphasize these costs and encourage disarmament debate "through a humanitarian lens, an approach that focuses on the very real and devastating impact that nuclear weapons would have on humanity, should they ever again be used in conflict."[149]

Today, disarmament activists such as Beatrice Finn of the International Committee to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) often describe their position as being "the only rational choice … the only reality that is possible."[150] And indeed if one assumes this is the case, it seems obvious—as Mia Zian has put it—that the main challenge going forward is merely "getting publics and policymakers in nuclear weapons states (and their allies) to … *accept*" that reality: "the treaty's humanitarian imperative, its lawfulness, and the obligations that follow."[151]

---

[148] See, for example, Reaching Critical Will, "Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons" (undated), available at https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/hinw.

[149] Heather Williams, Patricia Lewis, & Sasan Aghlani, "The Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative: The 'Big Tent' in Disarmament," Chatham House Research Paper, March 2015, available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150331nuclear.pdf.

[150] Beatrice Finn, "ICAN Nobel Lecture, Oslo, Norway," The Nobel Foundation, December 10, 2017, available at https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ican/pages/129/attachments/original/1595949747/ICAN-Nobel-Lecture.pdf?1595949747.

[151] Mian, Zia, "After the nuclear weapons ban treaty: A new disarmament politics," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 7, 2017, available at https://thebulletin.org/2017/07/after-the-nuclear-weapons-ban-treaty-a-new-disarmament-politics/.

There exists a disarmament group called "Reaching Critical Will,"[152] for instance, whose name plays on the idea of a nuclear critical mass, and which implies that the challenge of achieving nuclear weapons abolition is just a question of accumulating *willpower*—after which peace and disarmament will become self-sustaining, as if it is only because our leaders are blind or lazy that humanity is in this troubling situation in the first place. From this perspective, the purpose of disarmament activism is to horrify citizens and to stigmatize nuclear weaponry and deterrence, on the assumption that mere recognition of the potential for nuclear catastrophe is the key to weapons abolition. As Bea Finn puts it,

> No nation today boasts of being a chemical weapon state. / No nation argues that it is acceptable, in extreme circumstances, to use sarin nerve agent. / No nation proclaims the right to unleash on its enemy the plague or polio. / That is because international norms have been set, perceptions have been changed.[153]

Simply by understanding the destructive power of nuclear weaponry, in other words, one will clearly see—as Zia Mian puts it—that "nuclear weapons are in fundamental conflict with basic humanitarian sensibilities and international law." Seeing this, in turn, one will inevitably support abolition as "this view … become[s] the common sense of the world."[154] Clearly, the disarmament

---

[152] See, for example, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "Reaching Critical Will" (undated) ("Reaching Critical Will is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organization in the world. Reaching Critical Will works for disarmament and arms control of many different weapon systems, the reduction of global military spending and militarism, and the investigation of gendered aspects of the impact of weapons and of disarmament processes."), available at https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org.

[153] Finn, op. cit.

[154] Zian, op. cit.

community assumes that "public opinion" will be the key "dynamic for change."[155]

This kind of thinking tends to be what this paper terms "weapons-idealism." The main problem (it is assumed) is the existence of the weapons themselves, and both diagnosis and cure for our nuclear dilemma are seen as flowing all but inevitably from a proper recognition of their terrifying nature and the imperative of immediately eliminating them. Finn's remarks accepting the Nobel Peace Price on ICAN's behalf, for instance, reflect this, signaling her feeling that the weapons *themselves* have what is almost some kind of malevolence of their own: "these weapons brought us to the brink multiple times throughout the Cold War. And in this century, these weapons continue to escalate us toward war and conflict.[156]

As she phrases it, it is "the weapons" that have done this do us,[157] and it is therefore *the weapons* that must be banished. This type of thinking is commonplace in the disarmament community in the form of "weapons-idealism." Since the weapons themselves are the primary problem, the solution to our nuclear predicament lies in no more than getting rid of them.

Conditions Discourse

As Lawrence Wittner's scholarship makes clear, however, this weapons-focused activism has long existed in some tension with broader conceptual currents within the disarmament movement that focus less monomaniacally upon the tools of war and more, also, upon its *causes*—currents that tend to emphasize broader questions of pacifism, dispute resolution, and world government. To

---

[155] Payne, op. cit., p. 49.

[156] Finn, op. cit.

[157] Those weapons, Finn says, "escalate us." Ibid.

this author's eye, one could describe weapons-idealism as existing in an enduring tension with what might be termed "conditions discourse." Conditions discourse sees the cause of the nuclear arms race as being rooted more in the politics or geopolitics of the international arena and in the competitive, sometimes hostile rivalries between states, which lead countries both to *seek* such destructive tools and to be unwilling to *relinquish* them once acquired.

For conditions discourse, weapons remain important, inasmuch as *how* rivalries and hostilities are expressed can matter a great deal, and what tools one brings to the fight can have a lot to do with how that fight develops. But the more fundamental problem, in this view, is not the weapons themselves, for they tend to be sought out as long as such rivalries and hostilities exist—and they will be difficult to control, let alone eliminate, as long as states look at each other with suspicion, fear, insecurity, and hostility. Accordingly, the more fundamental problem and the deepest cause of humanity's nuclear dilemma lies in the *conditions* of rivalry and hostility themselves; this is true both with regard to diagnosis and to cure.

This distinction in thinking can be seen all the way back to the dawn of the nuclear age, with both conceptual currents appearing on the scene quite early. The reader may recall, for instance, that the Truman-Attlee-King statement of November 1945 described the most fundamental problem of nuclear weaponry being "the problem of war" itself.[158] Not long thereafter, however, the Acheson-Lilienthal Report envisioned taking mining and production and control of fissionable materials out of the hands of nations and putting it under an Atomic Development Authority for this—it was said—would remove "the

[158] Truman-Attlee-King, op. cit.

element of rivalry between nations" from the nuclear arena.[159]

That aspect of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report clearly has aspects in it of weapons-idealism, in that it seems to assume that the problem of rivalry is driven by the existence of one particular *object* of that rivalry. (It seems to suggest that those "hazards of rivalry" over nuclear weapons can be prevented by telling nations that they're not allowed to have control of fissile materials.) Yet the Truman-Attlee-King statement more clearly suggests conditions discourse thinking, under which, as long as nations feel themselves to be threats to each other, they will tend to seek means with which to protect themselves and gain advantage—including nuclear weapons. In this latter view, a real solution cannot address merely the weapons themselves, but must instead grapple with the deeper underlying problems of the international community.

Lawrence Wittner, in his history of the nuclear disarmament movement, describes the Truman-Attlee-King perspective as follows: "Ultimately … the problem faced by the nuclear disarmament movement was systemic. There was no magic formula that would secure nuclear disarmament as long as nations remained at one another's throats."[160] Offering an even earlier example of such thinking, Wittner quotes Salvador de Madariaga, the former head of the disarmament section of the League of Nations—a body which in the 1920s tried valiantly to negotiate wholesale reductions in *all* the world's major armed forces in Geneva. Madariaga ultimately concluded, as Wittner quotes him, that "[i]t is … hopeless to try to solve the problem of armaments in isolation from the remaining problems of the world," he wrote glumly. The arms race was "a world symptom," which "must be cured by curing

[159] Acheson-Lilienthal Report, op. cit., from Section II, ch. 4.

[160] Wittner I, op. cit., p. 339.

the world disease, which is anarchy." Indeed, "no general disarmament is possible in the absence of a well organized World Community."[161]

Such ideas have frequently been expressed in the context of nuclear disarmament debates, even *within* the disarmament community in the broadest sense. Robert Oppenheimer himself told an audience at Princeton in 1957 that "[d]isarmament should not be confused with the solution to the problem of nuclear war, and not even very much to the problem of sudden nuclear war." Also: "Disarmament is desirable, but only in connection with vast changes in the world, some of which have to do with the international cooperative development, others … with the maintenance of international order, and some … with the establishment of some minimal elements of transnational power."[162]

And the famous pacifist, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, quite strikingly argued in 1955 that there would be little point in negotiating an international treaty prohibiting thermonuclear weapons:

> It would be wholly futile to get an agreement prohibiting the H-Bomb. Such an agreement would not be considered binding after war has broken out, and each side on the outbreak of war would set to work to manufacture as many bombs as possible.[163]

According to Russell, the H-bomb thus wouldn't be very useful "so long as the danger of war exists."[164] And he once chided the Soviet-backed World Peace Council in 1959 as it protested U.S. and NATO deterrence policies, arguing that the WPC would make a *greater* contribution to world

---

[161] Ibid.

[162] Quoted in Payne, op. cit., p. 1.

[163] Quoted in Schell, op. cit., p. 86.

[164] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 24.

peace if it would protest "militaristic imperialism in East Germany, Hungary, and Tibet" and call for "the abandonment of militaristic imperialism by Russia and China."[165] This was indeed very much a "conditions"-based critique of weapons-idealism.

Both of these strains of thought seem to have been present from the outset, and the ongoing—if sometimes merely implicit—debate between them can be traced forward from 1946 to the present day. This longstanding tension and debate between weapons-idealists and "conditions"-thinkers is far from over.

Yet this is not merely a debate between the disarmament community and its many critics, but also one—as the abovementioned quotes from the pacifist Bertrand Russel make clear—*within* the peace movement itself. The disarmament activist Jonathan Schell, whose famous 1982 book *The Fate of the Earth*[166] is considered one of the seminal texts of the late-20th Century disarmament movement, himself took a "conditions"-minded approach, observing that:

> If, on the one hand, disarmament is not accompanied by a political solution, then every clash of will between nations will tempt them to pick up the instruments of violence again, and so lead the world back toward extinction. If, on the other hand, a political solution is not accompanied by complete disarmament, then the political decisions that are made will not be binding, for they will be subject to challenge by force.[167]

Even inside the disarmament movement, therefore, there has been a debate between weapons-idealism and conditions discourse for a long time. *Inside* the movement,

---

[165] Ibid., p. 315.

[166] Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, Knopf, 1982.

[167] Quoted in Schell, *The Abolition*, op. cit., p. 87.

"conditions" thinking tended to encourage broad thinking about systemic solutions. As Keith Payne has noted, the movement has often aimed to bring about "the profound transformation of international relations and an enduring, consistent pattern of mutual trust, cooperation[,] and non-violence in human behavior."[168] In Schell's words, one way or the other, our "nuclear predicament" demands some kind of "revolutionary conclusion."[169]

For some activists in the disarmament movement, the insights of conditions discourse led activists to urge the establishment of some kind of world government, reasoning that only by taking lawful violence out of nations' hands entirely—much as national governments themselves had done within their territorial jurisdictions by taking the option of private violence away from individual persons through the establishment of police forces and criminal justice systems—could the problem of war be solved. Jonathan Schell describes this approach, invoking Albert Einstein, who came to support such ideas, as "the Einsteinian school" of thought.[170]

For others in the disarmament community, especially on the radical left from the 1950s through the 1970s, the "revolutionary" answer was indeed almost literally revolutionary. For such thinkers, the solution to what Truman, Atlee, and King had called the "problem of war" would need to come through a transformation in the *domestic* systems of nations, such as through socialist revolution, so that they would no longer (it was assumed) approach each other with hostility.

At the extreme, perhaps, one might even describe Mao Zedong himself as a kind of "conditions" thinker. Mao argued that the answer to the nuclear problem was the *spread* of nuclear weaponry—to break the superpowers'

---

[168] Payne, op. cit., p. 37.

[169] Schell, *The Abolition*, op. cit., p. 158.

[170] Ibid., p. 37.

monopoly and provide a counterweight to global imperialism—coupled with Communist revolution to fundamentally transform states in ways that would achieve a worldwide socialist utopia.[171]

But "conditions" thinking was by no means a monopoly of those on the political Left seeking radical transformations of the international environment—which one might call "Left-Conditionism." There also developed, for instance, a critique of disarmament more from the political Right, which Schell termed the "Brodiean School," after the early nuclear deterrence theorist Bernard Brodie.[172]

From this Brodiean perspective, which might be called "Right Conditionism," the Truman-Attlee-King "problem of war"—rather than just the existence of any particular type of weaponry—is indeed they key obstacle, but that problem is not actually *solvable* in any comprehensive or conclusive sense at all. Rather, that problem can only be *managed*—never perfectly, with absolute certainty or finality, but certainly in ways that can be in practice variously better or worse—through ongoing, careful, and shrewd attention to security dynamics, the balance of forces, and deterrence.

This kind of "Right Conditionism" thinking can clearly be seen in Keith Payne's 2023 book *The Grand Illusion*.[173] It can also be seen in the work of the present author, not least when speaking for the first Trump Administration in late 2017 to the disarmament advocacy group Ploughshares Foundation to convey the results of an internal review of U.S. Government disarmament policies that had recently been concluded at the National Security Council (NSC):

> From the start of the nuclear age, as our representative to the U.N. Security Council

---

[171] Ford, "Nuclear Posture and Nuclear Posturing," op. cit., p. 20.

[172] Schell, *The Abolition*, op. cit., p. 37.

[173] Payne, op. cit.

observed in October 1949, disarmament opinions have been divided between those who emphasize "the necessity of developing conditions of world confidence before disarmament and, conversely, [those who emphasize] disarming in order to engender conditions of world confidence." The United States, however, traditionally came down in the former camp, taking a "conditions"-based approach to disarmament throughout the Cold War.

By contrast, much of the conventional wisdom of the broader disarmament community has often sought to address these challenges from the opposite direction, focusing principally—and sometimes exclusively—upon the nuclear weapons themselves rather than the underlying conditions of conflict, competition, and security that continue to require nuclear deterrence (or extended deterrence) or which for other reasons may lead countries to wish to possess those weapons.

… But it may be that the answer isn't something entirely new, but rather a wisdom that has been hiding in plain sight all along …. If there exists a viable road to disarmament in the current security environment, in other words, it surely must run through the amelioration of such adverse geopolitical conditions. If we can successfully address those conflicts and rivalries, reducing or even eliminating the weapons themselves may be possible; if we cannot, it's hard to see how any weapons-focused agenda could succeed.[174]

[174] Special Assistant to the President and National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director Christopher A. Ford, "NPT Wisdom for a New Disarmament

The aforementioned NSC review—informally called the "2017 Nuclear Vision Review"—led directly to the so-called Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) effort organized by the U.S. State Department in 2018.[175] This effort, which continues to this day, is a multinational forum devoted to exploring ways in which the stresses and tensions of the international security environment could be managed more effectively in ways that reduce the pressures nuclear weapons-possessing nations feel to retain and rely upon nuclear weaponry, as well as any incentives that non-possessors may feel to acquire such tools.

CEND does not necessarily promise that there *is* a way to accomplish this—or at least to do so comprehensively, reliably, enduringly enough to pave the way for actual nuclear weapons abolition. Nevertheless, it does hope to make constructive contributions, and perhaps to make at least *some* further movement in nuclear reductions eventually possible through the easing of tension and strengthening of trust between nations.[176] To date, CEND stands as the most explicit and focused manifestation of "conditions" discourse in contemporary disarmament debates, and it thus forms a conspicuous contrast to the weapons-idealism of the TPNW.

Discourse," remarks to the Ploughshares Fund, October 26, 2017, available at https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2041.

[175] See, for example, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "From 'Planning' to 'Doing': CEND Gets to Work," remarks to the NGO Roundtable sponsored by the CEND Initiative, November 24, 2020, available at http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2884.

[176] See, for example, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "Reframing Disarmament Discourse," remarks to the CEND Leadership Group, September 3, 2020, available at http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2755.

Conditions and Deterrence

Interestingly, however, CEND is not the only conditions-based riposte to the disarmament community's traditional weapons-idealists. Coming from a place *within* the peace movement, for instance, Jonathan Schell has written fascinatingly on the subject. In his 1984 book *The Abolition*, Schell powerfully critiques weapons-idealist thinking, and *also* critiques the "Left Conditionism" of world government or social-revolution thinking. In this respect, he broadly approved of the "Nuclear Freeze" movement of his era, but observed that merely *stopping* nuclear weapons deployment offers no real way to a solution:

> … [W]hen one asks how far the reductions should go, and what sort of world they would lead to, haziness and ambiguity set in. The goal of complete nuclear disarmament is sometimes mentioned, but in a perfunctory, almost casual way. No details are offered, and no convincing picture of a nuclear-free world has yet been presented. … [Most calls for nuclear disarmament] have lacked seriousness …. They may, for example, call for nuclear disarmament, or for total disarmament, but without acknowledging the need for the vast political changes that would enable nations to resolve their disputes bindingly by peaceful means, and without specifying any such means.[177]

To really get at a solution, Schell argued, we instead need "a way of abolishing nuclear weapons that does not require us to found a world government, which the world shows virtually no interest in founding."[178]

---

[177] Schell, *The Abolition*, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

[178] Ibid., p. 88.

And this is what he tried to do in his 1984 book *The Abolition*. Boldly, Schell argued in *favor* of the basic concept of nuclear deterrence, whose foundations, he said, "are solid. They are deeply lodged in the nature of things." "We cannot abolish war," Schell contended, and "can only really "trade on" the threat of extinction in order "to keep the peace." "We seek to preserve a stalemated, purely defensive world but must apparently make use of—or at least make provision for—purely offensive weapons to do it."[179]

The mechanism by which he proposed to do this, however, was one that he hoped would enable us to rely upon deterrence even though (and *after*) nuclear weapons had actually been abolished. He proposed, in effect, the generalization of what might be termed "virtual deterrence."

As the reader may remember, the Acheson-Lilienthal Report argued that the presence of internationally-controlled nuclear facilities in most of the major countries would help prevent any one nation from violating the international control system by force, on the theory that if *it* broke the rules by seizing control of such facilities within its territory, *other countries* would likely respond by doing the same—thus preventing the violator from gaining advantage thereby. This idea rested upon clear deterrence-based reasoning: each would be deterred from seizing the internationally-controlled materials or facilities in its own territory by the *other players'* ability to respond by seizing such materials or facilities on theirs, creating a new stalemate and vitiating any advantage the first state might have hoped to gain.[180] In effect, Schell suggested a variation on this theme as a way to ensure peace through nuclear deterrence after nuclear weapons had been eliminated.

---

[179] Ibid., pp. 103 & 112.

[180] See Acheson-Lilienthal Report, op. cit., from Section III, ch. 2.

After abolition, in the "worse case" of one nation "suddenly and swiftly building up, and perhaps actually using, an overwhelming nuclear arsenal"—a case "which must be taken into account if nations are to have confidence in the military preparations for thwarting aggressors"—Schell believed that "[t]he only significant military response to this threat would be a response in kind: a similar nuclear buildup by the threatened nations, returning the world to something like the balance of terror as we know it today."[181] Because countries would *know this*, however, and know that they thus had no prospect of real gain from achieving "breakout" from a nuclear weapons abolition regime, Schell hoped that they would all behave. He thus called for nations after nuclear weapons abolition

> to hold themselves in a particular, defined state of readiness for nuclear rearmament. This provision would, in fact, be the very core of the military side of the agreement. It would be the definition, in technical terms, of what "abolition" was to be. And it would be the final guarantor of the safety of nations against attack.[182]

His key point was that

> deterrence doesn't dissolve when the weapons are abolished. In other words, in the nuclear world the threat to use force is as self-cancelling at zero nuclear weapons as it is at fifty thousand nuclear weapons. … Under what we might call weaponless deterrence, factory would deter factory, blueprint would deter blueprint, equation would deter equation. … The knowledge of how to rebuild the weapons is just the thing that would

[181] Schell, *The Abolition*, op. cit., pp. 117 & 153.

[182] Ibid., p. 118.

> make abolition *possible*, because it would keep deterrence in force. …
>
> Abolition backed up by weaponless deterrence would thus crack the link between nuclear disarmament and world government in not just one way but two: first, it would enable abolition to occur without our having to solve the underlying political problems; and, second, it would provide a foundation on which those political problems could be addressed piecemeal and gradually rather than all at once. It a word, it would resolve not the nuclear predicament—something that does require that we pursue the solution of the political question all the way to its revolutionary conclusion—but the problem of timing ….[183]

Schell's approach to "weaponless deterrence" was an elegant attempt at a solution. It is also one that relies upon concepts that to some extent have *already* been validated and adopted in U.S. nuclear weapons thinking. During much of the post-Cold War era, for instance, the United States pretty explicitly argued that it could at least somewhat reduce its number of deployed nuclear weapons because it retained the "hedge" option of being able to re-deploy and upload delivery systems with retired weapons or construct new ones.[184] In the 1990s, moreover, multiple studies suggested the possibility that maintaining the ability to produce weapons rapidly might allow a country

---

[183] Ibid., pp. 118-20 & 158.

[184] See generally Ford, "Nuclear 'Hedging,' Arms Control, and Today's Strategic Challenges," op. cit. Such uploading, moreover, is something that a bipartisan commission of nuclear experts recently unanimously suggested may be needed in response to the ongoing nuclear weapons buildups by Russia and—especially—China. Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, p.48, available at https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf.

to be able safely to keep smaller numbers of such devices on hand,[185] and conceivably even provide a pathway to eventual abolition.[186] The idea of at least partially substituting *potential* nuclear weapons for *actual* ones thus has some precedent, and was even cautiously endorsed as a way to facilitate reductions by the George W. Bush Administration in 2007.[187]

Subsequent analysis has suggested that Schell's recipe for "weaponless deterrence" would be unlikely to work as a way to sustain a world of nuclear weapons abolition.[188] It

---

[185] See Ted Gold & Rich Wagner, "Long Shadows and Virtual Swords: Managing Defense Resources in the Changing Security Environment," unpublished paper (January 1990); Roger C. Molander & Peter A. Wilson, *The Nuclear Asymptote: On Containing Nuclear Proliferation*, MR-214-CC, RAND Corporation, 1993; Marc Dean Millot, Roger Molander, & Peter A. Wilson, *"The Day After …" Study: Nuclear Proliferation in the Post-Cold War World*, MR252-AF, RAND Corporation, 1993, vol. II.

[186] See Michael J. Mazarr, "The Notion of Virtual Arsenals," in *Nuclear Weapons in a Transformed World*, Michael J. Mazarr, ed., St. Martin's Press, 1997.

[187] See U.S. Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation Christopher A. Ford, "Disarmament and Nuclear Stability in Tomorrow's World," remarks to the Conference on Disarmament and Nonproliferation Issues, 2007, reprinted in the *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, November 14, 2007, p.100 (We are working, however, to make our 'hedge of non-deployed 'weapons-in-being' less necessary—and thus to permit further reductions in our total stockpile of warheads. … In short, we anticipate that a smaller but more responsive infrastructure will enable us to manage the geopolitical and technical risks associated with a smaller nuclear force, thus making that smaller force feasible. The possibility of countervailing reconstitution, in other words, is already promoting disarmament because it is helping us move toward a posture in which we can reduce the number of nuclear warheads in existence as we feel less need to maintain weapons-in-being as a 'hedge' against unforeseen changes in the strategic threat environment or technical surprise. … [W]e should not ignore the possibility that this principle might be applied in order to help current nuclear weapons states reach 'zero' and to deter 'breakout' in a zero-option world. In other words, every current nuclear-weapon state's strategic "hedge" ultimately could move entirely into productive capacity. This could make nuclear disarmament seem less potentially threatening to them, thereby helping to achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons. It also could help sustain a zero-option regime by confronting a would-be violator with the unpleasant prospect that if it broke the rules by trying to develop nuclear weapons, it would quickly be confronted by countervailing arsenals.").

[188] See Christopher A. Ford, *Nuclear Weapons Reconstitution and its Discontents: Challenges of "Weaponless Deterrence,"* Hudson Institute: November 2010, available

is bold and attractive in conception, but seems likely to be dangerously unstable at "zero" because it would encourage "reconstitution racing" any time two relatively sophisticated countries found themselves in a crisis or war. (Each would stand to gain *hugely* by reconstituting some nuclear weapons *first* and then *using* those weapons on its rival not just to preclude that country's reconstitution, but also to prevail decisively in the war or crisis that gave rise to their reconstitution race.[189]) Nevertheless, there is still a logic here that could help facilitate at least some further nuclear reductions,[190] and despite its arguable infeasibility at "Zero," Schell's is perhaps the most well-constructed and conditions-sensible policy agenda ever to have come out of the nuclear disarmament movement.

---

at https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Ford%20at%20Hudson%20on%20weaponless%20deterrence.pdf.

[189] Ibid., pp.15-20. This is also a prime concern of Thomas Schelling's. Thomas C. Schelling, "A World Without Nuclear Weapons?" *Daedalus*, Fall 2009, pp. 124-27; Thomas C. Schelling "The Role of Deterrence in Total Disarmament," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 40, 1963, pp. 392-406.

[190] Ford, *Nuclear Weapons Reconstitution*, op. cit., pp. 54-56.

An Overall Assessment

So where do these debates get us? It is one thesis of this paper that the aforementioned "Two Tensions" within the disarmament movement have contributed to dampening its impact upon real-world policymakers in Western states. Such leaders, after all, have reason to care about the asymmetric impact of civil-society protest upon nuclear-armed democracies threatened by nuclear-armed autocracies, and to worry that the movement's weapons-idealist reflexes may misdiagnose both the cause of the nuclear disease and its cure. Yet some scholars of the anti-nuclear movement have also frequently made strong claims of its powerful impact in helping drive arms control and disarmament progress, so these assertions need to be addressed.

Having written a huge and perhaps definitive history of the disarmament movement, Lawrence Wittner goes so far as to give the disarmament movement credit for pretty much every nuclear arms control and disarmament agreement ever reached. To hear him tell it,

> the history of nuclear arms controls without the nuclear disarmament movement is like the history of U.S. civil rights legislation without the civil rights movement. … [P]ublic pressure helped curb the nuclear arms race and prevent nuclear war.[191]

The disarmament movement, Wittner says, "eased the dangerous international confrontation, slowed the nuclear arms race, and provided the basis for the unprecedented nuclear arms control agreements that were to follow."[192] He also argues that during periods in which the anti-nuclear movement was at a lower political ebb, its *absence* led

---

[191] Wittner II, op. cit., pp. ix-x.

[192] Ibid., p. 383.

directly to escalation in the arms race. He says, for instance, that "the enfeebled state of the nuclear disarmament movement" of the early 1970s was a "key reason" for the arms build-up later in that decade. He also gives anti-nuclear pressures "the bulk of the credit" for the arms control breakthroughs of the late 1980s between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev.[193] All in all, according to Wittner, "nuclear arms control and disarmament measures of the modern era have resulted *primarily* from the efforts of a worldwide citizens' campaign, the biggest mass movement in modern history."[194]

In his own study of the impact of disarmament-focused protest movements upon U.S. Government arms control policies, Jeffrey Knopf makes a less sweeping assessment than Wittner, but nonetheless argues that "domestic opposition strongly affected [each] U.S. decision" to engage in arms control talks as "a direct stimulus to seeking cooperation." (He also broadly agrees with Wittner that *without* such protest, the pursuit of arms control was less likely.)[195] According to Knopf, "[t]he amount of anti-nuclear weapons protest generally turns out to be strongly related to U.S. decisions to enter arms talks."[196] He attributes such public pressures as having played important roles in persuading U.S. leaders to negotiate the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT),[197] the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT),[198] and he goes so far as to declare that President Ronald Reagan's willingness to negotiate nuclear arms with the

---

[193] Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 8, 403, & 447.

[194] Ibid., p. 485 (emphasis added).

[195] Jeffrey W. Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on US Arms Control Policy*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 1, 3-5, 13, & 15.

[196] Knopf, op. cit. p. 47.

[197] Ibid., pp. 109 & 137-38.

[198] Ibid., pp. 159, 178, & 195.

Soviets was "almost entirely due to the rise of the freeze movement."[199]

These strong claims, however, stand up poorly even to the evidence that Wittner and Knopf themselves adduce. In fact, the history of the relationship between the disarmament movement and U.S. arms control decision-making is as much, or more, *anticausal* as it is causal. Rather than being the result of American leaders being pushed into sensible agreements by civil society activism, as Wittner and Knopf allege, many of the United States' most important arms control successes are ones achieved *despite* (and contrary to) the actual policy prescriptions of the disarmament movement, and which seem to reflect dynamics much more consistent with conditions discourse than weapons-idealism.

Tellingly, Knopf's analysis crediting domestic protest as a key driver for U.S. arms control negotiating (on the basis of the correlation he claims to identify between periods of high protest and arms control progress) seems curiously unconcerned with circumstances or trends in the international security environment at the time. According to Knopf, there are multiple pathways by which domestic protest can influence U.S. arms control decision-making,[200] but in his account these pathways seem to operate entirely independently of what is actually happening in that security environment, as if U.S. leaders made arms control decisions on the basis of domestic political factors alone.

---

[199] Ibid., p. 200.

[200] Knopf feels there to be three such pathways: (1) an "electoral pathway" in which politicians may fear popular preferences on arms negotiating matters will influence marginal voters in elections; (2) an "elite coalition-shift pathway" in which protesters exercise influence through "pooling their resources and coordinating their activities with elites who share some of their policy goals" so as to "stimulate action by and enhance the capabilities of like-minded policy elites;" and (3) a pathway in which protest provides ideas that individuals or institutional players within the national bureaucracy use in their debates and maneuvers against each other. Knopf, op. cit., pp. 58-68.

The very case histories Knopf describes, however, undermine any such claim. To be sure, he does demonstrate that U.S. leaders were at no point unaware of or unconcerned with disarmament protest, which is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the details he himself recounts make clear that where U.S. leaders perceived themselves to have specific security interests related to arms control, they consistently pursued such interests by *resisting* arms control where it was not felt to serve those interests and *accepting* arms control only when it did. Even in Knopf's own telling, therefore, this is not a weapons-idealist world in which activists' consciousness-raising efforts awaken leaders to the horribleness of nuclear weaponry and hence drive the negotiation of agreements. Instead, it seems to be one firmly grounded in conditions discourse, in which agreements are either precluded or become possible depending on underlying shifts in the landscape of international tensions and security dynamics.

With regard to LTBT, for instance, Knopf describes President Dwight Eisenhower as seeing disarmament as "desirable," but as refusing to consider it for so long as it could not be accomplished consistent with U.S. deterrence and security interests: "until a surefire way to achieve it safely was found, top priority would go to staying ahead in the arms race."[201] Accordingly, in Eisenhower's time, therefore, the United States "opposed nuclear disarmament proposals because they would leave a conventional imbalance in Europe" that favored the Soviet Union.[202]

Furthermore, Knopf admits, Eisenhower was eventually willing to accept the LTBT's prohibition on aboveground nuclear tests only after the United States developed the capability to replace such tests with ones carried out deep underground,[203] after American scientists

[201] Ibid., p. 83.

[202] Ibid., p. 102.

[203] Ibid., p. 128.

had shown that "a test ban could be monitored adequately and would not be militarily disadvantageous to the United States,"[204] and after his advisors had concluded that the Soviets might be able to correct a problem with their H-bomb design if they carried out another round of aboveground tests, "meaning that immediate test cessation would favor the United States."[205] Knopf's account of Eisenhower's arms control decision-making is, in other words, not a tale of caving to protest, but of *refusing* to do so unless and until such arms control could be shown to advance rather than detract from U.S. security.

Knopf also undermines his own claims about the efficacy of disarmament protest in influencing U.S. decisions on SALT and the ABM Treaty by admitting that President Lyndon Johnson put arms control on his policy agenda when "citizen activism was a relatively unimportant part of the domestic equation."[206] He concedes, in other words, that SALT "began at a time when there was no sizable citizen protest against nuclear weapons" in the first place.[207] As for Richard Nixon, under whom both SALT and the ABM Treaty were both finalized, U.S. willingness to accept the limitations on strategic delivery systems imposed by SALT was certainly less likely to be the result of disarmament protest rather than *realpolitik* security calculation, given that Knopf admits that "Nixon and Kissinger both feared that the USSR was about to pull ahead of the USA in nuclear strength"[208] if some limits were not imposed.

The closest Knopf comes to demonstrating *some* connection between arms control decisions and disarmament protest during the Nixon Administration is

---

[204] Ibid., p. 149.

[205] Ibid., p. 147.

[206] Ibid., p. 159.

[207] Ibid., p. 158.

[208] Ibid., p. 186.

the suggestion that the administration found SALT helpful in persuading Congress not to cut U.S. military spending, and found the ABM Treaty useful in persuading Congress to fund a limited anti-ballistic missile program.[209] (Nixon believed a limited ABM architecture was necessary "to improve the strategic balance in light of the Soviet missile buildup"[210] and to protect the United States against "a Chinese communist or other mini-nuclear power threat."[211]) Yet the idea that there was legislative pressure against military budgets during the final phases of the American debacle in Vietnam is hardly surprising, and it would be a stretch to describe anti-nuclear protest as having driven the Nixon Administration's approach to arms control.

As for Knopf's claim that President Reagan's willingness to negotiate the INF Treaty with the Soviets was "almost entirely due to the rise of the freeze movement,"[212] this flies in the face of Reagan's years of steadfastly *rejecting* Soviet proposals at the height of the "nuclear freeze" protest movement until he felt that the United States had caught up to Soviet deployments and would no longer be in a position of numerical nuclear inferiority.[213] Reagan's success in bringing the INF Treaty to a conclusion in 1987, in fact, was the direct result of his having *refused* to listen to a disarmament movement that had been howling with outrage over NATO's decision to deploy U.S. nuclear-armed Tomahawk cruise missiles and Pershing II ballistic missiles in Europe—the so-called "Euromissiles"—in response to the Soviet Union's earlier deployment of SS-20 missiles.[214]

---

[209] Ibid., p. 186 & 196.

[210] Ibid., p. 177.

[211] Ibid., p. 192 (quoting Nixon memorandum of April 14, 1969).

[212] Ibid., p. 200.

[213] Ibid., p. 236.

[214] See generally Jayita Sarkar, "Whither Pax Atomica?—The Euromissiles Crisis and the Peace Movement of the Early 1980s," Nuclear Proliferation International

Reagan went through with the deployment of those countervailing U.S. systems in 1983, and was on that basis able to get Moscow to accept banning *all* intermediate-range systems. The INF Treaty, in other words, was possible not *because* of anti-nuclear protest, but *despite* it. Without Reagan's consistent rejection of protesters' demands to scrap the U.S. deployments and accept a deal that would "freeze" in place Soviet superiority, the signal arms control achievement of the 1980s would not have been possible. (Even Knopf himself admits that the Reagan administration "felt that the USA would have to reverse this situation [of SS-20-class asymmetry] before entering new talks."[215])

As for Reagan's willingness to begin Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) negotiations with the Soviets, the first U.S. proposal in June 1982 included a sublimit of no more than 110 large throw-weight intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)[216]—a number that would allow the United States to deploy the full complement of 100 MX (later "Peacekeeper") missiles then anticipated[217] while significantly reducing the Soviet arsenal of heavy SS-18 missiles (of which Moscow had over 300 in the mid-1980s).[218] This was most certainly *not* what the disarmament community urged upon the Reagan

---

History Project, undated, available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/whither-pax-atomica-the-euromissiles-crisis-and-the-peace-movement-the-early-1980s.

[215] Knopf, op. cit., p. 205.

[216] See Federation of American Scientists, "Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START I) Chronology," undated, available at https://nuke.fas.org/control/start1/chron.htm.

[217] The original U.S. plan was to deploy 100 MX missiles, but the number was cut to 50 in 1984. At the time of Reagan's 1982 START proposal, the first MX flight test had yet to occur. See "LGM-118 Peacekeeper (MX)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2, 2021, available at https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/lgm-118-peacekeeper-mx/.

[218] U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power 1986*, 1986, available at https://irp.fas.org/dia/product/smp_86_ch2.htm.

Administration, for the MX was fiercely controversial.[219] (Demonstrators were further outraged after Reagan's deployment of Tomahawks and Pershing IIs led the Soviets to withdraw temporarily from START discussions.[220])

As with the Euromissile deployment, however, Reagan's nuclear buildup turned out to be exactly what was needed to persuade Moscow that it *needed* to negotiate reductions with Washington. Just as the U.S. deployments in Europe ultimately made possible the INF Treaty in 1987, so the deployment of the MX (which began in 1986[221]) contributed to making possible the ultimate agreement upon START in 1991. In both cases, however, U.S. arms control success depended critically on successive American administrations *rejecting* the urgings of the disarmament community and hewing instead to a course that undertook to shape the USSR's concrete incentive structures through deterrence-focused statecraft and calibrated confrontation.

Wittner and Knopf may perhaps be forgiven their sympathies for the antinuclear protest they made the focus of their scholarship, but the facts simply do not support their effort to give the disarmament movement credit for pushing the United States into arms control. To argue that "nuclear arms control and disarmament measures of the modern era have resulted primarily from the efforts of a worldwide citizens' campaign, the biggest mass movement

---

[219] See, for example, "Demonstrators protesting the MX missile system Tuesday used a …," *UPI* December 28, 1982, available at https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/12/28/Demonstrators-protesting-the-MX-missile-system-Tuesday-used-a/9295409899600/.

[220] See, for example, Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Soviet Union Withdrawal From the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Negotiations," November 23, 1983, available at https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-soviet-union-withdrawal-intermediate-range-nuclear-force-negotiations.

[221] See, for example, Federation of American Scientists, "LGM-118 Peacekeeper," August 15, 2000, available at https://nuke.fas.org/guide/usa/icbm/lgm-118.htm.

in modern history" is insupportable.[222] As noted, rather than resulting from U.S. leaders doing what protesters urged, American arms control efforts have been far more successful when U.S. leaders resist the movement's entreaties by placing security and deterrence interests first—e.g., not agreeing to arms control concessions unless and until U.S. nuclear objectives could be assured, using arms limits to slow Soviet efforts to catch up to and surpass U.S. capabilities, and pressing Moscow into arms control concessions by building up countervailing U.S. capabilities. (If anything, resolutely *ignoring* the specific policy prescriptions urged by the disarmament community would seem to be a better recipe for success than following them.)

Another way to look at the history of the disarmament movement is to recognize—as Lawrence Wittner at one point admits—that "the appeal of nuclear disarmament decline[s] in proportion to perceived threats to national security."[223] Even U.S. leaders initially strongly sympathetic to disarmament, moreover, seem to understand the unwisdom of its pursuit *unless* conditions in the security environment can be made suitable. U.S. President Jimmy Carter, for instance, campaigned for president on a platform that called for arms control and eventual disarmament. He opposed U.S. development of the B-1 strategic bomber, opposed even underground nuclear testing, and promised movement toward what he described as "our ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from this earth."[224] It was Carter,

---

[222] Wittner III, op. cit., p. 485.

[223] Wittner II, op. cit., p. 27. As he recounts, for instance, some anti-nuclear weapons advocates at the very outset of the nuclear era—among them the vice-president of the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists (ECAS)—lost much of their initial enthusiasm for U.S. nuclear disarmament after the Soviets got atomic weaponry, the Cold War got underway, and the Communist powers showed themselves to have a taste for military expansion with the advent of the Korean War. Wittner I, op. cit., pp., 315-16.

[224] Wittner III, op. cit., pp. 26, 28, 31, & 41.

moreover, who canceled the "neutron bomb" under disarmament political pressure.[225]

Before long, however, even the Carter Administration found itself confronted with the realities of the Soviet Union's expanding arsenal and increasingly self-confident global adventurism, and with the insights of conditions discourse into the difficulty of negotiating effective arms control measures absent the prior achievement of suitable "facts on the ground." Thereafter, it was *Carter* who presided over the U.S. decision in 1979 to deploy nuclear-armed Tomahawk and Pershing II missiles in Europe in response to Soviet deployments of SS-20s,[226] Carter who first approved development of the U.S. "MX" missile,[227] Carter who began to expand U.S. defense budgets and initiated a new American defense build-up, and Carter who suspended plans for ratifying the second SALT treaty after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.[228]

And indeed, the end of the Cold War also illustrates this point, demonstrating what can become possible when security conditions *do* become conducive. Lawrence Wittner would have his readers believe that Washington and Moscow reached agreements such as the INF Treaty and the START agreement because of pressure from peace

---

[225] Carter opted to "defer production" of that weapon in 1978, though he secretly ordered production of components that could be assembled in 48 hours and airlifted to Europe if needed. Ronald Reagan ordered full production and assembly of the ERW. (It was, however, never deployed.) See, for example, Ibid., pp. 48-49 & 295; Schulte, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons in NATO and Beyond," op. cit., p. 50.

[226] See, for example, Correll, op. cit.

[227] Wittner III, op. cit., p. 98.

[228] See, for example, Thomas G. Mahnken, "The Reagan Administration's Strategy toward the Soviet Union," in *Successful Strategies*, Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.422; Aiden Warren & Joseph M. Siracusa, *Understanding Presidential Doctrines: U.S. National Security from George Washington to Joe Biden*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, p. 144.

activists.[229] But a *far* more persuasive explanation is simply that they were able to have those discussions and reach those deals because the United States had erased the Soviets' previous nuclear advantages, because the Kremlin recognized the futility of further such competition, and because with Mikhail Gorbachev's reform and restructuring (*glasnost'* and *perestroika*) in the Soviet system, Cold War tensions were easing. In this changed context, engagements between Reagan and Gorbachev showed that there was a possibility for agreeing on things that might reduce nuclear dangers both feared, and these dynamics of easing tension became for a time something of a self-accelerating "virtuous circle." The two countries thus began to feel less threatened by each other—which is to say, the *conditions* of international rivalry and hostility waned—and dramatic things became possible which perceived security threats had previously precluded.

This all amounts to a profound vindication of conditions discourse. It is, however, something of an indictment of the disarmament movement. However well-intentioned its members may have been, the movement has never made a compelling case for the weapons-idealism that appears to be its default mode, nor offered a coherent response to concerns about the asymmetric impact of civil-society protest upon the security of democracies threatened by autocratic geopolitical revisionism. Especially in a geopolitical context of growing revisionist challenges from authoritarian revisionists who hate Western democracy and wish it ill, for so long as that movement remains unable to provide compelling answers to these challenges, it is likely to continue to be the case that the disarmament movement's specific policy prescriptions form more reliable models of what to avoid in arms diplomacy than they do of what to seek.

---

[229] Wittner III, op. cit., p. 403.

About the Author

The Hon. Christopher Ford is Professor of International Relations and Strategic Studies with the School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow with the Pharos Foundation at Oxford. In 2018-21, he served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, for the last 15 months of that period also performing the duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. In 2017, Dr. Ford served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation at the U.S. National Security Council. This paper is an adaptation of a lecture for students at Missouri State University.

Previous National Institute Press *Occasional Papers*

Volume 5 (2025)

David J. Trachtenberg, *Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense,* January 2025

Volume 4 (2024)

Christopher A. Ford, *Call it by its Name: Communist Chinese Imperialism,* November 2024

Mark B. Schneider, *Current and Projected Growth of China's Nuclear Arsenal*, October 2024

Keith B. Payne, Michaela Dodge, Matthew R. Costlow, David J. Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, September 2024

Michaela Dodge, *Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions*, August 2024

Michaela Dodge, ed., *The 75th Anniversary of NATO's Founding: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead*, July 2024

David J. Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the "Two-War Strategy" and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, June 2024

Joseph R. DeTrani, *The North Korean Threat: Intelligence and Diplomacy – A Personal Memoir*, May 2024

Matthew R. Costlow, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report*, April 2024

Steve Lambakis, *Moving Missile Defense Sensors to Space*, March 2024

Christopher A. Ford, *Nuclear Posture and Nuclear Posturing: A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing China's Nuclear Weapons Policy,* February 2024

Michaela Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*, January 2024

Volume 3 (2023)

Jennifer Bradley, *The Democratization of Deterrence: The Impact of Individuals and the Private Sector on Strategic Deterrence*, November 2023

David J. Trachtenberg, ed., *Lessons Learned from Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, October 2023

Keith B. Payne, *The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for "Tripolar" Deterrence*, September 2023

Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, August 2023

Matthew R. Costlow, *Restraints at the Nuclear Brink: Factors in Keeping War Limited*, July 2023

Gary L. Geipel, *Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World*, June 2023

John A. Gentry, *Influence Operations of China, Russia, and the Soviet Union: A Comparison*, May 2023

David J. Trachtenberg, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Missile Defense Review*, April 2023

Keith B. Payne, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, March 2023

Michaela Dodge and Matthew R. Costlow, eds., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 National Security Strategy*, February 2023

Christopher A. Ford, *Assessing the Biden Administration's "Big Four" National Security Guidance Documents*, January 2023

Volume 2 (2022)

David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait: Potential Economic Tools for a Victory Denial Strategy*, December 2022

Kathleen C. Bailey, *China's Quest for a New International Order and Its Use of Public Diplomacy as a Means*, November 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World*, October 2022

Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, September 2022

Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, August 2022

Jennifer Bradley, *China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy*, July 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Building Partnerships Against Chinese Revisionism: A "Latticework Strategy" for the Indo-Pacific*, June 2022

Ilan Berman, *Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy*, May 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania*, April 2022

Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, *Victory Denial: Deterrence in Support of Taiwan*, March 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Defending Taiwan: Defense and Deterrence*, February 2022

Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question*, January 2022

Volume 1 (2021)

Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses*, December 2021

Thomas D. Grant, *China's Nuclear Build-Up and Article VI NPT: Legal Text and Strategic Challenge*, November 2021

Susan Koch, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, October 2021

Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, *Stable Deterrence and Arms Control in a New Era*, September 2021

Steve Lambakis, *Space as a Warfighting Domain: Reshaping Policy to Execute 21st Century Spacepower*, August 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *A Net Assessment of "No First Use" and "Sole Purpose" Nuclear Policies*, July 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, June 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *Safety in Diversity: The Strategic Value of ICBMs and the GBSD in the Nuclear Triad*, May 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, *Congress' Role in National Security Decision Making and the Executive-Legislative Dynamic*, April 2021

Bradley A. Thayer, *The PRC's New Strategic Narrative as Political Warfare: Causes and Implications for the United States*, March 2021

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic During the Radar Debate and Beyond*, February 2021

Keith B. Payne, *Redefining Stability for the New Post-Cold War Era*, January 2021