



LITERATURE REVIEW

Victor Davis Hanson, *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2024), 352 pp.

In *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation*, the eminent classical historian Victor Davis Hanson examines four cases of military victories that resulted in an end of a civilization, state, or culture and finds potential parallels with conflicts today. The first case discusses Alexander the Great's obliteration of classical Thebes in 335 BC, the second a well-known destruction of Carthage by expansionist Rome in 149-146 BC, the third the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 AD, and lastly, Hanson describes the Spanish destruction of Tenochtitlan which ended the Aztec civilization in 1521. Hanson focuses on these particular final battles, because each city presented the last vestige of a respective civilization's political, cultural, economic, and military stronghold, and following its fall, there was no civilization to speak of left. Most of the defeated people were exterminated or made slaves.

The author identifies common threads that contributed to civilizations' downfalls: e.g., each nation seldom believed that the attackers would completely destroy their capitals and annihilate the survivor. In battle, each continued to overestimate its strength and the infallibility of its defenses. Each nation also put too much faith in allies who failed to provide substantial help when it mattered. Each of them was in a state of decline that went on for decades or centuries prior to the final battle; a mere mirror image of its former peak-strength self. This makes the author's focus on final battles somewhat misleading, even if their detailed accounts make for an interesting read. Civilizations the book examines overtime weakened to the point of making a battle of annihilation through eliminating the capital a viable option for adversaries to pursue.

Occasionally, the author appears to contradict himself. For example, he criticizes the perennial optimism of the besieged, yet, by his own account, Constantinople almost survived the siege and only successive strokes of bad luck made the Ottomans victorious. The focus on individuals simplifies necessarily complex processes. Moreover, the chapters are occasionally too repetitive.

The author warns that the modern world is hardly immune from annihilation of entire peoples and cultures such as described in his book, yet the analogy might be taken too far. The cases do not necessarily illustrate why this should inevitably be so; why some civilizations are completely annihilated and others are not. Moreover, each of the cases predates the creation of the concept of a sovereign state and, with a few extreme exceptions, state borders are no longer synonymous with a single city in which an entire population of peoples concentrates.

Yet, democracies do appear to underestimate the ruthlessness of their adversaries in a manner not dissimilar from ancient Thebans questioning whether that the young Alexander would truly destroy their city if they do not surrender. Modern technologies can cause destruction and loss of life faster than Alexander the Great's armies. Modern autocrats are



not shy about communicating their desire to annihilate other cultures, just as Russia is attempting to do in parts of Ukraine it conquered. Regrettably, even that knowledge is not enough to mobilize the West to defeat the Russian invaders. The consequence could be destruction of uncommon magnitude. Hanson's book is worth reading.

*Reviewed by Michaela Dodge
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Kelsey Davenport, *Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons*, Arms Control Association, September 2024, 41 pp.

Disarmament advocates have long dreamt of using arms control treaties and agreements to reduce the risks of nuclear conflict and move the United States (and by extension the rest of the world's nuclear-armed states) toward a world without nuclear weapons. This dream has been elusive because the nature of the international environment is such that some powers are not swayed by Western notions of morality and the imperative of complying with international agreements. Nevertheless, hope springs eternal among those who wish to believe in the inherent goodness of mankind and the notion that international agreements will be complied with by all parties, regardless of political or ideological differences.

Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons, published by the Arms Control Association, is an example of what Samuel Johnson (referring to second marriages) once called the "triumph of hope over experience." It chastises nuclear weapons states for their "lack of political will to pursue bold, creative steps to reduce nuclear risk and reverse the buildup of nuclear weapons capabilities." This charge, however, is hardly applicable to the United States, which has arguably done more to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy than any other country, has led multinational efforts to contain global nuclear threats, and has slashed the size of its own nuclear arsenal by some 85 percent since the height of the Cold War.

The report reviews various international treaties, organizations, and initiatives focused on disarmament issues, including the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the UN Conference on Disarmament, and various Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones. It judges these traditional approaches to be structurally flawed due to their "inadequate or overly broad membership, overreliance on consensus-based decision-making, and limited high-level political engagement." The author's solution to this dilemma: the creation of yet another international forum to discuss disarmament matters, specifically the creation of "a new series of disarmament summits designed to inject momentum into current efforts to reduce the risk posed by nuclear weapons and eliminate nuclear arsenals."

The naivete of such a recommendation is breathtaking, in that it ignores the fact that states view the threats to their security differently and have different motivations for their behaviors, including how they see the value of nuclear weapons. Moreover, focusing on process cannot overcome differences of substance. Although the report states “Involving all nuclear-armed states in the disarmament enterprise...is more urgent than ever,” it offers no practical solution for convincing the most troublesome actors—such as the so-called “Axis of Authoritarians” (i.e., Russia, China, North Korea and Iran)—to engage cooperatively with responsible stakeholders.

The report assesses favorably the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process launched by President Obama in 2010 and views this as a template for future summits designed to “jump-start progress on concrete actions to advance disarmament.” It applauds the NSS notion of states making national commitments to disarmament (so-called “house gifts”) and participating in multinational endeavors (“gift baskets”) that avoid the “structural impediments” to disarmament that exist among traditional organizations. Such “minilateral initiatives” would ostensibly circumvent the stalemates created by having too many cooks with competing recipes in the disarmament kitchen.

“A more select membership also can exclude states that are disinclined to participate in good faith,” the report notes. The success of this effort among “like-minded states” could “build norms and create peer pressure” among the outliers to get with the disarmament program. Some of the recommended “house gift” actions include having states provide greater transparency on their fissile material stockpiles, declaring their total warhead numbers, freezing the number of number weapons, supporting ratification of the CTBT, and supporting nuclear-free zones. Additional “gift basket” options could include limiting certain nuclear delivery systems, adopting “no-first-use” and “sole purpose” nuclear doctrines, strengthening verification protocols, and restricting the use of artificial intelligence tools in nuclear command and control systems.

These measures are typical reflections of the disarmament movement narrative, and represent a smorgasbord of wishful thinking that is divorced from reality. The notion that holding disarmament summits among like-minded parties will help shame those who seek to exploit their nuclear arsenals for coercive purposes into agreeing to disarm is stunningly naïve. As Ronald Reagan used to say, “nations do not distrust each other because they’re armed; they arm themselves because they distrust each other.” No amount of summitry can change the fact that the international system is a self-help system where states cannot always rely on the largesse of others for their own security.¹ This includes both nuclear-armed states like the United States, who rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence, and states like Russia and China, who use nuclear weapons for coercive purposes and to prevent the United States from taking actions that can check their expansionist drives and tendencies.

As the report concludes (accurately in this case), “Many may consider the concept [of nuclear disarmament summits] to be impractical at this particular juncture in the long

¹ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA, National Institute Press, 2020).

journey to reduce the number and spread of nuclear weapons.” Indeed, there is nothing in the report—or in the subsequent year since the report was issued—to suggest that the author’s desired end state is any closer to being realized, or that the process of Nuclear Security Summits employed 15 years ago is relevant today. In fact, a dose of realism would argue just the opposite, as the international security environment is radically different and decidedly more dangerous than the world of 15 years ago. Just ask the Ukrainians, for example.

In summary, the problem is not a “lack of political will to pursue bold, creative steps to reduce nuclear risk and reverse the buildup of nuclear weapons capabilities,” as the author would have the reader believe. Rather, it is the aggressive postures of those who seek to upend and overturn the existing world order established and nurtured by the United States since the end of World War II and to remake the global order in their own image.² To expect more dialogue to overcome these fundamental differences is, as one brilliant Cold War strategist argued, like “looking for eggs in a cuckoo clock.”³

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² See, for example, David J. Trachtenberg, *Why Arms Control Must Fail*, *Information Series*, No. 627 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 12, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-why-arms-control-must-fail-no-627-july-12-2025/.

³ Charles Burton Marshall, “Looking for Eggs in a Cuckoo Clock: Observations on SALT II,” January 22, 1979, in Charles Tyroler, II, ed., *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1984), pp. 94-98.