

Disarmament and Other Nuclear Norms

Once the Cold War ended, and with it the prospect of a cataclysmic Third World War, many argued that the nuclear arsenals accumulated during its 45 years were anachronistic and redundant. By the mid-1990s, calls for their complete elimination had gained notable adherents.¹ Yet, while elements of these arsenals were removed without much difficulty, their size and destructive power remained substantial and the disarmament movement soon flagged. It took about a decade for it to revive, when in 2007 a surprising group of senior American statesmen refreshed the process.² Organizations such as Global Zero, which has attracted high-profile support,³ and various international commissions⁴ echoed their call for a world free of nuclear weapons. This issue impressed itself sufficiently on Barack Obama that he made it the subject of one of his first speeches as President, when he spoke in Prague in April 2009 and committed the United States to the goal of complete nuclear disarmament.⁵

In this speech, Obama noted a “strange turn of history”: as the threat of global nuclear war had gone down, the risk of a nuclear attack had gone up. More states had acquired nuclear weapons and testing had continued. With a black market in nuclear secrets and materials, the “technology to build a bomb” had spread. Terrorists were “determined to buy, build, or steal one.” Efforts to contain all these dangers were “centered on a global nonproliferation regime, but as more people and nations break the rules, we could reach the point where the center cannot hold.” On this basis, Obama stated “clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

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He recognized that this was a long-term goal, requiring “patience and persistence.” As first steps, he committed the United States to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same,” and to reduce the actual arsenal. Concrete measures would include a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russians, ratification at last of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), a treaty to end the production of fissile materials, and strengthening of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) with improved inspections, sanctions, and a better framework for civil nuclear cooperation. (Here, he acknowledged the challenges posed by North Korea and Iran.) He added the need for a “new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years.” In all of this, he insisted that the United States would not abandon nuclear deterrence: “As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.”

In Pursuit of the Nuclear Disarmament Norm

Many considered President Obama’s speech a bold move by a new president. It was even celebrated, somewhat prematurely, by the award of a Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian Nobel Committee stated that in making the award, it “attached special importance to Obama’s vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.”⁶ Optimists took this as an encouraging sign that a process was well underway to get the international community to adopt a new disarmament commitment. They urged other countries to support Obama in this grand project, a project framed in terms of the universal adoption of a significant norm.

The project has been regularly compared to another grand project, founded on a deep moral imperative: the abolition of slavery. Nuclear weapons have been described as the “slavery of the 21st century. With their threat of Armageddon, they enslave all of humanity.”⁷ On this basis, the great anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce, in his challenge to a social order dependent on the trade of slaves, is held up as an example of perseverance and readiness. In 2007, British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett also used Wilberforce’s example to urge a commitment to the vision of a world without nuclear weapons: “[Would Wilberforce] have achieved half as much . . . if he had set out to ‘regulate’ or ‘reduce’ the slave trade rather than abolish it?” she asked. “I doubt it.”⁸

The comparison underlined the nobility of the goal, but also gave a warning not to expect quick results. For instance, from the start of the anti-slavery campaign in the 1780s, some 50 years passed before the British Parliament passed the Anti-Slavery Act, and then even longer to fully implement it and address all the various anomalies and exceptions. Even then, it did not deal with slavery in areas outside of the British Empire, for example the United States. In

some areas, slavery still lingers. Nevertheless, the British Empire was in a position to control much of the trade and could, to a degree, set standards for others. This case demonstrates the possibility to set new norms for state behavior and the advantage a hegemonic power could have in the process.

The anti-slavery campaign therefore fits in with the models that might be gleaned from the considerable academic literature on norm-changing. This points to a process involving “norm emergence,” which requires disparate “norm entrepreneurs” to assert the need for change from a variety of platforms. As they reach a wider audience, a “norm cascade” occurs.⁹ In the international sphere, this process may begin with the original norm entrepreneurs responding to domestic stimuli, but then this will turn to external pressure on other states where the domestic demand for change may be weak. Over time, the norms become internalized so that challenges become acceptable and the pressure grows for universal adherence. This is why it helps when powerful states promote norms. The quality of the norm should also make a difference, and it helps if it fits well with established core values or derives from them.

The differences in the case of nuclear weapons and slavery are important. The aim might be to turn the United States into the norm entrepreneur, but it controls only its own arsenal and can only influence the arsenal of others through statecraft, negotiation, and occasional coercion. Moreover, as Obama’s speech made clear, in a critical sense the U.S. (and Russian) arsenals might be the largest, but they are not the most problematic. Greater danger comes from activity around the edges, much smaller in scale but still potentially deadly. One should not assume that radical proliferators or terrorist groups will recognize the restraints accepted by nuclear powers. This throws into sharp relief the main difficulty with the elimination of nuclear weapons compared with slavery: elimination must be complete. There can be no tolerance of just a few holdouts.

This in itself makes the norm-setting process for nuclear weapons more complex than the slave trade. The abolition of slavery was an end in itself—human beings should not treat other human beings as chattels without any rights. Complete elimination of slavery was the only alternative. The elimination of nuclear weapons is, however, a means to another end—preventing nuclear war. If arsenals still exist, however, small and embryonic, there is a risk of their use. Anything short of total elimination could therefore prove fatal. Because of this absolute standard, the promotion of the disarmament

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norm has to be evaluated against alternative approaches to the core aim of preventing nuclear war.

In discussing whether all nuclear powers might adopt total disarmament, I will consider the relationship between disarmament and several other well-established norms that also claim to be serving the cause of preventing nuclear war: they are the nonproliferation norm, which tries to prevent nuclear weapons from spreading to any

other actors; the non-use norm, which sets an internalized moral restraint on detonating a nuclear weapon; and the deterrence norm, which provides a prudential rationale for not using nuclear weapons against an opponent who also has a nuclear arsenal.

Alternative Sources of Nuclear Restraint

The nonproliferation norm came about through something like the process described above, gaining supporters among the major powers and then cascading down through the international system: the great value of the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty has been to affirm and consolidate this norm. It has undoubtedly influenced the behavior of states who in other circumstances might have been tempted to develop national nuclear programs.¹⁰ Its adoption was never complete, however, and adherence has eroded over time, although not as fast as many feared. In the end, attempts to enforce it depend on threats, sanctions, and inducements as much as any intellectual conversion. Curiously, those who enforce the norm do not follow it themselves, which is one reason for the revival of the claim that established nuclear powers must lead by example, and that only a renewed commitment to disarmament can sustain the norm of nonproliferation.

The non-use norm has served well thus far to achieve what is the declared goal of disarmament: preventing nuclear war.¹¹ Although international agreements limit where a country can deploy nuclear weapons and the numbers and types a country can hold, none prevent their actual use. Some judicial rulings and ethical teachings exist that might suggest non-use, but they are not something which those facing the prospect of war could sensibly rely upon. Instead, the authority on non-use lies in politics. The most important form of arms control remains the kind that political leaders exercise daily, namely, the hesitation to resort explicitly to nuclear weapons to resolve pressing international problems. We can assume this hesitance stems from prudence, proportionality, and a general sense that such a step would be so momentous—so terrible, so extreme—as to preclude it.

The inability to contemplate actually using nuclear weapons is now regularly described as a “nuclear taboo,” but the term barely does justice to the importance of this restraint.¹² Taboos are about forms of behavior that wider society considers perverse or disgraceful in some respect. To break a taboo is to challenge accepted norms of appropriate conduct. A lot of social taboos—say incest or polygamy—affect defined social groupings and may therefore be ignored by those in different societies with their own distinctive value systems. Even when the norms are strong, and are policed to a degree, so long as those conducting them are consenting, they may well occur despite the prohibition. Taboos can come to be seen as reactionary and untenable. Subverting them can come to be seen as a brave and noble act—as was the case in the civil rights movement. Social taboos therefore can be honored not so much in abstinence but in hidden practice, and may erode completely over time so that what was once hidden becomes open.

With nuclear use, however, we are not talking about an individual’s behavioral eccentricity that others may or may not follow; instead, breaking the nuclear taboo would be a transformational event representing a turning point in international history.¹³ The human and political consequences would be profound, even if they are hard to predict in advance. On one hand, perhaps the true horror of the event would produce revulsion and a determination to avoid repetition. On the other hand, nuclear use might be perceived to have been successful, resulting in a decisive and meaningful victory. Given the repercussions, nobody has yet suggested that this is an experiment worth trying. This is something more than a taboo, and that is because restraint reflects basic prudence as well as moral inhibition. It is not only a consequence of deterrence, but deterrence is an important part of the story.

Yet in principle, a tense relationship exists between the non-use norm and the deterrence norm. The deterrence norm, which is the assumed default position of nuclear powers, implies that there are circumstances so extreme that they would remove all inhibitions on nuclear use. The most obvious contingency is in the aftermath of nuclear use against one’s own state. A significant relationship also exists between extended deterrence and nonproliferation. Extended deterrence involves countries that have reason to fear nuclear powers but lack means of retaliation—they receive deterrence only if it is provided by another (which normally means the United States). Thus without U.S. security guarantees, a significant number of states that currently adopt the nonproliferation norm might feel a need to reconsider their position.

How does disarmament fit in with this? The essence of the conceptual and political challenge to disarmament in the late 1950s and early 1960s was that it would not make nuclear war less likely. One reason for the shift from disarmament to arms control was that the latter focused on how to keep politics in command. Arms control addressed crisis instability—times when

political leaders might rush into fateful decisions out of fear that restraint would pose risks. Crisis stability, on the other hand, dampens any military urge for pre-emption, thereby allowing for diplomacy or reflection on the potential consequences of war.

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it did not offer crisis stability; as arsenals went down then so did the risks of a nuclear miscalculation. At some point, with smaller arsenals, a first strike might appear to a desperate leader as a real and enticing possibility. Thus, well-intentioned schemes of disarmament could bring about crisis instability, and thus, it was claimed, the very disaster they were pledged to avoid. It could be argued that the political conditions necessary to achieve disarmament would probably also mean fewer crises, but such arguments would

also confirm that the key determinant of peace lay in political relationships rather than weapons inventories.

Disarmers in the first decades of the nuclear age often urged governments to follow the moral imperatives of nuclear disarmament, regardless of the immediate security considerations. By abandoning their own nuclear arsenals and ambitions, they argued, these governments could create a cascading normative effect, with or without a prior easing of political tensions and irrespective of the impact on deterrence. The modern generation of disarmers is more careful of the politics and has also made a pragmatic accommodation with the deterrence norm, at least to its most narrow extent.¹⁴ Since the absence of a nuclear arsenal could make a state feel vulnerable to a nuclear-backed power play by a rival, disarmament schemes are now designed to preserve this basic deterrence relationship until the last moment. The strength of the deterrence norm explains why disarmers doubt their ability to let individual countries just reduce inventories and abandon security tasks at their own pace, without regard of the stances taken by old adversaries.

In practice, it is worth noting that the most substantial disarmament from the largest arsenals of the 1950s and 1960s has been unilateral rather than multilateral, reflecting not only changes in weapons technologies and strategic priorities, but also political judgments about the value of certain categories of weapons. The most dramatic example of this came as the Cold War ended. From 1991–92, President George H. W. Bush made major unilateral cuts in tactical nuclear weapons—he ended a variety of missile programs, cut back on new warhead development, and took B-1B and B-52 bombers off hair-trigger alert

status. Similar moves were made during the last months of the Soviet Union, while Mikhail Gorbachev was still in charge. Thereafter, economics, always the most powerful source of disarmament, led to a further decline in the Russian arsenal. Britain, a country that wants to stay a nuclear power, went out of its way to identify the smallest operational arsenal consistent with this status. It has not expected any reciprocity in this endeavor.¹⁵

There is therefore no particular reason why disarmament has to be multilateral, especially when it removes a capacity that is surplus to any pressing security needs. The sort of shared, symmetrical ceilings common to strategic arms control agreements are a product of demands for parity common in the early 1970s. Disarmament only has to depend on multilateral treaties when it affects real security calculations.

Norms in Conflict

The rhetoric of disarmament insists that mankind is on either of two tracks: one route leads to continued conflict and eventual disaster, while the other leads to disarmament and greater international harmony. This rhetoric goes back to the very start of the nuclear age.¹⁶ Yet, the world has thus far survived the nuclear age without any major multilateral disarmament treaties. If it truly was only disarmament that could spare us from disaster, we have no right to still be around. Instead, we have relied on the reinforcing nuclear norms of non-use, deterrence, and nonproliferation to prevent nuclear war. If proponents of disarmament want to make its case afresh, then they must explain why this particular approach must now have priority over the thus far successful combination of non-use, deterrence, and nonproliferation.

The only basis for extra urgency on disarmament is the belief that some actor will break the non-use norm at some point. Again, this is not a new argument. British scientist and novelist Sir C. P. Snow's address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 1961 is a classic text in this regard: he attempted to make a scientific case for disarmament.¹⁷ His starting point was the fact that all physical scientists "know that it is relatively easy to make plutonium." From this, he calculated that

for a dozen or more states, it will only take perhaps six years, perhaps fewer [to build a bomb]. Even the best-informed of us always exaggerate these periods. . . . We know, with the certainty of statistical truth, that if enough of these patterns are made—by enough different states—some of them are going to blow up. Through accident, or folly, or madness—but the motives don't matter. . . . We genuinely know the risks. We are faced with an "either/or," and we haven't much time.¹⁸

The choice was to restrict nuclear armaments and testing, or face an eventual nuclear detonation. With an arms race accelerating between the United States

and the USSR, and China and “several other states” soon bound to join in, Snow believed disaster was unavoidable. Fortunately, the non-use norm has so far turned out to be more robust than Snow and others surmised. Meanwhile, although the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), his main candidate for action, has been negotiated and signed, it has yet to come into force because the United States will not ratify it.

While Snow worried about the non-use norm inevitably breaking, others have worried that deterrence is simply not a good enough reason to maintain nuclear arsenals. As a recent example of this, we can consider arguments by Ward Wilson of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, who explains that if proof exists that nuclear deterrence does not work, then disarmament is the only recourse. Unless a “stronger rationale for keeping these dangerous weapons can be contrived,” he says of deterrence, “perhaps they should be banned.”¹⁹ Wilson also challenges the claim that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki played a crucial role in Japan’s surrender in 1945; rather, he says, it was the entry of the Soviets into the war. The atom bomb was just a convenient excuse for Japanese leaders, “allowing them to blame defeat on this ‘miracle’ weapon.”²⁰

In this, Wilson makes the elementary error of assuming that just because he can identify one non-nuclear cause—the Soviet Union’s entry into the war—that precludes the presence of another. If the bombs were so irrelevant, one wonders why Emperor Hirohito mentioned atom bombs and *not* the Soviet invasion in his surrender address to the Japanese people: “The enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb,” he reported, “the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable . . . Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.”²¹

Pursuing his theme, Wilson observes that claims for the success of deterrence are speculative, while evidence of its failures is not. Yet, successful deterrence is by its nature extremely difficult to prove: “success” means simply that no attack has occurred, and there could be many reasons for this. Cause and effect is not easy to demonstrate. Furthermore, the examples Wilson cites of deterrence failure are slippery. Basically, he points to any case in which a nuclear power has had trouble with a non-nuclear one as a failure of deterrence: he mentions Iraq (twice), Serbia and Kosovo, Afghanistan and the United States, Britain and the Falklands, and Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Yet in none of these cases, bar one, were nuclear threats ever in play. The issues at stake were not existential and could achieve resolution via non-nuclear means.

The United States did hint on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War that use of chemical weapons might lead to nuclear retaliation, although nobody believed these threats. In late December 1990, then-Defense Secretary Richard Cheney observed that “were Saddam Hussein foolish enough to use weapons of mass

destruction, the U.S. response would be absolutely overwhelming and it would be devastating.” At the same time, officials still insisted that the use of chemical or nuclear weapons “has never been on the table” and no preparations were made for any nuclear operations.²² According to a poll, a quarter of Americans would have favored tactical nuclear use if it would end hostilities quickly and save the lives of American troops. Seventy-two percent were still opposed even with this positive slant of the question.²³ Britain and France notably refrained from making any nuclear threats. The Iraqis of course did not use chemical weapons, but trying to work out why just illustrates the problems of proving the reasons for a non-event.

The most interesting case is that of Israel and Syria in October 1973. Israel had been complacent about the ability of its conventional forces to deter an Arab invasion. When Egypt and Syria caught it with a surprise attack on two fronts, the Israeli state appeared to be in great danger. Some claimed that, at one of the darkest moments of the crisis, the government ordered its Jericho missiles to be armed with nuclear munitions. This was done in a detectable way: reports have surfaced that the Russians warned the Syrians about this. There is better evidence that the Americans picked this up, and was one reason for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to order a major airlift to replace the material losses the Israelis had suffered.²⁴ This illustrates another basic problem with attempts to disprove deterrence— nuclear weapons play a number of strategic roles other than influencing adversary behavior, like influencing the behavior of allies.

More than any of this, Wilson’s basic methodology is flawed. By stating his case in such absolute terms, his whole thesis is vulnerable to a single example that shows nuclear weapons as a source of restraint. He does to some extent preempt this by accepting that the weapons might result in caution, but that is only evidence that they are “dangerous, not that they are effective weapons of war or useful for threatening.”²⁵ The error here is to assume that theories of deterrence rely on a confident ability to issue deliberate threats, as if one can use or threaten to use nuclear weapons the same way one uses or threatens to use conventional weapons. Nations have always kept nuclear threats vague, as obvious constraints exist on their casual use as an instrument of foreign policy.

Deterrence worked in the Cold War because nuclear weapons were “dangerous,” because few wished to take risks that would inadvertently result in nuclear exchanges, and because of fear that a limited affair might escalate through a series of false moves and misunderstandings (Snow’s “accident, or folly, or madness”). The lingering doubt that someone just might press the nuclear trigger, especially in the face of some dire existential crisis or gripped by the passions of war, was precisely what made deterrence “work.” This was the basis of Tom Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance” or former U.S. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy’s “existential deterrence.”²⁶

Imagine a crisis in which one party observed that there was no need for restraint because they faced no credible nuclear threat. The danger, this party would quickly be warned, lies not in what has been said before but what might happen should the crisis get out of control. So although good reasons exist for arguing that nuclear threats, at least as far as great powers are concerned,

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are becoming less credible, that would not make much difference amid fears that a slight miscalculation could be catastrophic, especially in a social and political setting already transformed by brutalizing violence. Because nuclear weapons are dangerous, prudence dictates considerable caution when moving toward any situation that could create pressures for their use. This is why nuclear weapons can have a deterrent effect well beyond their logical limits. So long

as the non-use norm is believed to be have any fragility, then there is no incentive to test it. If it is believed that the norm will survive even quite dire contingencies, then this makes it safe to disarm, but of course at the same time makes it less necessary.

Wilson's assumption that nuclear threats are not credible leads him to argue against extended deterrence as well. Because deterrence "intended to protect nuclear weapon states has failed a number of times and seems theoretically problematic," he argues, then deterrence "extended over another state seems likely to be even less reliable. It makes little sense to issue dangerous threats that are unreliable."²⁷ Again this wholly fails to understand the politics of extended deterrence. It is not about implausible threats but about alliances. For the United States to abandon extended deterrence would be tantamount to unraveling a whole series of security relationships, leaving countries that currently depend on U.S. protection to rely instead on their own devices. It is hard to think of a more likely stimulus to nuclear proliferation as countries seek instead to develop their own deterrents. It would pose a direct challenge to the nonproliferation norm.

None of this is to argue against disarmament. There is enormous scope to reduce the arsenals of the United States and Russia. My concern is not that disarmament would be harmful (unless we got to levels that are currently implausible and would depend on a quite different political context), but that disarmament is presented as the "last best hope" for the world. As a result, it is used to deride the role of other valuable sources of restraint, including deterrence. In addition, it is important to be aware that it is easier to convert

the United States to disarmament at the moment precisely because it is far less reliant upon nuclear weapons than other nuclear powers.

Avoiding Nuclear War

The period since Obama's April 2009 speech does not give cause for great disarmament optimism. The record is mixed. The CTBT remains unratified in the U.S. Senate. The Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), proposed to prohibit further production of fissile nuclear material, has been generally accepted but is currently blocked by Pakistan. In March 2012, a Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul considered cooperative measures to combat the threat of nuclear terrorism, protect nuclear materials and related facilities, and prevent illicit trafficking of nuclear materials, which involved a number of voluntary pledges but was somewhat overshadowed by more North Korean saber-rattling.

The 2010 NPT Review Conference was less fraught than its predecessor in 2005. This reflected one significant achievement, which came when the New START Treaty was signed in April 2010. It set limits of 1,550 for deployed warheads and 700 for deployed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers, submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear weapons (going up to 800 if non-deployed systems were included). This seems to confirm a past tendency to honor the norm of parity rather than to reduce excess capacity. While the limits are some 30 percent lower than those of previous agreements, and can be verified by reciprocal inspections, they do not require drastic cuts in either arsenal. For example, Russia currently has fewer than 700 deployed systems already. Nevertheless, the Treaty at last received Senate ratification and helped to demonstrate a seriousness in arms control that had been absent for most of the 2000s.

Whatever the rhetoric, there is little evidence of a shared, urgent commitment to drastic progress toward disarmament, let alone full abolition. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review set in motion by the Obama administration explored options to restrict the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. One leak suggested that warhead numbers might go as low as 300 (the lowest in a range under consideration by a 2012 implementation study), which was seen to provide sufficient ammunition to the President's opponents, who might charge him with unilateral disarmament, so that no major steps were taken during the election year of 2012. Furthermore, critics charge that the Pentagon remains firm in wanting nuclear targeting that can attack targets in Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and North Korea. Demands to keep five ballistic missile-carrying submarines on station at any time leave little scope for cuts in the fleet.²⁸ In

his 2013 State of the Union address, the re-elected President did reaffirm his commitment to “engage Russia to seek further reductions in our nuclear arsenals, and continue leading the global effort to secure nuclear materials that could fall into the wrong hands.”²⁹ As with other aspects of policy, it may be that the President, free from worrying about re-election, will become bolder in his initiatives. He will still, however, need partners if he is to get agreements.

Although the United States remains the world’s predominant power, its ability and inclination to set norms for the rest of the international community has declined. It has reverted to its default (and important) position as a status quo power, sustaining its network of alliances and partnerships without taking radical initiatives. Meanwhile the so-called emerging powers, such as China and India, tend to stress more parochial interests in their foreign policies. In both these cases, they have shown a close attachment to their own nuclear arsenals, partly with each other in mind. The same tendencies reflect in other faltering multilateral efforts, whether they concern multilateral trade or climate change.

The hopes of disarmers once rested on the belief that a few great powers were able to decide matters of world peace as they could also decide world war. The international system now works differently. Deals among great powers are rarer and are limited by the diverse and often conflicting security concerns of multiple states. We should not be sanguine about how the large nuclear powers will cope with future crises, but most current concern surrounds states that do not have large inventories to draw down but are suspected of chronic insecurity and an inadequate sense of nuclear risk. Those most likely to end the tradition of non-use are Kim Jong-un of North Korea, some future leader of Pakistan, or even a non-state actor who has gained access to a nuclear device—not one of the established nuclear powers.

Even if we could leave these matters to a few great powers, there is hardly an encouraging history of disarmament conferences and grand declarations upon which to draw. The experience since the end of the nineteenth century has been one of disappointment and disillusion. The basic model of disarmament is to construct an arms race in reverse with the assumption that one state’s weapons choices depend on those of potential adversaries (in this case reinforced by the view that the only purpose of nuclear arsenals lies in mutual deterrence). Therefore complete, total disarmament depends on reciprocity, with nuclear nations abandoning their nuclear weapons together in a remarkable feat of choreography.

The problem is that nuclear arsenals do not connect in a systemic way, which might allow them to be drawn down in a coordinated effort. They are geared to quite specific security concerns. In order for the traditional security concerns of states to accommodate abolition, choreography of a drawdown would

involve some of the world's most intractable conflicts to somehow be resolved in a series of side deals. Against this backdrop, skepticism about the abolitionist project is not unreasonable, without at all dismissing concerns about the risks inherent in the status quo and the importance of the nonproliferation and non-use norms.

Reinforcing these two key norms of nonproliferation and non-use, however, requires attention not so much to the size and shape of the arsenals, but to the political context in which they have been developed and might be employed, whether for bargaining purposes, deterrence, or acts of war.³⁰ For other nuclear weapon states, the current American interest in disarmament reflects not so much a moral imperative as the self-interested stance of a country comfortable in its conventional military superiority.³¹

Rhetoric that urges elimination on the assumption that the only alternative is Armageddon is not credible, almost seventy years into the nuclear age. It is also impossible to start from the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and work backwards to explain how this can come about. The many intermediate steps are contingent on so many other factors that any one scheme cannot accommodate them. In looking for first steps, the tendency is to pick up on whatever happens to be the most immediate unfinished business on the international agenda at hand—which, after half a century, is *still* a comprehensive test ban. If survival depends on a goal which middle-aged politicians routinely say is both essential yet unlikely to be reached in their lifetime, then the inevitable result is fatalism. This might still be a perverse outcome of the recent campaigning, which if nothing else, has provided eloquent reminders of the terrible capacity to self-destruct found in the international system.

The norms of nuclear nonproliferation, non-use, and deterrence can be shown empirically to have brought important benefits. Now, they must be applied in cases marked by shifting and fraught political circumstances that make resort to nuclear arms conceivable. These norms are all vulnerable to being rejected by those who see them as cynical instruments of their opponents and the prejudicial morality of patronizing Western elites. If these norms are to have enduring value, they will require more than assertions of their past value—they need constant demonstrations of their relevance to new types of conflict involving new types of actors.

There is an inescapable logic in the assertion that if nuclear weapons did not exist, then the potential for nuclear war could not exist; however, so long as we

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The challenge is to prevent the erosion of the old norms of deterrence, non-proliferation, and non-use.

are stuck in the nuclear age, even at lower levels of armaments, avoiding nuclear war will require intensive diplomacy and careful posturing. The challenge is not to re-assert an old norm of disarmament, but to prevent the erosion of the old norms of deterrence, as in prudent appreciation of the dangers in taking a risk of nuclear war; of non-proliferation, as in a grasp of the consequences of adding to the list of potential nuclear conflicts; and of non-use, as in accepting the responsibility of restraint.

Notes

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