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## Advancing the Disarmament Debate: Common Ground and Open Questions

### A Refreshing Approach

The Adelphi Paper, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, is an extremely important contribution to the debate on nuclear disarmament. Until now, most publications devoted to a serious discussion of abolition originated in either the world of nongovernmental advocacy organizations or the world of technical experts. They tended to focus *either* on explaining *how* the technical challenges of verification could be met, *or* on explaining *why* abolition was urgently needed.

*Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* is a conceptual breakthrough in this debate, in that it combines political and technical expertise to lay down the conditions under which total nuclear disarmament could become a reality—and addresses the issues in a way that is both logical and realistic. The second sentence of the text captures the approach taken by the two authors: “How might the security conditions which would permit nuclear weapons to be safely prohibited be created, and how might measures to implement such a prohibition be verified and enforced?”

*Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* is also a remarkable piece of work in that it avoids falling into the “advocacy trap” that has led previous studies and reports on the issue to easily dismiss important counterarguments, thereby condemning such texts, most of the time, to political irrelevance. Instead, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* tackles head-on the most difficult strategic challenges of nuclear abolition. One of its strongest messages is that

“States will not begin to make the changes necessary for abolishing nuclear weapons if there is not a shared sense that the goal is realistic.” It wisely avoids the temptation of presenting artificial roadmaps or timetables.

While clearly stating why abolition, in the authors’ view, is desirable, it does so in a dispassionate way, putting responsibility almost equally on nuclear-armed states and non-nuclear-weapon states. It is refreshing to read in a paper that tends to view abolition as being both feasible and desirable that “non-nuclear-weapon states would be wise to be responsive to the reasonable expectations of nuclear-armed states trying to create conditions for the secure prohibition of nuclear weapons” or that “non-nuclear-weapons states should realise that they will get neither the nuclear industry nor the disarmament they seek if they fail to join efforts to strengthen and enforce the non-proliferation regime.” And while the authors emphasize the need to “move on both fronts simultaneously” (nonproliferation and disarmament), they seem to recognize that if something has to “go first” to create a virtuous circle, it has to be the resolution of Iran and North Korea issues, if only because those two states exploit the current paralysis of the international community for their own benefit.

The paper makes a good case for the pivotal role of China, which stands in between the two nuclear superpowers and the nascent Asian arsenals. And it is to be commended for characterizing the Iran issue as being “deeply damaging to the objective of global nuclear disarmament,” when most supporters of abolition tend to focus their wrath on the United States.

*Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* gives excellent and often detailed replies to some of the classic counterarguments of those who claim that abolition is not feasible. This includes, for instance, the “nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented” argument. The authors argue correctly that “the problem of lingering nuclear know-how might not last indefinitely.” They deal efficiently with the question of what to do with “nuclear knowledge.” One can only support their conclusion that, at the end of the day, the most important challenges of abolition are more political than they are technical or political-technical.

The paper also recognizes that if nuclear weapons are to be traded away, some other reliable means have to be set up to foster a sense of security equal to what the possession of nuclear weapons—rightly or wrongly—provided. The authors have it right when they state that, in particular, countries such as Russia and China would need assurance that in a non-nuclear world, the relative U.S. military power would not increase. They are also on the mark when they explain that nuclear abolition

will be unrealistic as long as some critical issues such as Taiwan, Kashmir, and Palestine remain unresolved. As is well recognized, the American debate about the future of security guarantees needs to involve countries currently protected by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. And one can only applaud the paper's contention that given the regional and perhaps global costs of any large-scale conventional war, it would not be in the interest of non-nuclear-weapon states for any countries that have given up their nuclear weapons to feel less secure.

Likewise, the paper deals upfront with the challenges of getting rid of the last nuclear weapons: Before doing so, it argues, "states would want to feel confident that the risk of even a 'small' break-out was lower than the risk of keeping a small number of nuclear weapons and suffering a failure of nuclear deterrence."

*Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* is forward-looking in many respects, particularly in tackling the verification challenges (and noting correctly, for instance, that a verifiable nuclear-weapon-free world may imply banning nuclear-powered vessels), or those related to the difficulties of enforcement. On this point, it remains realistic: "it would probably not be possible for a consensus to be reached on establishing robust automatic-enforcement measures against non-compliant actors." The authors avoid easy (and unrealistic) fixes such as a decision to transfer the last nuclear weapons to an international authority. And they realize that, whatever legally binding elimination regime would be devised, it might be impossible to avoid allowing for some form of withdrawal clause.

Many proposals made by the authors make good sense and are hard to object to, even by skeptics of nuclear disarmament (a group that includes this commentator). Among them: creating an intergovernmental group to discuss the conditions of nuclear disarmament; setting up an expert working group on transparency; or making proliferation to non-state actors an international crime.

### **Is Nonproliferation Linked to Disarmament?**

There are, of course, some weaker points.

While the paper states clearly that it does not focus on whether nuclear disarmament should be achieved, it does offer arguments on why it should, and those arguments are not always convincing. It states that "a nuclear order cannot be maintained and strengthened over time on the basis of inequity." But leaving aside the existence of other "unequal" situations (in many key international institutions), a case could be made that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) offers equity of rights and obligations.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the question of the meaning of Article VI of the NPT is not treated in an entirely satisfactory way. The paper argues against “double standards,” but forgetting the “general and complete disarmament” part of Article VI could also be viewed as a case of a double standard. The paper states correctly that “states would not have agreed to extend the treaty indefinitely ...if the nuclear-weapons states had tried to claim that they were not obliged to pursue nuclear disarmament.” This is surely true, but it is largely a straw man. The nuclear-weapon states do not challenge the existence of an obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament. Their arguments generally revolve around the following points: The disarmament obligation contained in Article VI does not contain any deadline; Article VI also contains a conventional disarmament obligation that is hardly met by non-nuclear-weapon states; nuclear-weapon states do comply with the nuclear provisions of Article VI (by having put an end to the arms race, for instance); and because the main object of the treaty is nonproliferation, any alleged “noncompliance” with Article VI cannot be put on a par with real, incontrovertible violations of the treaty by some non-nuclear-weapon states.

### **Security, Influence, and Nuclear Weapons**

Another straw man is created when the authors seek to demonstrate that the benefits of nuclear weapons possession are overstated. They claim that those possessing such weapons assume that they “would never fail to deter major conventional war.” Those making such a broad claim (the key word being “never”) would be fools, but who are they? Nuclear-armed states assume that maintaining nuclear deterrence is a safer means to ensure the absence of major conventional war than taking the risk to disarm.

On the contrary, the benefits of *not* living with the threat of nuclear destruction may be overstated: Countries as diverse as Germany, Japan, Bosnia, and Rwanda have experienced extreme levels of destruction by non-nuclear means. (To be sure, this part could lead to further discussion: for instance, some recent technical studies have shown that even a relatively small-scale nuclear exchange might have global effects.)

The paper focuses on the security rationales for building and maintaining nuclear weapons. It does not give enough treatment to the political rationales—among them influence and prestige—and to the ways and means to “compensate” for these perceived benefits. One of the reasons India went nuclear is that it sought a shortcut to great-power status. Therefore, to devalue the nuclear-weapon route for other regional powers, serious reform of the United Nations Security Council may be needed as a prerequisite to nuclear disarmament.

The analysis becomes very idealistic when it suggests that “reassurance” would be a key for non-Western countries to forgo the great equalizer that nuclear weapons provide them. The means through which such reassurance could be given raise eyebrows: Washington would commit itself to “abide by international law as understood by other major powers in determining whether, when and how to use military force.” This raises serious questions. First, such reassurance would surely not be enough: Why should non-Western countries believe the United States? Second, even the use of U.S. military power in full compliance with the UN Charter may be a problem for such states. Third, the interpretation of “international law” by countries such as China and Russia is often incompatible with the most common Western (including non-U.S.) interpretations. The authors do not make their case any stronger when they add that the United States would have to “eschew unilateral or small-coalition military intervention” for other purposes. (When would a coalition be big enough? The support of a large majority of key states in a given region could be enough to legitimize intervention, but there is no reason to believe that it would be an acceptable criterion for Beijing, Moscow, or other states.) It is slightly counterbalanced by the recognition that the real key here would be the establishment of truly cooperative relations among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing—a daunting task, to be sure, but at least the logical consistency of the argument is made stronger once that point is made. (After all, who would have thought 70 years ago that relations among Britain, France, Germany, and Italy would become so cooperative that the mere idea of war among them is now outside the realm of the conceivable?)

The same degree of idealism seems to be at work when the authors call for “greater sensitivity to Russian concerns” on such issues as missile defense or NATO enlargement. On missile defense, this assumes a degree of sincerity in Russian rhetoric that many in the West doubt truly exists. As for NATO enlargement, some in Europe and the United States question the wisdom of acceding to the demands of a country whose leader regards the breakup of the Soviet Union as the biggest tragedy of the twentieth century; rather than bringing more stability, such a move could just as likely bring more instability.

### **Some Open Questions**

Several areas warrant further work or at least a dialogue involving experts of various origins, personal preferences, and sensitivities.

First, what is the strength of the causal link between disarmament and nonproliferation? The introduction says it quite clearly: A primary

motivation for renewed interest in abolition is the “belief” that it will be impossible to curtail proliferation without serious progress toward disarmament. There are two problems with this well-known argument. The first appears in the text itself: It is a “belief” as much as it is a fact, and perhaps more so, in the sense that nuclear reductions by four of the five NPT-recognized nuclear powers in the past 20 years have not seriously affected either nuclear proliferation dynamics or the nonproliferation debate. The second problem is that there is little evidence that leaders of states advocating nuclear disarmament consider it a top political priority. When they have a face-to-face meeting with the head of a state or government that has nuclear weapons, how often do they mention disarmament? The answer probably is almost never. In some cases, notably in the foreign ministries of some non-aligned countries, nuclear disarmament advocacy seems almost like a *raison d’être* of some bureaucratic constituencies.

Second, are there “key disarmament steps” that, if taken by nuclear-weapon states, would create a consensus for strengthening the nonproliferation regime? Taking the rhetoric of non-nuclear-weapon states at face value, the nuclear-weapon states would need to do more in terms of disarmament to gain support for strengthening nonproliferation norms. However, government officials of nuclear-weapon states become skeptical of that argument, having made important gestures in the past 20 years. Yet they are always being asked to do “a little more” for proof of their goodwill before non-nuclear-weapon states agree to further reinforcement of the nonproliferation regime. (For instance, the fulfillment by the nuclear-weapon states of a large part of the agenda contained in Decision 2 of the 1995 NPT Conference, “Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament,” has hardly been recognized.) In other words, how can the “virtuous circle” that the authors call for be initiated? And how can the “perceptions gap” be bridged between, on the one hand, those in the nuclear-weapon states who honestly believe that they are fulfilling their disarmament obligations and, on the other hand, those in the non-nuclear-weapon states who equally and honestly feel betrayed?<sup>2</sup>

A third area for further work is the question of the links between nuclear status and the quest for permanent membership in the UN Security Council and, more generally, the causal relationships between the reform of international governance and the path toward a nuclear-free world.

Finally, the role of ballistic missiles and defenses in a nuclear-free world might deserve a broader and deeper discussion. Specifically, the potential stabilizing or destabilizing role of such non-nuclear offensive and

defensive strategic systems in a nuclear-free world merits consideration. Even before that discussion can take place, though, deciding when to tackle the question—after the elimination of nuclear weapons, before that, or simultaneously—would need to be settled.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, there is arguably a balance of obligations between Articles I and II, or even within Article VI.
- <sup>2</sup> Some may argue that few of the “13 Steps” included in the final document of the 2000 NPT Conference have been fulfilled. However, the 1995 “Principles and Objectives” may be a more appropriate

point of reference: They were a key part of the bargain that led to the decision to extend the treaty indefinitely, and they were called a “program of action,” which clearly committed the parties (whereas the 13 Steps were more of a catalog of principles to be observed than a politically binding action agenda).