

The Taming of the Great Nuclear Powers

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This Policy Outlook by an eminent Dutch scholar argues that nuclear weapons have unintended beneficial consequences. They can make the intended development of a more peaceful global and political order possible. The Carnegie Nonproliferation Program presents this paper in hopes of furthering international dialogue and debate on the nuclear order, including the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Summary

- Nuclear weapons have unintended beneficial consequences. They compelled the major powers to avoid war among themselves, even as they conducted an arms race and competition in the Third World.
- Over time, the restraint imposed by nuclear weapons leads to security cooperation “within rivalry.”
- Nuclear weapons do not enable their possessors to gain positive political results, for example, through blackmail or territorial aggrandizement.
- In this sense, nuclear weapons help produce stability and order.
- The positive effects of nuclear weapons can and should be achieved at drastically lower numbers than the United States and Russia currently possess.
- The nonproliferation regime should be improved in order to prevent destabilizing rapid proliferation, and nondiscriminatory measures should be part of this improvement.

The Context: States and Struggles for Hegemony

States developed first in Europe as the outcome of drawn-out struggles for hegemony between different power centers, with one state eventually winning.¹ The hegemonic position of each state then enabled it to establish a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence in the territory it ruled. After elimination struggles in other territories, this monopoly became the most important characteristic of individual states.² It made pacification of their territories possible. By eliminating robbers on land and pirates at sea, dynastic states also made transport and trade safe, paving the way for industrialization.

The state's monopoly on violence has its seamy side—making oppressive regimes and even state terror possible. However, the monopoly on violence was also a precondition for the rise of democratic politics—power balances within states became more stable with the decline of the aristocracy and the rise, first of the bourgeoisie, and then later of the organized working class. States became the dominant form of organization in the world after decolonization, helped by the spread of the idea of the nation, which was in practice synonymous with a (state's) people. The development of states went hand-in-hand with a change that occurred within individual citizens. Citizens had been initially forced by state authorities to behave in a less violent and more restrained manner than before; they gradually internalized the implied norms and sustained them by their own conscience.³ This internalization explains the often deplored contradiction between the norms ruling conduct within states and the norms for conduct between states, especially in war.

While states' monopolies on violence developed (primarily by elimination struggles between different independent units), elimination struggles continued at the level of inter-state relations. These reduced the number of independent powers⁴ and also led to the fall of a number of once-great powers such as Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Holland, as well as the Ottoman Empire. War made states and states made war, as Charles Tilly has concluded.⁵

Enter Nuclear Weapons⁶

The American atomic monopoly made it imperative for the Soviet Union to follow suit,⁷ and it entered the race in 1949. Great Britain, France, and China followed. These five states also became the five nuclear powers recognized by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Newer nuclear states (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) were regarded as outsiders. The first three did not sign the NPT; North Korea did sign, but later withdrew from the treaty.

Today the main international concern is no longer the relationship between the great nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, and China) but nuclear

proliferation, particularly focused on Iran. Why does the relationship among the great powers no longer produce the great fear of earlier decades, especially during the Cold War? This requires an explanation. Nuclear “arsenals of folly”⁸ have hardly diminished. It is widely believed that nuclear weapons can be unleashed by so-called hair-trigger alerts and by the decision of single political leaders of the great powers. Parts of the Russian and American arsenals can indeed be launched within minutes, but they are well protected against accidental or unauthorized use. The instruments of nuclear war have not disappeared, but the perceptions of nuclear danger and threat, both of the public and of the political leaders of the great powers, have lessened considerably. Popular anti-nuclear movements have practically disappeared. Their demand for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons has now been taken over by (former) political leaders and established scholars.⁹ Why has this happened?

For the answer we have to trace the main lines of development of the nuclear age. The atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified by military considerations, as ending the war with Japan would otherwise have demanded the lives of too many American soldiers. The resulting scale of destruction made a lasting impression on President Truman. He once said in an interview: “You have got to understand that this isn’t a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women, children and unarmed people, and not for military use. So we have to treat this differently from rifles and cannons.” During the Berlin crisis of 1949 he added: “I have to think about the effect of such a thing on international relations. This is no time to be juggling an atom bomb around.”¹⁰ Truman’s response to the Berlin crisis was restrained but firm. As military action in Berlin itself was impossible, he had sent sixty B29 bombers, publicly announced to be atomic capable (but without carrying warheads), to England. Stalin backed down and the blockade of Berlin was lifted. Though at the time the United States still possessed a nuclear monopoly, Truman considered the use of an atomic bomb too dangerous, too ineffective, and immoral. Sending the bombers to England had been a veiled threat. Berlin remained an enclave in the DDR.

Bernard Brodie already in 1945 characterized the atomic bomb as an *absolute* weapon.¹¹ Contrary to the *relative* weapons of the past, nuclear superiority had become irrelevant once the two great powers possessed survivable retaliatory capabilities, able to destroy at any time what to the other would be unacceptable. This meant mutual vulnerability, because a nuclear first strike would be suicidal, unless of course it could fully disarm the opponent. Brodie already in 1946 expressed the character of what then would become the nuclear revolution¹²:

The first and most vital step in any American security program for the age of atomic bombs is to take measures to guarantee to ourselves in case of attack the possibility of retaliation in kind... Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishments has been to win wars. From now on it must be to avert them.

The “military establishments,” however, supported by a majority of civilian strategists, did not accept the absolute character of nuclear weapons.¹³ They considered two aspects of Brodie’s analysis of “the utility in non-use of nuclear weapons” questionable, i.e., how to define invulnerability and unacceptable damage. How much would be enough? The answer was an approximation that depended on whether nuclear weapons were viewed from Brodie’s perspective or as “just another weapon,” of which one could not have enough.¹⁴

This prolonged debate on the role of nuclear weapons gradually led to a split between actual political conduct and arms acquisition policies, the latter being justified by strategies for “winning” a nuclear war. Before the Cuban missile crisis, even the increasingly dangerous idea of limited nuclear war was discussed as if America were still invulnerable. It was dropped following the crisis, though it returned in the seventies in the equally dangerous form of “limited nuclear options,” though these were not really taken seriously.

The Cold War

During the Cold War, uncertainty about the opponent’s intentions regularly led to scare scenarios about nuclear war. At the end of the Korean war, the otherwise careful President Eisenhower made a veiled nuclear threat directed at both North Korea and China. Some praised it as “brinkmanship,” implying that the United States could still safely hint at the possibility of nuclear war if it could convince an opponent of its own greater stake and commitment. Revolts in Soviet Eastern Europe, however, were never supported in that way by the West. After Stalin’s death, a brief period of détente, called the Spirit of Geneva, developed. It came to nothing. Distrust prevailed. Though the struggle for hegemony continued, after 1945 nuclear weapons were never used and a full scale Soviet-American alert did not occur.

Still, from 1947 to 1962 one can speak of a Cold War with intense political-ideological and military competition. Nuclear tests (the H bomb) raised public fear. The Soviet Union was catching up. Its growing nuclear arsenal led in the United States to perceive a bomber gap and, after Sputnik, a missile gap. In relative terms in 1962 the United States was still superior both in conventional and nuclear hardware. As President Kennedy publicly asserted after his election, there was no missile gap. But in absolute terms, the Soviet Union had also around 1960 acquired a retaliatory capability. A nuclear war would already then have meant terrible, mutually unacceptable destruction for both countries. The nuclear danger thus made relative superiority less important, if

not irrelevant. The supreme task for both sets of political leaders gradually became not “how to get the upper hand” but “how to avoid escalation to nuclear war, while finding a compromise acceptable to both.”¹⁵

The Cuban Missile Crisis

The importance of the task was demonstrated by the course of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The crisis originated from the Soviet Union’s concern about its position relative to the United States. In secret, Khrushchev sent intermediate range missiles capable of reaching the United States to Cuba. It is not likely that the missiles were intended to increase the nuclear capability of the Soviet Union, as was widely believed in the West. Kennedy and his advisers knew that the Soviet Union already had a sufficient retaliatory capability to deter the United States. The heart of the matter was the Soviet claim to an equal political position with the United States. The Soviets believed that they should, for example, be allowed to have overseas bases just as the United States. The reach of the Soviet missiles in Cuba was similar to that of the American missiles in Turkey. There was also a more concrete reason: protection of communist Cuba against an American invasion, such as the one that had occurred earlier in the Bay of Pigs.

Kennedy could not accept the missiles as a *fait accompli*. It made him angry that they were discovered by an American reconnaissance plane, while Soviet representatives had lied about their deployment. The missiles had to be removed. At first the issue was how to make the Soviet Union back down, as it would have been in pre-nuclear times. Kennedy waited a week before announcing that he knew of the missiles and what he would do about them. He installed a small Executive Committee (Ex-Comm) of the National Security Council consisting of his closest advisers. The Ex-Comm discussed the possibilities of air attack or of armed invasion of Cuba. Kennedy chose the least dangerous alternative, a naval quarantine of Cuba. This offered a way out to the Soviet Union instead of engaging it in a military confrontation that could escalate. The quarantine worked: the Soviet ships carrying arms turned back. But the missiles remained. Secret negotiations began and Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged letters. In one of these Khrushchev wrote, clearly showing he was aware of the danger of unintended escalation:

... the more the two of us pull the knot of war, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment may come ... (when) it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what it would mean is not for me to explain....
Consequently, if there is no intention ... to doom the world to the catastrophe of thermonuclear war, then let us not only relax pulling on the knot, but also take measures to untie it. We are ready for it.¹⁶

The situation called for compromise. The nuclear danger prevailed over the relative issue. The Soviet Union had to give up the fruits of adventure. But in return for the removal of the missiles, it received the promise that the United States would not invade Cuba again, which has been respected ever since.

Also, Kennedy secretly agreed to remove the already obsolete American missiles installed in Turkey. At the time it was supposed in the West that the compromise was the result of American superiority, both nuclear and conventional. The United States had forced the Soviet Union to remove the missiles from Cuba. This interpretation seemed to be confirmed by reactions in the Soviet Union. The Russian diplomat Kuznetsov famously told McCloy, his counterpart in the negotiations: “You will never do this to us again.”¹⁷ The forced restraint of both great powers was viewed as a defeat for the Soviet Union. As this was also the conclusion of its military and political leaders, Khrushchev was replaced and the Soviet nuclear arsenal was rapidly built up, to which the United States responded. Relative considerations again took over, though not in the actual conduct of the rivals.

MAD and the Transformation of the Struggle for Hegemony

The Cuban missile crisis reinforced the separation between the actual conduct of the great powers vis-à-vis one another and their continuing preoccupation with relative power resources. Restraint forced by the nuclear danger determined actual conduct. Considerations of relative power and position, however, continued to fuel the arms race and outlandish strategic scenarios, such as the “window of vulnerability.”¹⁸ Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense McNamara had already understood the inadequacy of all successive attempts to develop a war planning nuclear strategy.¹⁹ He then opted for the criterion of “assured destruction” as a capability to destroy a very high percentage of Soviet industry and population was considered necessary to deter the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union acquired a similar capability, assured destruction became mutual (MAD). Though this was a description of reality, it was criticized from the war planning perspective for not being a strategy, which it was not. It was an inescapable fact. As such, MAD became the bedrock of the transformation of the struggle for hegemony. The arms race and the advocacy of “winning” strategies therefore had to evolve into a form of shadow boxing.

MAD also changed the meaning of deterrence. Before, the great powers were supposed to deter each other from attack. “Mutual deterrence” has since become the standard description of the nuclear relationship between the great powers. But is that description adequate?

After 1962 the great powers were held back from risky conduct by the shared danger of nuclear war and the impossibility of controlling escalation. This implies that deterrence can no longer be seen as one sided. It is a shared condition, a shared imperative. The joint nuclear danger forces great powers to restrain themselves and prevent crises that could escalate. “Shared deterrence” means that the rivals were no longer deterred from aggression by each other’s nuclear second strike capability but by the shared or common danger of nuclear war. Competitive risk-taking was no longer possible,

because even the slightest risk might provoke a response up the escalation ladder, with the potential outcome being mutual destruction.

The question then becomes how to assure the security of allies. In this respect the demarcation and recognition of vital interests of the great powers is crucial. The security of allies is a vital interest to the great powers (clearly recognized in Europe until 1989). An ally does not have to be bound by treaty, as, for example, Thailand to the United States. A vital interest can even be claimed *ad hoc*, as the United States and the Soviet Union did in Vietnam. If the United States had invaded North Vietnam, it would have risked a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, which could have escalated. The United States recognized the Soviet Union's vital interest in the security of North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union recognized the United States' vital interest in South Vietnam by not sending its own troops in support of North Vietnamese troops. In this way a balance, through recognition of each other's vital interests, made for mutual restraint. In other words, shared deterrence and forced restraint were extended even beyond allies. That the achievement of such a balance is a risky matter was demonstrated by the Soviet Union's claim to a vital interest in Cuba and the resulting crisis in the relations between the great powers. It failed, though the compromise solution to the crisis—the balance of vital interests underlying mutual restraint—did contain an American promise not to invade Cuba. The stalemated conflict over the status of Taiwan is another example of restraint produced by a balance of vital interests.

Forced restraint through shared deterrence has, therefore, replaced the former meaning of deterrence between great powers. This has an important consequence for the concept and idea of extended deterrence—an opponent will be restrained by the threat of a nuclear response in case of attack of an ally. The latter implies that the opponent is restrained by the probability of a nuclear *response*. But forced restraint prevents any *initiative* to endanger the security of allies of another great power. Extended deterrence has become an obsolete idea that produces politically divisive questions, for example: “Will the United States, when the chips are down, really use nuclear weapons to defend its allies?” This question led to the debate about “coupling” (the deployment of intermediate nuclear missiles in Western Europe), which divided NATO in the 1980s. The idea of the need for extended deterrence in the future could become an obstacle to reducing the nuclear arsenals of the great powers.

Lessons: Crisis Avoidance

During the Cuban missile crisis, unexpected events or near-events proved very important. During the crisis the danger of nuclear war was not just based on the unpredictable result of moves made by adversaries. A number of unforeseen events could also have resulted in escalation: for instance the possible interference of Soviet submarines with the quarantine (much feared by Kennedy) or an unintended consequence of DEFCON II, the highest alert

stage ever put in practice by the United States, leading to a U2 plane entering Soviet airspace and escaping before Soviet and American fighter planes could have confronted each other.²⁰

Lucky escapes. Most lucky was that a code signal “Soviet attack imminent,” sent by a spy in Moscow, was *not* passed on to superiors by American intelligence. A Russian officer and agent for the United States and Britain, Oleg Penkovski, already suspected of being a spy, was believed by Soviet intelligence to have informed the United States of the missiles in Cuba. He was immediately arrested in his home. Just before his arrest, Penkovski had managed to pick up the telephone and sent the false code signal “Soviet attack imminent” to American intelligence, but the CIA and Secret Service officials who received the signal did not pass it on to their superiors.

Unintended escalation was thus an even greater danger than intended escalation. The latter could be avoided, but whether unintended escalation could be prevented during a crisis remained uncertain. The most important lesson of the missile crisis was that any crisis should be prevented. As McGeorge Bundy, having himself been involved in the decision making, concludes his analysis: “The teaching of these great events ... was not to ‘manage’ a grave crisis, but how important it is *not to have one*. We must make it our business not to pass this way again.”²¹

The only exception was a brief and quickly defused nuclear alert ordered in 1973 by Nixon and Kissinger.²² Restraint had since become self-evident and internalized. Recently this was demonstrated anew by the conduct of both Russia and the United States over the adventurous military action by (American ally) Georgia, to which Russia replied with superior military force. Some saber-rattling by NATO and Russia followed, which in prenuclear times could well have escalated into war. In this case the crisis was quickly defused and relations between Russia and the West were restored.

It is, of course, impossible to prove beyond any doubt that a great war would have occurred if there were no nuclear weapons. In *The Long Peace*, John Lewis Gaddis provides a list of crises “that in almost any other age ... would sooner or later have produced war.”²³ However, we should also examine the recurrence of struggle for hegemony by great powers in the past. Though the idea and practice of the Balance of Power between great powers in the nineteenth century maintained peace for long periods and could even take the form of the Concert of Europe, the Balance was twice broken by shifts in power balances, first by Napoleon’s France and then by the unification of Germany, both leading to terrible and widespread wars.

Carl Kaysen has turned the argument around, submitting that if the nuclear revolution would have occurred in the eighteenth century, dynastic states ruled by absolute monarchs would have become more peaceful:

Even the most calculating of absolute monarchs ... would have to take a different view of war.... The prospect that they themselves, their families, their capitals and their hunting lodges as well as their palaces would all vaporize in the thermonuclear fire would certainly change their assessment of the relative virtues of peace and war.²⁴

In the case of the crisis over Georgia, there might have been another restraining influence, i.e., from the economic and financial interdependencies between the parties to the conflict. That influence cannot be generalized, however. In *The Great Illusion*, published to great acclaim just before the First World War, Sir Norman Angell asserted that war would no longer occur, as economic interdependencies had become so strong that war no longer profited any state. Two World Wars proved otherwise.²⁵ Sir Norman Angell's idealist perspective has become valid in the realist form of the nuclear revolution. It has become extremely difficult to imagine a scenario in which forced restraint would have disappeared.

Lessons: Security Cooperation

The great powers learned a second important lesson: the need for security cooperation, including the improvement of the protection of their own arsenals against accidental or unauthorized use. Suddenly, after years of discussion, in 1963 it became possible to agree on a limited Test Ban Treaty. The same year the Hot Line was established between Moscow and Washington to facilitate communication between the two great powers. Such a Hot Line has also been established recently between Beijing and Washington.²⁶ Despite the Vietnam War, the two great powers feared escalation of a conflict between the new nuclear powers enough that they agreed to jointly advocate the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In 1972 the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty was concluded, prohibiting the deployment and testing of anti-ballistic missiles, except for one system around each capital.²⁷ Strategic defense, however, was revived by President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (1983). It did not come to much, except for lavishly financed research and investment in the relevant technologies. SDI coincided with Gorbachev's attempt to reform the Soviet Union politically and economically, which he believed required improved relations with the United States.²⁸ It produced two other instances of security cooperation, the INF and CFE treaties. Cooperation between Gorbachev and Reagan resulted first in the liberation of Soviet Eastern Europe (1989) and then in the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself (1991). These unexpected events were not a sudden end to the Cold War. The Cold War had de facto ended already in 1962, when "cooperation within rivalry" had begun. One more instance of security cooperation should still be mentioned: the START 1 Treaty (1991), less important for reducing nuclear arsenals than for its verification procedures, which made the size and location of their nuclear weapons known to the two great powers.

A Sole Great Power?

The events of 1989 and 1991 were widely interpreted as having left the United States the only great power in the world. This was not hegemony, however, as the Clinton administration realized. The administration of President George W. Bush, on the contrary, overestimated American power and opportunity, believing that the United States enjoyed a unipolar moment to do what it wanted. David Owen has characterized the attitude of Bush and his follower Blair as “hubris.”²⁹ After the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, Bush hardly used the enormous international support he received. He preferred his own War on Terror to multilateral efforts. He alienated Russia by not taking it seriously, as illustrated by his continuation of the eastward expansion of NATO, already started under President Clinton (which made it easier for the EU to keep hesitating with the extension of EU membership, sufficient for the protection of Eastern Europe); by the agreement with Poland and the Czech Republic for deployment of BMD interceptors and radars; and by the recognition of the independence of Kosovo. He did much damage to the reputation—and power—of the United States in the world at large by the intervention and occupation of Iraq. His Manichaean perspective on the world as evidenced by the slogan “axis of evil” led to the worsening of relations with Iran.³⁰

Though this is not the place to discuss the legacy of the Bush administration, two aspects still have to be mentioned. First, the Bush administration tended to neglect, if not sabotage, security cooperation. Examples abound—from the termination of the ABM treaty to the Republican refusal to ratify the CTBT and the lack of interest in any new initiatives. Security cooperation serves to increase trust and mutual understanding between the great powers. A serious effort to reduce nuclear arsenals, beyond the Moscow Treaty, was never made.

The second aspect is the attitude of the United States under President Bush toward nuclear proliferation. The secret nuclear program of Saddam Hussein, discovered during the Gulf war, had demonstrated the insufficiency of the IAEA safeguards and the difficulty of improving this. This situation called for caution. However, despite cooperation between the United States and Iran in the fight against the Taliban, Bush insulted Iran by including it in his so-called axis of evil. Instead of proposing to start the negotiations as prescribed by Article VI of the NPT or attempting to develop new multilateral approaches to the global nuclear order, Bush chose counterproliferation of specific “rogue” states. States rightly or wrongly suspected of acquiring nuclear weapons were to be forced by all available means to stop their program. The military intervention in Iraq was at first publicly justified as counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD: nuclear, biological, and chemical), suggesting that Saddam might possess or soon acquire nuclear weapons, though one may question whether the Bush administration really believed this.

In the case of Iran the attitude of Washington—and its European allies in the Security Council—proved counterproductive. It has made Iran’s uranium enrichment program a symbol of national pride. Iran has always denied that it aims at producing nuclear weapons. But America based its policy on the suspicion that Iran was lying. Even if so, it remains an open question how dangerous such slow proliferation would be, in view of the de facto acceptance of Israel, India, and Pakistan as new nuclear powers.

This distinction between slow (or one by one) and quick (or “cascading” proliferation), as introduced by Kenneth Waltz, remains crucial.³¹ There is no sign of the often invoked proliferation cascade in the Middle East. The nuclear arsenal of Israel might have led Arab states to such developments, but for more than forty years did not. The danger of a nuclear-armed Iran has been much exaggerated, as if it would practically mean the end of the world.³² Actually, the main, and very important, result of the NPT regime and the IAEA inspections might be that they slowed down nuclear proliferation.

Conclusions

The Unintended Nuclear Order

The role of nuclear weapons in international politics has turned out to be quite different from what was expected in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two opposing views developed. The first saw nuclear weapons as a “winning weapon,” cheaper and more effective than “conventional” weapons. The second view stressed the unprecedented destructive effects of nuclear weapons, seen as even more dangerous after the nuclear arsenals of the rivals could together destroy the world as a whole.

The first view was comforting when the United States still possessed a monopoly, though Bernard Brodie foresaw already in 1945 that this could not last and called for an invulnerable second strike capability. When the Soviet Union indeed began to catch up, comfort turned sour and changed into fear. The second view led to the emergence of “Ban the Bomb” and other anti-nuclear movements, which in the 1980s became especially popular in Europe, leading to mass demonstrations.

Neither view could be sustained. Both overestimated the possibility that nuclear weapons would be used. But the actual conduct of the great powers contradicted assertions about “gaps,” “falling behind,” and “present dangers.” Such worst-case scenarios petered out after 1989.

The great powers had begun to accept that a nuclear war could not be “won.” The shared danger of nuclear war forced them to restrain themselves and avoid any crisis in their relations. That both sides kept pursuing relative gain in the arms race and in rivalries in different regions of the world hardly influenced their actual conduct toward one another.

President Bush, despite his militant rhetoric and policies toward what he saw as rogue states, did respect the need for restraint in great power relations, not just toward Russia but also toward China. Though China is often seen as potential challenger of the global leadership of the United States, interdependence became the leading principle of American–Chinese relations. The status of Taiwan, which in the past might have led to war, has up to now been handled with great care by all parties concerned. Relations between Russia and China, though lukewarm, are also characterized by cooperation in rivalry. A tripolar nuclear order based on forced restraint and security cooperation has begun to develop.

This embryonic order can be compared to the emergence of the state's monopoly on violence. However, the analogy has only limited meaning. The monopoly on violence first developed after a violent struggle eliminated all but one of the fighting units. To reach such an outcome at the global level is impossible because it would require a nuclear war. That would leave no victor, only losers in most of the world. A global monopoly on violence can thus only develop out of sustained cooperation between the major powers of the world.

The present nuclear order implies unevenness of status and power between the nuclear powers recognized as such in the NPT and the great majority (183) of non-nuclear signatories of the NPT. The only argument for preserving—and improving—the present unintended nuclear world order is its pacifying function. This is indeed an exceptionally strong argument. That non-nuclear states have difficulty in accepting the privileged positions of the five nuclear powers in the NPT is understandable. But the pacifying function of the nuclear order can be fulfilled with considerably reduced nuclear arsenals. Unevenness also results from other power resources: military, economic, technological, cultural, and, not to forget, leadership roles in alliances and other networks of international relations. In the latter the United States remains superior.

It should also be realized that to possess nuclear weapons cannot obtain positive political results, either to threaten or to blackmail non-nuclear states. Nuclear weapons did not help the United States in Iraq or the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan.

Nuclear weapons should not be seen as purely destructive and dangerous for humanity as a whole. Their unintended benefits should also be explicitly recognized. A more even relationship between the states of the world requires not so much the abolition of nuclear weapons as the reform of the Security Council. If finally successful, this endlessly discussed reform may put the UN as a whole on a different footing.

Beyond the Great Powers: Nuclear Proliferation

The position of the United States vis-à-vis Russia as the main successor of the Soviet Union after 1991 was strong. The United States was assumed to have

“won” the Cold War, though as an actual struggle for hegemony that had been transformed into cooperation within rivalry. Russia still had a large nuclear arsenal and had repossessed all small (tactical) nuclear weapons from the other parts of the former Soviet Union. The volume of the Russian arsenal worried the United States less than its safety and the possibility that nuclear weapons or materials from Russia would be sold abroad. That danger has not materialized, but it has contributed to increasing concerns about nuclear proliferation, which more and more are being seen as the most serious threat to international peace.³³

In the past it was regularly predicted that the number of nuclear states would grow rapidly. In 1960 President Kennedy warned that by the end of his first term in 1964 up to 20 new nuclear states might have emerged. According to a recent Pentagon estimate, over 60 countries now have the technical capacity to produce nuclear weapons. But compared to these predictions, nuclear proliferation has been slow—and took place for different, mainly regional reasons. The nuclear program of Israel was probably seen as a last resort defense against Arab states (but Israel has always been silent about its existence and nature); India used the Chinese bomb as justification for its nuclear effort and Pakistan used India’s bomb. With regard to North Korea, the arsenal it claims to possess probably serves as the only power resource left with which to extract concessions, especially from the United States. It plays hard-to-get, and from time to time uses threats so as not to be forgotten.

After the Cuban missile crisis the Soviet Union and the United States began to fear that they might be drawn into an escalating conflict between the new nuclear powers. In 1968 they submitted an identical text to all members of the UN for their signature.³⁴ In 1970 the NPT had been ratified by a vast majority of UN member states. It was based on the deal by which non-nuclear-weapon states renounced receiving or producing nuclear weapons in exchange for technological aid and materials for developing nuclear energy. Article IV preserved their “unalienable right” to engage in their own research, production, and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The deal proved acceptable enough, though some non-nuclear states at first had objected to the nuclear oligopoly inherent in the treaty. At the last moment the two great powers inserted VI in the treaty to make it more acceptable to all non-nuclear states. It obliged the five nuclear states recognized by the treaty to negotiate in good faith about disarmament, but did not further specify obligations nor when negotiations had to start (at an early date).

Several measures to improve the NPT—after its failure to prevent Saddam Hussein’s secret program—have been suggested. The Additional Protocol is an important one, but has not been made mandatory and still has not been ratified by key countries from a nonproliferation perspective.³⁵ Was it the NPT that made a number of states give up their nuclear weapons or programs (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, South Africa and Brazil, Argentina, and Libya)? It is difficult to say.

Up to now the question of how to have the new nuclear states participate in the NPT regime has remained insoluble. The agreement President Bush concluded with India is not the answer, as it undermines rather than strengthens the NPT. If new nuclear states would be recognized under the NPT regime, would non-nuclear states then not think of using the development of nuclear weapons as a means to join the privileged nuclear club? Perhaps the discriminating character of the NPT, as emphasized by India, can be remedied the other way around, by including the new nuclear-weapon states in negotiations on nuclear disarmament in line with Article VI of the NPT, though whether that will be acceptable to Israel or North Korea is doubtful. The NPT itself, however, cannot be replaced by a nondiscriminatory equivalent without undermining the foundations of the global nuclear order. But it can be improved by a number of additional agreements, such as the Additional Protocol or an agreement to stop production of fissionable materials for weapons purposes. These can be based on equality between the participating states.

Recently, a new fear has developed. The NPT only deals with the rights and duties of states. What if transnational political groups of terrorists (al-Qaeda) were to acquire nuclear weapons?³⁶ Though international cooperation in intelligence and prevention cannot be neglected, the fear of nuclear terrorism is exaggerated. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that any state, including North Korea, will sell a complete nuclear weapon or even crucial parts, to such groups. Such a transaction could not stay secret, so the culprit would immediately become the object of retaliation, and even more so if the weapon in question were to be used. Secondly, it is highly unlikely that such transnational groups can and will produce nuclear weapons themselves. Such production requires a fairly large and therefore vulnerable organization, and these groups thrive in small, relatively autonomous “cells.”

In helping to slow down and to some extent prevent nuclear proliferation, the NPT did lessen the degree of international anarchy. Supplementing it with a number of nondiscriminatory agreements, the NPT can continue to provide a crucial contribution to strengthening the nuclear world order as a whole.

Policy Implications

Improving the Global Nuclear Order

1. Thinking about the role of nuclear weapons should be less concerned with relative position, strategy, and power resources, and more with the global nuclear order.³⁷ The consequences of shared deterrence and forced restraint should be made explicit in the relations between the three pairs of the tripolar great power relationship. Shared deterrence is not the same as minimal deterrence, though it does provide a rationale for deep reductions of nuclear weapons. Possibilities for extending security cooperation between all three great powers should

be more actively explored. The expiration of START 1 (which in the meantime should be extended) offers a possibility to do this. The nuclear relationship between China and the United States should be put on the same footing as that between Russia and the United States.³⁸

The further development of a nuclear world order requires the gradual removal of defensive postures. The rationale for the ABM Treaty still holds. Though SDI was replaced by the more limited BMD, it is still perceived as a long-term threat to Russia's second strike capacity and as a more immediate threat to China's. To declare that it is only directed at missile attacks from Iran or other new nuclear states to Europe or the United States—and perhaps extended to other states—lacks credibility, because small nuclear powers can easily be deterred from using nuclear weapons. Israel has the capacity to completely destroy Iran and thus prevent any nuclear initiative it could work to achieve. Though even after 35 years of large investments, BMD does not work yet—and cannot be tested so as to guarantee that it will work—creating uncertainty and suspicion. If defensive postures will be continued they could frustrate the improvement of the nuclear order.

2. Arms control as part of security cooperation should be revived. Article VI of the NPT should be taken up to negotiate in good faith about “the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and . . . nuclear disarmament.” Large reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the great powers would surely qualify as such. This would help to increase the trust of non-nuclear powers in the NPT and measures to extend it. At the same time it would help to clarify and make acceptable the benefits of forced restraint as based on the nuclear oligopoly of the recognized nuclear powers. Article VI negotiations should be supplemented by negotiations with the non-recognized nuclear powers.

To serve their purpose, reductions of the arsenals of the great powers likely need to go further than the often-mentioned number of one thousand. Though difficult to determine precisely, the volume of the combined arsenals of the great powers should continue to support shared deterrence, while remaining as much as possible below the capacity to destroy the world. The goal of *zero* is undesirable because it would abolish the positive function of nuclear weapons and, in the long term, might lead again to unrestrained rivalry and war between the great powers. Both history and the realist theory of international relations lead to this conclusion.

3. The further development of a nuclear world order creates new possibilities for multilateral cooperation in other fields, especially the growing common transnational problems of humanity such as climate change, economic and financial structure, environmental degradation, epidemics, the failure of the war on drugs, etc.

Improving the Nonproliferation Regime

1. If the nuclear order, including the NPT regime, fell apart, it would give a strong impetus to furthering nuclear proliferation. The development of nuclear technology and trade networks, illicit or not, already makes complete prevention of proliferation impossible at present. International political arrangements are required and can be improved upon. That alone makes the NPT invaluable. It should be strengthened so as to improve the balance between the costs and benefits of going nuclear. The time may now be propitious for new initiatives.
2. Iran still requires special attention.³⁹ Although President Obama's rhetoric is drastically different from that of the Bush administration, the problem is still far from solved. Obama made a laudable beginning by taking the military option off the table. He showed respect for the Iranian people and the leadership of the Islamic republic of Iran, which he said should take "its rightful place in the community of nations." But he also stressed that this "cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions..." That affirmation of the American attitude led Ayatollah Khamenei to initially rebuff Obama's conciliatory message. He did not yet see "real changes" in American policy.

Obama and Khamenei both remain tied to the past in terms of their countries' relations. They also have to take into account the broader audience of their messages. Neither leader can completely distance himself from his own public and the rhetoric it has been accustomed to. For Obama in particular, the special relationship of the United States with Israel remains important.

Iran's nuclear program remains the most contentious and difficult issue. It seems possible, however, to extricate Iran and the United States from the conflict about Iran's nuclear enrichment program and the dispute about the possibility that it could lead to the development of a nuclear weapon. Constructive diplomacy must be informed by a realistic analysis of the consequences of that possibility. One should ask what Iran could do with a small and vulnerable nuclear arsenal that it cannot already do, such as providing arms to Hizbollah and Hamas. Why assume that it might attack Europe or Israel (and later America) with nuclear missiles? The answer to the eventuality of a threat from Iran is not BMD, but deterrence. That the Iranian leadership would be willing to commit national suicide is a fantasy.

How negotiations with Iran will proceed, now that it seems no longer a precondition that Iran first stop its uranium enrichment program, is difficult to foresee. Part of a quid pro quo would in any case involve the lifting of sanctions against Iran; the control of its nuclear program by the IAEA; guarantees against a military removal of Iran's nuclear installations; the

reigning in and control of Iran's support of Hizbollah and Hamas; and last but not least, Iran's cooperation in resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This will not be easy.

Epilogue

Though the fear of nuclear war never completely disappeared, an unintended nuclear order based on shared deterrence came about through the actual conduct of the great powers. The continuing arms race, however, blinded governmental establishments of the great powers to the wider consequences and possibilities inherent in the development of forced restraint. Only a few individual scholars such as Bernard Brodie, McGeorge Bundy, Stanley Hoffmann, Robert Jervis, Christoph Bertram, Kenneth Waltz, Lord Solly Zuckerman, and not to forget, Robert McNamara, saw the nuclear problem in perspective. To contribute to such more detached thinking has been my intention in writing this reassessment.

Notes

¹ That process has been described and explained by Norbert Elias in *The Civilising Process*, Revised Edition, Oxford and Malden, 2000.

² Max Weber (in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 5th ed. (Tubingen, 1972) famously defined “state” in this manner. The question how the monopoly on violence of states developed out of feudal relations was answered by Elias (op.cit). Most so-called “failed” states have not (yet) developed into states at all.

³ For a detailed description see Elias, note 1.

⁴ According to Charles Tilly in 1500 there were in Western Europe 500 independent political units, of which only twenty states remained in 1900.

⁵ See Chapter 3 of Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990-1990* (Oxford and Malden, 1990).

⁶ The original term used was atomic (bombs), when the H- or thermonuclear weapons arrived, based on fusion instead of fission, the generic term became nuclear weapons. I will follow that usage.

⁷ For the futile attempts to develop international control (the Baruch plan) when the competition had just started, see McGeorge Bundy’s *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988) and Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York, 1946).

⁸ The title of Richard Rhodes’ analysis, *The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York, 2007).

⁹ For a detailed proposal see George Perkovich and James M. Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, Adelphi Paper 396 (London: IISS, 2008).

¹⁰ Cited in Greg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War* (New York, 1981).

¹¹ His prophetic views were first published in Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*.

¹² Op. cit. 76.

¹³ An early example is William L. Borden, *There Will Be No Time: The Revolution in Strategy* (New York, 1946).

¹⁴ See “Absolute or Relative? Two Perspectives on the Role of Nuclear Weapons” in Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, *The Nuclear Revolution and the End of the Cold War: Forced Restraint* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1992), pp.127–133.

¹⁵ The danger of nuclear war did play some role before 1962. An equivalent to the July crisis of 1914 did not come about, though the adjective “Cold” might have been taken too much for granted.

¹⁶ Quoted in Robert Kennedy, *The Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1969). This is still one of the best descriptions of the course of the crisis, written by the President’s brother and main negotiator with the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ Quoted in Rhodes, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁸ On the justification of preoccupation with relative power by perceptions see Stephen Kull, “Nuclear Nonsense,” *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1985, pp. 28–52.

¹⁹ See van Benthem van den Bergh, op. cit. Ch. 3, *The Deadlock of Nuclear Strategy*, especially pp. 147–169.

²⁰ When McNamara heard about it he yelled, “This means war with the Soviet Union.” See Scott D. Sagan, “Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management,” *International Security*, no. 4, 1985, pp. 99–139.

²¹ Bundy, op. cit. p. 462.

²² See Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, Chapter 5 and *The Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca and London, 1984 and 1989). For the 1973 events see Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation* (Washington, 1985), p. 382. Also Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, 1994), Part 2.

²³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York and Oxford, 1987), p.230. Examples from the list are Korea, 1950; East Berlin, 1953; U2 incident 1960; Cuban Missile Crisis 1962; Czechoslovakia 1968; Yom Kippur War 1973; Afghanistan 1979; Poland 1981; Korean Airliner Incident 1983. One could add European

Theatre Nuclear Forces, 1977 into the 1980s, after which the Reagan-Gorbachev rapprochement began.

²⁴ Cf. Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay," *International Security*, vol. 14, no. 4, Spring 1990.

²⁵ On this topic see the classical analysis of E. H. Carr in his *The Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939* (London 1939).

²⁶ Security cooperation between China and the United States also extends to a regular semi-official dialogue between Chinese and American delegations about nuclear strategies.

²⁷ McNamara had already provided the justification for ABM in 1967 during a visit to Washington of Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin. See van Benthem van den Bergh, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–227

²⁸ The unexpected rapprochement between the great powers was afterwards often explained as a capitulation before the technological might of the United States, as demonstrated by SDI. But Gorbachev had motives of his own in Perestroika. Compare also the interpretation of Soviet conduct in the Cuban missile crisis.

²⁹ David Owen, *In Sickness and in Power*, especially Part III, "The Intoxication of Power," (London, 2008), pp. 253–327.

³⁰ See Glenn Greenwald, *A Tragic Legacy* (New York, 2007).

³¹ See the contributions of Waltz in the still relevant debate between Waltz and Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York/London, 1995).

³² It may be more to the point to worry about the consequences of the political disintegration of Pakistan, though its arsenal as a significant power resource of the military seems well protected.

³³ Examples from the 1990s are the debate between Waltz and Sagan, *op. cit.* and Brad Roberts, *Weapons Proliferation and World Order* (The Hague, 1996), and the contributions to Part 2 of Jorn Gjelstad and Olav Njolstad, eds., *Nuclear Rivalry and International Order* (Oslo and London, 1996).

³⁴ On the prehistory of the NPT see the contributions of William Walker, Joachim Krause, and Michael Ruhle in the issue on nuclear world order of *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 3, May 2007.

³⁵ The most ambitious was the Carnegie Endowment's *Universal Compliance, A Strategy for Nuclear Security*, (Washington, D.C., 2005).

³⁶ Cf. Graham Allison's *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York, 2004).

³⁷ William Walker's work is a good example.

³⁸ On this crucial issue see George Perkovich and Patricia Lewis, "The Vantage Point," Carnegie Endowment Non Proliferation News, March 19, 2009.

³⁹ On Iran's society and politics see Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York, 2008). For a still relevant excellent paper on dealing with Iran, see Christoph Bertram, "Rethinking Iran: from Confrontation to Cooperation," Chaillot Paper, no. 110, August 2008.

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