

Do Nuclear Weapons Still Have a Role in International Relations in the Post-Cold War Era?

Written by Katie Smith

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KATIE SMITH, DEC 22 2007

For those that lived through the Cold War, nuclear weapons are synonymous with the superpower rivalry of the USA and USSR. Although never used, they were central to the conflict. Now, in the post-Cold War environment, this rivalry has been removed and the question of the utility of nuclear weapons is being reviewed.

The role of nuclear weapons has been, and still is, to deter threats. However, the manifestation of deterrence is different in the post-Cold War environment. The dominance of the US in global affairs and the perception of it as a threat mean that increasingly states and non-state actors (many of whom were previously supported by the USSR) are seeking nuclear weapons as a means to guarantee their cultural and political survival. I will argue that for many states, nuclear weapons provide the only credible deterrent to the US's superior conventional forces. I will also look at responses to US cultural dominance and the potential for nuclear blackmail by anti-American terrorists. I will conclude that, for those who feel threatened by the USA, nuclear weapons still have a prominent role in international relations.

US Global Dominance

Nuclear weapons are seen by many as the ultimate deterrent (Mearsheimer and Waltz quoted in Howlet, 2001: 428; Davis and Gray in Baylis, Wirtz, Cohen and Gray (eds.), 2002: 57). Their strength lies in the immense, indiscriminate destruction that they wreak, and the vulnerability of the whole globe to attack. The immoral nature of such destruction means that for most states they are not a viable offensive weapon (Gray, 1999: 13). However, their deterrent or coercive capabilities are enormous; the possibility of nuclear retaliation is so devastating that nuclear states are very unlikely to be provoked. As such they act as an equaliser for the weak; instantly making them too dangerous for the strong to attack (Thakur, 2000: 34).

The protection nuclear weapons afford makes them appealing to those threatened by overwhelming force. The USSR developed nuclear weapons in response to its conflict with the US, which was significantly more powerful. The US's nuclear build up, beginning under the Eisenhower administration, was in turn a response to fears that the USSR was the more powerful; the so-called 'missile gap'. More recently, India's acquisition of nuclear weapons can be explained by the threat from its nuclear neighbour, China, whilst Pakistan's was a response to India (Thakur, 2000: 34). In the post-Cold War era, American cultural, economic and military dominance is seen as threatening by certain state and non-state actors. Nuclear weapons are seen by many as the obvious deterrent against US intrusion into state affairs (Gray, 1999: 157; Davis and Gray in Baylis et al, 2002: 269).

The breakdown of the Cold War system has left states increasingly self-reliant for their security. During the Cold War the two superpowers were vying for world influence and recognition of their state ideologies. They were willing to extend their protection and assistance around the globe in attempts to achieve this. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact embodied this policy for the West and East respectively, but it was extended much further afield through military and financial aid (Butfoy, 1999: 155). Theoretically, this gave small states a comparatively cheap and easy method of increasing security.

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The relative simplicity of the bipolar system was removed with the end of the Cold War (Davis and Gray in Baylis et al, 2002: 262) and replaced with a complex array of global and regional threats (Gray, 1999: 10) that have left vulnerable states seeking means for their own defence. The US has been left in the dominant position in the world (Dunne, 2003), resulting in a markedly different security environment. The collapse of the USSR not only removed the key adversary to the US but also a lot of foreign policy restraints that were adopted to maintain the delicate balance of power. In the post-Cold War era, the US no longer needs to be as concerned about its international image as it had in the past. Whereas, previously the US had been in competition with the USSR over allies (Thomas in Baylis and Smith, 2001: 564), now it is able disregard the alienation of entire nations and international law due to its hegemonic status (Bellamy, 2004: 1). In the absence of Soviet assistance for those that feel threatened by the USA, nuclear weapons have become very significant. As the only weapon capable of seriously challenging US military dominance or coercing the US government, it seems likely that the demand for nuclear weapons will continue.

The Use of Nuclear Weapons for Fearful and Threatened States

In its new position of hegemony the US has adjusted to a different type of adversary (Davis and Gray in Baylis et al, 2002: 262). A US government document from 1995 makes clear the administration's belief that 'rogue states' form a new type of threat to be countered (SAG Document, 1995). Rhetoric about the "Axis of Evil" (Iran, Iraq, Syria and North Korea) and the subsequent war in Iraq have increased the pressure on these states to comply with the US or to defend themselves. A statement issued by the North Korean government (shortly after the invasion of Iraq) said the war teaches the lesson that, "there should be a strong physical deterrent force to protect the sovereignty of the country" (CNN, 25/04/03). North Korea has recently developed nuclear weapons and threatened to use them if attacked (BBC, 19/06/03). For other 'rogue states', the differing US treatment of North Korea and Iraq demonstrates the defensive capabilities of nuclear weapons. This may particularly influence Iran, thought to already have some nuclear capability, towards accelerating its nuclear program (Observer, 20/02/05).

Realist philosophers have long argued that states fear other powerful actors regardless of their intentions. This helps to explain why there is also increased demand for nuclear weapons in states not directly threatened by the US. Since the revolution in military affairs, the USA's conventional strength has become so far in advance of any possible opponent that it can only be challenged by nuclear means (Manning in Schmidt, 2001: 59). In the bombing of Kosovo in 1999 the US demonstrated this strength and its willingness to act without UN Security Council approval. Russia reversed its post-Cold War decision to abolish nuclear weapons in response to this (Trenin, 106-7; Delpech 11; Freedman, 90; in Schmidt, 2001). There is also acute awareness of potential US hostility to an increasingly powerful China, and the possibility of a nuclear stand-off between the two (Davis and Gray in Baylis et al, 2002: 256). With this threat on the horizon, China is retaining and modernising its nuclear arsenal.

Both small states faced with the prospect of US 'intervention', and larger states whose interests are not necessarily aligned with the USA, have use for nuclear weapons in the post-cold war environment.

Nuclear Weapons and Terrorism

Politicians, journalists and academics are becoming increasingly aware of the prospect of nuclear terrorism. In the post-cold war environment, terrorist efforts to reverse the processes of American-led cultural homogeneity have become a serious threat (Gurr and Cole, 2000: 248).

The end of the Cold War conflict allowed capitalism, specifically Washington-led Neo-Liberalism, to become dominant in the world and marginalised alternatives (Thomas in Baylis and Smith, 2001: 564). It has also increased the reach and scale of globalisation, making it one of the most prominent features of the 1990s (Crockatt in Baylis and Smith, 2001: 108). For many, globalisation is seen as 'westernisation'; an imposition of western culture on the world, and it is primarily associated with America. Capitalism and 'Westernisation' are so prevalent in the post-Cold War environment that many people see little room for dissent and even less prospect for change. Opponents have an almost hopeless cause, and this desperation increases the chance of people resorting to terrorism to force change (Gurr and Cole, 2000: 248).

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Some have already turned to violence; the most prominent example being the September 2001 attacks by Al Qaeda. The World Trade Centre, the symbol of global capitalism within America, is a very significant target. The terrorists intended to force the US to stop supporting repressive secular regimes in the Middle East (Washington Post, 06/02/05); interpreted by some as an imposition of American secularism and an oil-driven act of capitalist greed (Klare, 2001: 23). Previously, Islamic opposition to America had been strong but largely unnoticed. These attacks were very effective in bringing attention to the issue; highlighted the propaganda uses of mass destruction (Gurr and Cole, 2000: 251).

Al Qaeda's wish to acquire nuclear weapons is seen by many as the next step in defending their culture from American influence (Observer, 21/03/04). Gurr and Cole have suggested that the use of nuclear weapons to convey a terrorist message is much more likely when faced with a very powerful opponent; seemingly the case with the USA. They show that the number of attempts by terrorists to acquire nuclear weapons have dramatically increased since the end of the Cold War and the start of American dominance (2000: 293-6).

With a credible nuclear threat, a terrorist group similar to Al Qaeda would have significant coercive power. Because of their destructive capabilities, the possession of just a few nuclear weapons could potentially force the US to comply with terrorist demands (Butfoy, 1999: 156). The fear of this scenario becoming reality is very real in the US, demonstrated by the massive investment to prevent theft of nuclear material in Russia (Washington Post, 24/02/05).

In an environment where US foreign policy continues to be invasive and dominating, and its cultural influence is greater than ever due to globalisation, terrorist groups will continue to seek a means to strike back. Nuclear weapons provide one of just a few credible options for this and therefore have a prominent role in international politics.

Increased Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

For actors seeking nuclear weapons in the post-Cold war environment availability has significantly increased (Manning in Schmidt, 2001: 54). Soviet nuclear material was spread around the former USSR and, although officially all collected in Russia during the 1990s, much is thought to have remained hidden in former Soviet states (Gurr and Cole, 2000: 58). Coupled with lax security on nuclear sites, this has made the states of the former USSR dominant in the black market for nuclear material (Gurr and Cole, 2000: 57; Caldicott, 2002: xiv).

The spread of nuclear knowledge is also thought to be more pervasive since the end of the Cold War. Again the break-up of the USSR is important, as Soviet nuclear scientists now belong to many different states. Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine are known to have nuclear knowledge which could be utilised to build weapons. This is unlikely at the moment but Cohen and Pilat warn that the situation could change if they felt threatened (1998: 138).

The case of Abdul Quadeer Khan, the Pakistani nuclear scientist who sold nuclear secrets to North Korea, Libya and possibly Iran, highlights the potential threat posed by under funded nuclear scientists (Observer, 20/02/05). Many governments, especially the US and Russia, are concerned about this in the former USSR. It is thought that the drop in living standards experienced by nuclear scientists after the end of the Cold War may be driving many to emigrate to states wishing to acquire their nuclear knowledge (Canadian American Strategic Review, 2003).

In an international system where both terrorist groups and rogue states are increasingly seeking a means to respond to US global dominance, the increased proliferation of nuclear material and knowledge is a trend which suggests that nuclear weapons will have an ever increasing role in the post-cold war environment.

Conclusion

Despite calls for disarmament in the post-Cold War era, it seems that nuclear weapons will retain their importance in international relations for the foreseeable future.

I have argued that nuclear weapons are equalisers when used for deterrence or coercion by the weak against the strong. The fall of the USSR means that the US has become an unchallenged superpower and has fewer restraints

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placed on its conduct. Its power makes it seem threatening to others as does its willingness to act outside international law. At the same time there are now many more small states with no powerful allies who are seeking new means to protect themselves. Nuclear weapons are still very important for many states as a means to ensure their security against the overwhelming military might of the USA.

Nuclear weapons are also an increasingly sought tool in the response to 'westernisation', a perceived cultural threat from the US. Nuclear blackmail is one of few options seemingly available to those determined to combat this threat.

The black market, stemming largely from former Soviet states, has made nuclear material more available since the end of the Cold War. There are also concerns about nuclear knowledge spreading from the former Soviet Union. For those wishing to acquire them, in the post-Cold War era nuclear weapons are increasingly available.

The global dominance of the US in both cultural and military terms means that nuclear weapons could be, and are, strategically beneficial to many. In the post-Cold War era they remain important in international relations.

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