

Is a World without Nuclear Weapons a Realistic Prospect?

Written by Thomas M. Dunn

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THOMAS M. DUNN, JAN 9 2013

Barack Obama was recently overheard saying to Russian president Medvedev that if he were to win a second term in office, he would have more of an ability to negotiate on arms control issues (Roth 2012). As recently as March of this year, the American president claimed that he had a 'commitment to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, and to seeking a world without them' (BBC Asia 2012). Now that he has won a second term, Obama faces a spiralling crisis in the form of Iran possibly developing nuclear weapons, and Israel's threats to go to war with Iran. If this is true, Middle Eastern media have suggested that the United States will have to decide whether to attack the Iranian nuclear sites or to give Israel a green light to wage war on Iran. Even after twenty years since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism and the Warsaw Pact, nuclear weapons are still very much on the foreign agenda.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was opened for signature in 1968, at the height of the Cold War. Its objective was to 'stop the further spread of nuclear weapons, to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy and to promote the goal of achieving complete nuclear disarmament' (UN 2012). There are currently five Nuclear Weapons States according to the terms of the Treaty; these are: the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China, in order of acquisition. Four non-signatories to the Treaty have, or are believed to have, nuclear weapons: North Korea, India and Pakistan have openly tested and claimed ownership of nuclear weapons, whilst Israel is widely believed to own them. Nonetheless, more countries have signed the treaty than any other treaty on arms limitation in the world's history, which arguably shows that the majority of the world has the same commitment as Obama to achieving nuclear disarmament. The question therefore remains, why does nuclear disarmament seem so implausible, if possible at all?

Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Parry and Sam Nunn published an editorial in the Wall Street Journal in 2007 which revolutionised thinking on nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War world and questioned previous adherence to the view that the possession of nuclear weapons made the world a safer place due to the mutually assured destruction theory (MAD), in which the use of nuclear weapons by either side was irrational because it would result in a retaliation that would annihilate both the attacker and the defender (Parrington 1997: 14). All previous adherents to the theory, they warned that the world is on the verge in of its ability to avoid nuclear devastation and that steps should be taken to prevent this. They outlined a number of 'agreed and urgent steps' that governments should take in order to create the conditions necessary for a world without nuclear arsenals, for example, 'increase warning time and thereby reduce the danger of an accidental or unauthorized use of a nuclear weapon', or 'halting the production of fissile material for weapons globally'. Even before describing those conditions, the authors called 'first and foremost' for 'intensive work with leaders of the countries in possession of nuclear weapons to turn the goal of a world without nuclear weapons into a joint enterprise' (Schultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn 2007: 15).

In fact, the international community has taken a number of steps to increase global non-proliferation and to halt international proliferation in recent years. United Nations Resolution 1540, obliged all nations to criminalise illegal trafficking of weapons of mass destruction, the Global Initiative to Combat Terrorism of 2006, announced by President Bush and Russian President Putin, refocused the two nations jointly against nuclear terrorism and the Moscow Treaty of 2002 decreased the size of Russia and America's deployable nuclear forces to only twenty percent of what they were at the height of the Cold War (Wirtz 2010: 326). These all seem to be significant steps

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towards making a world without nuclear weapons a realistic prospect. However, such progress is futile if the current nuclear powers are unable to replicate the same sense of MAD that existed between the United States and the USSR during the Cold War with an growing amount of potential nuclear states worldwide. North Korea's nuclear weapons testing and Iran's overt disregard of international opinion and sanctions when refusing to stop enriching its plutonium both provide examples that traditional methods of non-proliferation—for example such arms reduction treaties as the START treaties of the 1990s, renewed by Obama and Medvedev in 2009—are not enough in themselves to reduce the risk of increased nuclear weapons or to bring about a world without them.

Furthermore, if we were to abolish nuclear weapons completely, there could be no possible safeguard that would guarantee that they had been abolished forever. We cannot, as Michael O'Hanlon argued, 'un-invent the nuclear bomb' (2010: 23). A world after the abolition of nuclear weapons would still be rife with nuclear power plants and nuclear waste, which combined with knowledge would easily be capable of recreating nuclear weapons. MAD would be incoherent if one nuclear-armed state was able to threaten or attack a state which had abolished its nuclear weaponry. Besides, even if nuclear weapons were abolished globally, it is without doubt that we would expect any rational actor would to have hasty rearmament plans in place to avoid being caught out in the event another state were to rearm. After all, 'the first to rearm might... have an incentive to undertake a pre-emptive nuclear strike in the absence of deterrence' (Schelling 2009: 127). Ironically, this means that nuclear weapons can never truly be abolished, and might even mean that the absence of nuclear weapons in fact increases the possibility of nuclear war.

Following on from this point, however, with a recent focus on terrorism, rogue states, religious theocracy and fundamentalism in politics, the fear of such entities—which do not necessarily fall into the category of legitimate nation states that have signed the non-proliferation treaty—acquiring nuclear warheads, has risen (Krieger 1977: 46). This has led many to argue that the abolition of nuclear weapons would be a potential disaster, because it would dispossess us of the deterrent options which might someday be necessary to prevent terrorist attack. O'Hanlon posed the question, 'what if a dangerous country is highly suspected of having an active nuclear-weapons program but verification cannot resolve the question?' (2010: 3). If no other countries had the option to use deterrence, then terrorists or rogue states would find it rational to attack, as there would be no repercussion, and the outcome would be a one-sided catastrophe.

On the other hand, it could be claimed that the possession of nuclear weapons, and the potential of deterrence, is pointless in the face of a stateless enemy, as nuclear capability and deterrence are useless against an enemy that has no borders (Rosenbaum 1977: 145). Most states in the world are not capable of guarding themselves against nuclear attack, and therefore these states will not be able to prevent, or in order to guarantee survival might actually provide for, nuclear terrorism. In the disastrous event that terrorists were actually able to obtain nuclear weapons, the state-centric theory of deterrence would not be a useful defence against the covert and random destructive nature of international terrorism. The actions of terrorist groups are different from those of sovereign states. Their ideologies and interests lie in contrast to the politicians and statesmen of the current nuclear powers as they do not have economies, resources, or territory to defend, nor do they have electorates or courts to answer to (Blair and Brewer: 1977: 384). Rogue nations would have the same problem, perhaps using their newly acquired weapons for intimidation or aggression with little regard to MAD or game theory. These rogue nations legitimise their actions by charging the current nuclear powers with preaching double standards by not allowing other states to have nuclear weapons (Wirtz 2010: 325). Furthermore, if the liberal democracies were to rid themselves of nuclear weapons, and terrorist groups or rogue states subsequently were able to acquire the knowledge and materials to build them, then it is highly likely that nations would side with the new nuclear powers.

Nonetheless, one optimistic argument that could be taken from this concerns the potential for nuclear weapons to fall into the hands of non-state actors. The possibilities of what could occur if this were to happen are so great that states should be forced to heighten domestic surveillance concerning their weapons and security efforts. In order to do this, states would have to decrease their reliance on nuclear weapons in their national defence strategies, which would reduce the incentives for others to acquire them. Jenkins (2006: 39) believes that states possessing nuclear weapons 'must work to reduce the perceived power and prestige that comes with the acquisition and possession of such weapons'. Whilst states still retain their weapons, non-state actors and terrorist groups will still seek to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, and the argument against them will be futile, or perhaps even discriminatory. In this

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view, 'the nuclear arsenal of the Big Five is more of a proliferant than a deterrent' (Thakur 2000: 1).

In line with these points, the complete, or even partial, abolition of the nuclear arsenals of the United States or Russia could lead to countries which rely on them for protection developing nuclear arsenals of their own. If, for example, Turkey, Germany, Belgium, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia or Japan, to name but a few, decided to interpret a US commitment to the abolition of nuclear weapons to mean that they could no longer rely on the USA as a dependable partner in defence strategy, they might build their own nuclear weapons in order to exercise deterrence and protect themselves from the threat of nuclear terrorism or rogue states. A comment by Philip Murphy, the US Ambassador to Germany, articulated this concern in a document leaked to Wikileaks in 2009 – 'a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Germany and perhaps from Belgium and the Netherlands could make it very difficult politically for Turkey to maintain its own stockpile' (Murphy 2009). The movement for complete nuclear arms abolition could instead lead to increased nuclear proliferation, which it is trying to prevent.

There are also vested interests to be taken into account, especially in the major nuclear powers. Parties within what Dwight Eisenhower described as the military-industrial complex gain economically from the perpetuation of continuously updated nuclear weapons capabilities. Sections of the army, government and politicians have a comfortable relationship with the companies responsible for producing armaments, which includes their nuclear arsenals. Sagan (1996: 63) wrote that regardless of whether nuclear weapons serves the security or national interest of a state, 'it is likely to serve the parochial, bureaucratic or political interests of at least some individual actors within that state'. He outlined three groups which stand to benefit from the maintenance of nuclear weapons and proliferation—the nuclear energy sector, the military and politicians. For example, major defence contracts in the US have been awarded by Congress to Northrop Grumman Corporation, General Dynamics and United Technologies. These companies use their lobbyists to form close connections with Congressman, and to a lesser extent Members of Parliament, especially for incumbents (Demascio 2010). They also provide jobs for the electorate, and innovative technology which can be applied to civilian products. In return they are given the opportunity to promote the sale of military-related goods to the US and UK governments and defence ministries. Ian Sample argued that the Successor programme to the current British Trident system could be seen as an example of this (Guardian, 24 January 2007).

Therefore, due to these reasons, I cannot see any time in the near future where complete or majority nuclear abolition can occur. Attempting to abolish nuclear weapons too hastily could worry America and NATO's allies by making them think they can no longer rely on these bodies for protection. It would also allow countries which do not have any commitment to abolition, such as Israel, Pakistan and Russia, to hope that if the existing powers denuclearise and they do not, that their subsequent nuclear power will be greater. For this reason, 'declaration of ambitious but arbitrary and unattainable deadlines for action is more likely to discredit the (non-proliferation) movement than to advance it' (O'Hanlon 2010).

On the other hand, it is likely that complete nuclear disarmament will remain on the international political agenda because to remove this prospect will send messages of complacency to Pyongyang and Tehran, as well as non-state actors such as terrorist groups. This will leave open the possibility of theft and corruption by such groups, perhaps in places in which nuclear arms are not secure. There are, after all, twenty thousand nuclear weapons in the world and another ten thousand which are inactive. There are also concerns about security of weapons in Russia and Pakistan, as well as an inaccurate assessment of nuclear material in North Korea. This is a lot of nuclear material to be rid of, and a lot open to the possibility of theft, accident or confusion (Jenkins 2006: 35).

Therefore, if nuclear disarmament is to be possible, the nuclear powers must try to find a middle ground between hasty abolition of weapons and leaving the subject off the agenda until the far future. I believe the only foreseeable way for this to happen would be if major territorial issues involving the nuclear powers were to be resolved. Examples of these issues include ongoing disputes between India and Pakistan (Jo and Gartzke 2007: 177), the status of the territory of Taiwan and Kashmir, conflicts involving Russia and Georgia, Israel's status in regards to its surrounding neighbours, as well as the current crisis concerning Iran's nuclear ambitions. However disputes in North and South Korea are localised, and largely do not involve the major powers, therefore the beginnings of nuclear abolition could begin before their complete resolution.

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Whether or not the special interest groups within the military-industrial complex have decisive power, it is the lack of resolution concerning the territorial disputes and other conflicts that will lead states to fall back on game theory and their ability to deter full-scale war with nuclear arsenals. This leads me to conclude that nuclear weapons will not be abolished in the foreseeable future. Even in the unlikely scenario of all territorial and ideological disputes around the world being resolved, nuclear disarmament will remain elusive because unfortunately, the technology and knowledge, with the potential to be resurrected as new conflicts emerge, will still exist. Furthermore, the possibility of terrorist groups and other non-state actors acquiring nuclear weapons will force the existing nuclear powers to retain overwhelming nuclear capability. Therefore, there can never truly be a world without nuclear weapons.

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