

Do Nuclear Weapons still have a Role in International Relations in the Post-Cold War Era?

Written by Martin Taggart

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MARTIN TAGGART, MAY 10 2008

The First Nuclear Age ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Walton and Gray, 2007: 210). The end of bipolarity, arguably the most peaceful period in European history (Howard, 2001: 136), raised new questions about national security: specifically, the role of nuclear weapons in international relations. During this period nuclear weapons were not actually used per se, but used tacitly; as a means of deterrence (Segal, 1988: 13). We are now in the Second Nuclear Age, and the role of the nuclear weapon is still contested. Should they be retained or should they (or can they?) be abandoned? Is deterrence still a plausible strategy? Can we actually engage in international discourse without them? These questions, and many others, are debated by theorists, scholars, moralists, politicians and military commanders throughout the world; from Washington to Moscow, London to Beijing, and Paris to New Delhi. This essay will question the role of nuclear weapons in international society; namely, nuclear weapons as a deterrent, nuclear terrorism and proliferation. Before we embark on this analysis we must first ask the question: Why do states go 'nuclear'?

'If they have the bomb, we must have the bomb!'

There are several reasons why states embark on nuclear programmes. The most obvious explanation being the need to counter balance the strength of other states (Sagan, 1997: 54). Nuclear weapons are an appealing choice for weaker states as they are cheaper than conventional forces, and provide instant security. This is most definitely the case where states like Iran and China (and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era) are concerned. Their nuclear ambitions are a direct product of perceived threats, or distrust, of the West- namely the United States of America. In tandem with fear is the want for power and influence (Epstein, 1977: 17); with nuclear capabilities even an inferior state could become a formidable enemy. This type of state behaviour escalates horizontal and vertical proliferation, and by extension, could stimulate a 'domino effect' (Barnaby, 2003: 4-5). As the name implies, it is a situation in which states develop nuclear capability simply because their neighbours have nuclear capability (Barnaby, 2003: 4-5); for example France in the 1960s vis-à-vis the United Kingdom (Howard, 2001: 140). Another reason is simply that of international prestige (Barnaby, 2003: 4-5; Epstein, 1977: 17). Prestige offers influence, recognition and diplomatic clout; important tools in any state's workshop. Developing nuclear weapons and possessing them require large amounts of resources and a core of highly trained and educated scientists and technicians, the perfect way to show-off a nation's wealth and ability (Waltz, 1995: 9). This may be why, interestingly, that all five of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are nuclear powers. Would Russia, China or the USA wield as much international influence if they had no nuclear weapons?

Deterrence

As has been discussed, states choose to develop nuclear weapons for a plethora of reasons. Deterrence is the main role cited by many supporters of nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were used in this way; paradoxically they existed only to prevent their actual use (Towle, 2005: 163-64). Many theorists argue that this application of nuclear capability is still relevant and, citing the Cold War as an example, maintain that it still works and will continue to work. Indeed Kenneth Waltz (1995: 14) claims that the more states that have nuclear weapons the less likely they are to be used: "Nuclear weapons restore the clarity and simplicity lost as bipolar situations are

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replaced by multipolar ones.” His reasoning, and that of others who support deterrence theory, is that the costs of a war between two or more nuclear states would highly outweigh the actual benefits, making any nuclear victory a pyrrhic one (Waltz, 1995: 7-8). Therefore, no state would dare initiate a war that would lead to absolute obliteration. This is known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) (Walton and Grey, 2007: 219-20). Waltz asserts that having nuclear weapons is preferable to having only conventional forces, or having no nuclear weapons at all- states merely acquire them to maintain their security (Waltz, 1995: 42-3). According to this theory, the threat of nuclear war reduces the frequency of conventional conflicts (a conventional confrontation may trigger a nuclear response) which are more costly in the long term (Waltz, 1995: 42-3). John Mearsheimer is another supporter of deterrence theory. Writing on the capability of the NATO nuclear deterrent, he commented: “with the presence of thousands of nuclear weapons, there is good reason to be very confident about NATO’s deterrent posture” (Mearsheimer, 1985: 45). Indeed he argues that it is necessary to keep the military risks high in order to make deterrence more effective (Mearsheimer, 1985: 21). This, of course, means the development of more weapons or an improvement in technology (Mearsheimer, 1985: 21-2; 45-6).

Opponents to this view claim that deterrence it is an outdated strategy that rests on numerous assumptions that may not apply to many state leaders today. Deterrence theory assumes that the opponent is rational and mutually vulnerable, and that the opponent is a state (Brunk, 1987: 229-31). They also point to the fact that, as a theory, deterrence has not actually been tested. It is not absolutely certain whether or not the Soviet Union was actually deterred by the USA during the Cold War (Segal, 1988: 21). Even if deterrence actually worked during this time, it was successful in a different historical and political context, with unique circumstances and very different people. Therefore dependence on nuclear capability today would be absurd. With the rise of so-called ‘rogue’ states deterrence theory is made even more unreliable. Rationality, therefore, as the crux of deterrence theory is no longer a reliable measure due to the fact that leaders of rogue states do not conform to American hegemony, and are driven by ideological or religious concerns. Lastly, for deterrence to truly work, both states need to be mutually vulnerable. Some argue that the installation of missile defence shields (for example that which is proposed to be installed in the Czech Republic by the USA) compromise mutual vulnerability.

Nuclear Terrorism

In today’s society, terrorism has become a well known phenomenon. It has however, existed for a long time, and the fear that terrorist groups may acquire nuclear devices has been debated since the 1970s. With the recent surge of terrorism; and the rise of religious fundamentalism and the so-called ‘rogue’ state, this fear (Krieger, 1977: 46-7) has lead some to argue that deterrence and nuclear capability are useless against a stateless enemy (Rosenbaum, 1977: 140-41). In the event of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons the state centricity of deterrence, and the indiscriminate destructive nature of nuclear weapons does not allow for flexible options. Terrorist groups are not states, thus the actions of terrorists (or ‘nuclear terrorists’) would be different to the actions of governments. Terrorists seek to destroy the ‘old’ order and establish a new one (Krieger, 1977: 45-6). Their interests are very different from that of politicians (Blair and Brewer, 1977: 390-92) as they do not have nations and economies to contend with nor do they need to worry about securing resources or defending territory. Therefore, the existence of nuclear weapons is a double edged sword and the possibility of that power being used against its maker is very real. Terrorism that is fuelled by ideology or (as we are now all familiar with) religion has become more apparent and is hard to anticipate, as these factors defy or even disregard the idea of rationality. In the case of religious fundamentalism for example, death, of one’s colleagues or of one’s nation or even oneself, is not necessarily a defeat (the rise of the suicide bomber and ‘millenarianism’ (Kiras, 2007: 185)). Arguably, a terrorist with a nuclear weapon is more dangerous than a state with a thousand nuclear weapons. In further agreement with this point, is the fact that terrorist organisations are not bound to a static territory and are active internationally and independently (Rosenbaum, 1977: 140-41). Thus the contact that terrorists groups have throughout the world, makes their attempts to acquire nuclear material that little bit easier. If a terrorist group had a nuclear weapon, how would we stop them? Deterrence would be useless, so would any retaliatory technology. Paradoxically, nuclear weapons have created a role in international relations which is impossible to remove.

Proliferation

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Horizontal proliferation, the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries or non-state actors (Walton and Gray, 2007: 210), is seen as a negative by the current nuclear powers. Once again, the role of nuclear weapons is embedded in the need to prevent their usage, especially by so-called 'rogue' states or others of dubious repute. As has been discussed previously, Waltz supports the "gradual spread" of nuclear weapons as a means of security (1995:14). Gerald Segal (1988: 32) calls this a "hair raising way of achieving security." As he points out, small countries with inadequate nuclear development but potent nuclear capability coupled with unstable governments or regimes are not exactly "reassuring" (Segal, 1988:32). It is interesting to observe however, that discussions about which states have the right to own and develop nuclear weapons, further cements their role in international society. It would seem that, if the goal was to remove the role of nuclear weapons in society, then more appropriate discussions should be directed towards either: a) to prevent the initiation (or continuation) of nuclear programmes (the US's current relationship with Iran for example), b) the reduction in the numbers of nuclear weapons, or c) complete disarmament. It seems that countries, especially western states, are reluctant to come to conclusive decisions because having nuclear weapons gives them a voice in international discourse. Not only this but their arguments are also hypocritical (Segal, 1988: 32-3). They believe that proliferation is a dangerous occurrence that could see unfriendly countries becoming more capable. But as both Waltz and Segal rightly point out (1995: 42-3; 1988: 33), states usually only want nuclear weapons as a means of security, and that a policy to end proliferation or the manufacture of nuclear weapons would inevitably fail.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, I have argued that the role of nuclear weapons in international relations is a complex one, riddled with contradiction and disagreement. Deterrence, as a strategy, may be flawed. It may or may not work, but the fact that the discussion continues, gives the existence and role of nuclear weapons legitimacy. The compromising of MAD with the introduction of missile shields etc. is counter productive and actually increases the role of nuclear weapons in future foreign policy. Terrorism, again, shows that these weapons will remain with us forever. Fears of their use by terrorists means that new measures and strategies need to be formulated in order to combat them. Proliferation, a complicated problem in its own right, gives nuclear weapons another strategic dimension. Does proliferation increase security or does it increase risk? The debate continues.

In my opinion we do not have much choice when it comes to nuclear weapons. We have created for ourselves a situation in which it is impossible to escape. Solutions such as disarmament or reduction in nuclear arms, are unrealistic as no state with sane leadership would ever put its own security at risk. Leon Sigal (1984: 1) rightly referred to this as the "Faustian bargain"- an apt name for a power that has the potential to achieve great things, put one that could also lead to our own destruction.

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