Nuclear Abolition or Deterrence: A Nuclear Ethics Debate

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/29/nuclear-abolition-or-deterrence-a-nuclear-ethics-debate/

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One of the most important political cleavages in contemporary international society is marked by the lack of consensus on the continued reliance of nuclear weapons by some states for their security. On one side of this debate, it is argued that nuclear deterrence remains an important instrument of international security given (1) the stubborn nuclear security dilemmas in East Asia over North Korea and in the Middle East over Iran and (2) the increasing tensions between the United States and Russia over a number of controversial security issues. Even U.S. President Barack Obama holds this view. Additionally, Washington has begun a significant nuclear weapons modernization effort despite Obama's 2009 Prague commitment to move towards a nuclear-weapon-free world. Other nuclear-armed states too, have followed suit. And as renewed great power tensions intensify, a chorus of commentators has warned that emerging new nuclear threats, such as those posed by North Korea, will further necessitate the retention of nuclear deterrence.

On the other side, prominent global civil society groups, along with a few non-nuclear-weapons states, have argued for a nuclear-weapons-free world in order to avoid the projected catastrophic humanitarian effects that even a limited nuclear war might have. Anti-nuclear advocacy of this kind is grounded on a cosmopolitan and morally-informed notion of human security as well as a firm belief that nuclear weapons are not merely taboo (Tannenwald, 2007), but implicitly proscribed by several international agreements, such as the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Indeed, our knowledge of nuclear accident history in the United States (Schlosser, 2013), and elsewhere (e.g. Chernobyl, Fukushima Daiichi) suggests that the prospect of nuclear catastrophe is much more likely than what is typically admitted. If a nuclear catastrophe were to occur, whether as a result of an accident or deliberate (series of) nuclear detonations, the extent of medical and other humanitarian resources needed is not known. The urgency of nuclear abolition advocacy has grown since the now infamous deadlock at the quinquennial 2015 NPT Review Conference. By the end this past December, at least 127 states had signed the "humanitarian pledge" to work towards stigmatizing and formally banning nuclear weapons, even though none of the nuclear-armed states joined the legal agreement.

It is important to recognize that the ground of the debate between nuclear deterrence and abolition advocates is not limited to differences in political considerations or commitments. Rather, it arises from differences in ethical commitments which advocates on both sides of this debate have not resolved. As it happens, both sides make arguments which invoke moral values to justify their respective positions (Nye, 1986). And the irreconcilability of these two positions on nuclear weapons reflects directly the ethical dilemmas and paradoxes into which these actors are individually and collectively ensnared. I have written about these matters extensively elsewhere (See e.g. Doyle II, 2015). In the remainder of this short article, I examine one aspect of this larger debate which has not to my knowledge received sufficient attention: the question of the moral paradoxes of nuclear disarmament anchored in an unconditioned or unqualified moral cosmopolitanism.

Moral cosmopolitanism is committed to the idea that all human beings are equally subjects of moral regard. It is categorically distinct from egoism, nationalism, or confessionalism, each of which limits the universe of moral regard only to oneself or members of one's family, nation-state, or religion. Rather, moral cosmopolitanism is universal in terms of the right or the good. The latter phrase "the right or the good" suggests different kinds of moral

cosmopolitanism – namely, the universality of right action as defined by moral right or duty (e.g. Kantian deontology) and the universality of good outcomes (e.g. utilitarianism). Kantian cosmopolitanism starts with the idea that each individual person bears ultimate moral value (Korsgaard, 1996), and so the act of holding innocent people as nuclear hostages – which is what nuclear deterrence requires – is absolutely immoral since hostages are pawns of policymakers for ends which are not their own (Lee, 1985). Alternately, utilitarianism starts with the idea that the greatest good for the greatest number of affected people ought to always guide action. On this view, nuclear hostage-holding is not absolutely or intrinsically wrong, since the greater good might come of it. Consequently, nuclear deterrence is (conditionally) justified on utilitarian terms *only if* the avoidance of nuclear or great power war is directly linked to deterrence policies. If not, however, then utilitarianism might well (and has) condemned nuclear deterrence (Nye, 1986).

Now that we have a brief description of moral cosmopolitanism in its utilitarian and deontological modes, what is meant by the term "unconditioned or unqualified moral cosmopolitanism"? The short answer is this: an unconditioned utilitarianism permits the absolute rights of individuals to be unjustly sacrificed for the greater good, and an unconditioned deontology insists on morally upright actions even if catastrophic harm is suffered. Such moral approaches tend to be myopic and overly ideological rather than acknowledging and respecting the entire scope of legitimate moral concern. Accordingly, a well-intentioned utilitarian advocating for nuclear abolition on the risk of nuclear catastrophe under current conditions is unacceptably high. Supposing we accept the utilitarian's risk analysis, re-nuclearization and nuclear-first-use might still be likely if an immediate nuclear abolition induces renewed security dilemmas among the affected rival states. In this scenario, the outcomes could be as or more catastrophic than had disarmament not been undertaken (Nye, 1986).

Alternately, a well-intentioned Kantian cosmopolitan might insist on immediate nuclear abolition on the grounds that (1) it is wrong to threaten what it is wrong to do (also known as the Wrongful Intentions Principle) and (2) the holding of nuclear hostages is morally indefensible (Lee, 1985). Supposing we accept this deontological analysis, it might still be true that the ideal Kantian solution to the security dilemmas of nuclear-armed states does not regard properly the difference in moral valence between living under nuclear threats and losing one's life to nuclear attacks.

None of the foregoing is to argue that I am an advocate of nuclear deterrence or that my commitments are to some other approach than moral cosmopolitanism. Quite the contrary. I am an advocate of a qualified approach to moral cosmopolitanism, which takes the consequences of moral action as having significance alongside the nature of the action itself. In my view, an appropriately conditioned moral cosmopolitanism directs us to first address the fundamental security dilemmas of nuclear-armed states and their non-nuclear allies such that universal nuclear disarmament might truly become irreversible. A multi-pronged approach is necessary to adequately address these fundamental security dilemmas (Doyle II, 2015). One major effort to take in this regard is the cultivation of a larger and more potent anti-nuclear movement among abolitionist states and civil-society groups. This effort is crucial since politicians tend to change entrenched foreign policy positions more readily if their constituents apply almost irresistible pressures on them (Wittner, 2009). As part of cultivating such an anti-nuclear movement, another critical effort is the education of public officials and policymakers generally of the real prospects of nuclear deterrence failure and the likely resort to nuclear escalation in response. It is assumed that nuclear-armed rivals will be less inclined to resort to measures which no longer can assure security and stability. The likelihood of states accepting the stigmatization of nuclear weapons as evil is greater if the anti-nuclear movement succeeds in persuading policymakers that nuclear weapons no longer serve as reliable guarantors of security. Ultimately, the leaders of nuclear-armed states must find a way to engage each other as did former US President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, pp. 150-155). Their effort to bond personally, to imagine the other's fear, and to extend the scope of their moral regard for the other, was an inescapable factor in the success of their nuclear arms reduction efforts.

Indeed, the world's most important nuclear disarmament treaty to date, the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Agreement (INF), could not have been implemented had not a multi-pronged approach occurred. First, the international Nuclear Freeze movement in the early-mid 1980s put greater pressures on the U.S., Soviet, and European governments than had been done in several years. Second, the fears of nuclear war were intensified so much so that even President Reagan began to believe that nuclear wars were unwinnable and therefore must never

be fought (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, pp. 146-148). Once these and other preconditions were in place, Reagan and Gorbachev could take the ultimate step of eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. It seems clear that a comprehensive and irreversible nuclear disarmament in today's world will not be achieved by a political means less than what made the INF itself possible. And for that kind of effort to succeed, it must be animated by diverse actors who have arrived at a moral consensus which properly regards all the moral values at stake in its design and implementation.

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