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Nuclear Disarmament: From a Popular Movement to an Elite Project, and Back Again?

With the publication of the Adelphi Paper by George Perkovich and James Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons,* the study of nuclear disarmament reaches a new maturity. The paper provides the intellectual ballast to the grand project now gathering political support and stimulating research to take the idea of nuclear abolition beyond a visionary dream to a practical possibility. It reflects a change of sentiment, as the view takes hold that there has been unwarranted complacency over our ability to live indefinitely with "the bomb," and it revives the dialogue over arms control in advance of the 2010 review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The last review conference, in 2005, was a lackluster affair, widely viewed as a failure. Since then, there have been struggles to hold the line with the current crop of nuclear states, as North Korea and Iran—despite the efforts of diplomats and the occasional threats—edge toward nuclear status. In addition, the nuclear business is about to get busier. After a fallow period, concerns about global warming and high energy prices have led to governments rediscovering the benefits of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy even as they are being urged to reject the military uses.

If nuclear capabilities were confined to a few, by-and-large-stable-and-not-too-reckless great powers, that would be one thing. But we have passed that point. Hence the widespread view that a determined effort to hold the line is not enough: There must be a determined effort to roll back the nuclear age. At the very least, the recognized nuclear powers need to agree to go to the review conference with proposals for conspicuous

measures that would go some way toward meeting their obligations under the NPT's Article VI "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." In the past, this has been handled by the nuclear powers insisting that their demonstrated faith has been very good indeed and pointing to various measures as moves in the right direction even if in practice they barely do more than tinker at the margins of nuclear relationships. The problem is not that the nuclear powers are in breach of a binding promise to disarm; the legal requirement was never more than best efforts. It is more the impression of cynical disdain, as the nuclear powers insist that the non–nuclear-weapon states strictly follow treaty obligations while showing indifference to their own. Solemn undertakings delivered by junior officials and backed by no more than lists of relatively minor activities and discussions will no longer suffice.

The downturn in NATO's relations with Moscow, from which nuclear issues have not been entirely absent, has provided an inauspicious backdrop for the paper's publication. It does not, however, invalidate the exercise, for this is bound to be a long-term endeavor to be undertaken irrespective of the twists and turns of geopolitics. If and when great power relations do recover, the best analysis will be needed to identify the way forward, ensuring that rhetoric never leaps too far ahead of practical realities while negative assumptions about what is possible can be challenged by pointing out advances in knowledge and technique. *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* benefits by not being a tract or a polemic, by not being dogmatic or possessed of the sort of zealous certainty that denies alternative views. It identifies problems and takes them as far as it can go for the moment while noting the research needed to move them to the next stage.

The Need to Engage Public Opinion

The paper encourages the view that nuclear disarmament can be achieved through a calm and steady process dependent upon commonsensical commitments and compromises among the major players, with due regard for the interests and concerns of the non-nuclear-weapon states. In this respect, it reflects a striking feature of the current push for abolition: This is an elite-level debate. During the Cold War, when conditions appeared as unripe as they could be in terms of superpower relations, the pressure for disarmament came from political movements such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and scientific lobbies such as Pugwash. It was routinely opposed by policy elites. Even left-of-center parties were wary of getting too closely associated with disarmament campaigns, sharing

elite anxiety about fundamental strategic judgments becoming subject to a rowdy mass movement. At any rate, supporting these campaigns risked accusations of jeopardizing national security and consequential electoral defeat. The role of Communist parties in these movements added to the suspicions. Lip service was paid to disarmament ideals, but in practice multilateral activity in this area tended to be geared toward taking the sting out of the arms race, finding something for superpowers to talk about, and reducing anxieties about surprise first strikes. In the end, arms control—a term deliberately chosen as a contrast to disarmament—was about managing the balance of terror rather than eliminating it.

The end of the Cold War and the immediate reductions in nuclear arsenals, in particular short-range systems, was reassuring. Cliches about a generation "living under the shadow of the bomb" disappeared from fashionable literature and commentary. The movements turned their attention to opposing unpopular wars, notably Iraq; denouncing globalization; or proposing action to deal with climate change. Fears of a carbon summer took over from those of a nuclear winter. To the extent that disarmament has come back in vogue, it is because of other dangers, notably those associated with the risks of nuclear weapons becoming entangled with failing or rogue states, or with terrorists. For the major powers to hold on to nuclear weapons as strategic props when the security role of these weapons is increasingly marginal and when their impact, should they be acquired by malign groups or states, would be catastrophic, can be presented as at best complacent and at worst reckless. That the elder statesmen who are now leading the abolitionist movement recognize this fact provides the backdrop for the sort of analysis that Perkovich and Acton have now provided. The January 2007 op-ed article by Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn, and William Perry in the *Wall Street Journal* provided long-term advocates of radical disarmament with an opening. Governments may still have their doubts about the feasibility of the project, but they are becoming loath to distance themselves from the aspiration.

How far, however, can this be taken as an elite project? The destination having been set out, the aim now is to work out what is necessary to get there. This soon takes on the form of a geopolitical engineering enterprise. All the working parts of the international system are examined to see how they need to be tweaked or transformed to contribute to the ultimate goal. Consideration is given to the vital interests of the key players as well as to the areas where they might reasonably make compromises. Barriers are to be cleared by judicious treaty language here, a technical fix there, and a confidence-building measure to follow. In all of this, popular opinion

appears rather distant, as nothing more than a supposedly approving chorus. Yet governments must be accountable to their electorates. If this undertaking is going to be treated with the seriousness it deserves over an extended period, public opinion will need to be engaged.

Obviously public opinion manifests itself in different forms in countries with different political systems and cultures. Its influence can be felt even in countries where formal democratic mechanisms are either nonexistent, as in China, or increasingly circumscribed, as in Russia. It can turn up in Internet blogs or street demonstrations. In both these cases, expressions of popular feeling are often nationalistic. This is not unusual. For example, however much A. Q. Khan might have been a villain to the international community as a promoter of proliferation, in Pakistan he remained something of a hero, which put the government in a difficult position when it was obliged to deal with him after his network had been exposed. In Israel, a strong and vocal lobby will always argue against taking political risks when it comes to matters of national security. If popular opinion becomes animated, it is as likely to serve as a brake on disarmament progress as an accelerator.

So while it would be nice to think that this project can be carried forward by a multinational group of reasonable people making demonstrable progress at a steady pace and without breaking ranks, over an extended period there are bound to be problems. Governments change, as do their priorities. As things stand now, if governments start dragging their feet, it is hard to imagine vocal demands and public demonstration to get the process back on track. If nationalist politicians start to insist that their country is being duped into putting national security at risk, it is just as likely that demands to slow down would follow. As long as talk of abolition remains the diplomatic equivalent of easy-listening elevator music, and as political leaders remember to assert their belief in a world without war and weapons—and, while they're at it, no more poverty and disease either—few will pay attention. Only as the talk becomes serious will public debate open up, and properly so. Depending on the political system, dissent from the official line may be vigorous and open or cryptic and furtive. In all cases, the course of the debate will be influenced by the interaction with whatever happens to be on the public agenda at the time and the passing concerns of the moment.

New Challenges at Low Numbers

Of course, as the authors acknowledge, there is an alternative scenario that would instantly capture popular attention, and that is the actual use of a

nuclear weapon. In a strange way, a sort of confidence that the weapons will not be used provides a degree of comfort that time is available for an orderly progression to abolition. The case for abolition, though, is that it is hard to believe that the past 60 years of self-restraint can continue for the next 60 years. A natural assumption is that nuclear use, even on a relatively small scale, would trigger immediate demands for disarmament. Certainly, we can barely begin to imagine the horror and the fear that would follow a nuclear detonation in an urban area. The grim, eloquent images would remind people of the imperatives of disarmament, and the shock would undoubtedly lead to calls that this sort of thing never be allowed to happen again. But the actual response would depend a lot on context. If this were an act of terroristic nihilism, the short-term priorities would be to hunt down the perpetrators and improve security; long-term abolition would not offer much help. If nuclear weapons were used by states in anger, the global community's response would depend on what transpired next. Did the belligerents collapse, awed by the enormity of what they had wrought, or did one appear to achieve a form of victory through nuclear use? If the latter, seeking to shore up deterrence might prove to be a more appropriate response than seeking to abandon the weapons altogether.

One of the most difficult questions to address, of course, is whether such terrible events become more likely as the number of nuclear weapons gets closer to zero. The essence of the early arms control theory was that disarmament was naïve. Not only would fewer weapons not necessarily mean more peace, but fewer weapons could even make things more dangerous by unsettling the nuclear balance. At some point, a first strike might start to look attractive as a way of imposing unilateral disarmament on the other side; a small advantage in warhead numbers, irrelevant at times of big inventories, might just start to provide additional political muscle. Because even a single weapon can cause serious havoc, there can be no safety in small numbers. With large numbers of weapons, the danger is unquestioned and inescapable, encouraging caution where there might otherwise be temptation. So there is a potentially dangerous crossover point when numbers really start to matter. It is at this point that the smaller nuclear powers would also be required to be part of the arms control process, as they no longer have the excuse that their inventories are dwarfed by the large powers. So for that reason, among others, the negotiations and the processes will be getting more complicated.

At some point the lesser nuclear powers would be expected to join the discussions, if only to provide reassurances that they would not exploit the new situation to create more favorable nuclear balances. As the United

States and Russia commit to major reductions, they would insist that the others identify the points at which they might be prepared to make comparable reductions. A more inclusive process would not, however, necessarily address the issue of more delicate nuclear balances, when small numbers multiply the impact of any aggressive first strike. One possible answer might be to obtain pledges not to use nuclear weapons first or, better still, not to use them at all. The trouble with such pledges, of course, is that they are easily reversed. It is hard to imagine any country entering a crisis relying upon the pledges of an adversary with whom relations have already taken a sinister turn. The entrenched norm of non-use is valuable and worth reinforcing at every opportunity. As this norm has become embedded, nuclear use tends to be ruled out, without debate, as a matter of course. But it is still no more than a norm, and with a single cataclysmic event, what is normal today can become abnormal tomorrow.

There is no reason to suppose that this point would be dangerous just because the numbers had fallen below some threshold level. Nuclear options would come into play only when international relations were already at a breaking point. Nonetheless, those who rely on extended deterrence are going to be more concerned at the reliability of past commitments at this stage, assuming that the international situation in other respects had not changed dramatically. It is no longer the case, as it was during the Cold War, that nuclear threats (at least not threats by Western states) are required in order to deter conventional superior opponents. Western conventional strength now provides deterrence in itself. But it does not solve the problem of a non-nuclear-weapon state facing a nuclear threat and seeking to draw on the strength of a powerful ally to provide a degree of deterrence. Without a benign political environment, progress toward nuclear abolition may be slow. It may be that with such an environment, great projects can be agreed and set in motion. The process will, however, remain vulnerable to a change for the worse in the political setting.

What this argument does do, however, is emphasize, first, the importance of measures intended to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs and to reduce the risks of proliferation to unruly states or groups or of accidental use. These concerns are not incompatible with reductions, and the two approaches might be mutually reinforcing. Second, it draws attention to the extent to which the perceived risks of further disarmament will be seen to grow substantially as the process gets closer to zero. The steps that must be taken move from being merely courageous politically into the realm of the extraordinarily bold. Core issues cannot be

fudged. Normal diplomatic ruses—procrastination, creative ambiguity—will not suffice. There must be no possible doubt that one state might hang on to some nuclear advantage after others have disarmed. The agreement and the process would have to be both transparent and definitive.

The problem, therefore, is not with the stability of abolition once it has been achieved. Perkovich and Acton argue convincingly against the fatalism based on the reality that nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented. The lead time for a successful reconstruction of a nuclear arsenal would be long, and the penalties of disclosure of such an attempt would be severe. The problem may be less the stage after abolition than the ones leading up to it.