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Disarmament and Deterrence: A Practitioner's View

Abolishing Nuclear Weapons is an important, thoughtful, and challenging paper. Its treatment of the technical issues associated with verifying both the abolition of nuclear weapons and the peaceful nature of civilian nuclear programs is a significant contribution to the debate.

The paper disappoints, however, in its discussion and analysis of the political issues surrounding nuclear weapons abolition. In some way, I realize this is an unfair criticism, as the authors, George Perkovich and James Acton, stipulate early on that they do not intend to explore anything other than technical issues in any depth. That said, the paper proceeds to put forth assertions and propositions that place those political questions front and center … only to leave the reader futilely seeking further argumentation.

Three issues in particular require discussion:

- The rationale for abolition
- The role nuclear weapons play in interactions between the great powers
- The dichotomy between why nations have nuclear weapons today and the world the authors envision as bringing about abolition

Additionally, there are some deterrence and operational issues that bear mention.

A Rationale for Abolition?

At the outset, the authors indicate that the primary reason for abolishing the nuclear weapon stockpiles of the five nuclear-weapon states and the other nuclear-armed powers is halting nuclear proliferation. "[T]he problem [is] of states resisting strengthened non-proliferation rules because they say they are frustrated by the nuclear-weapons states' refusal to uphold their side of the NPT bargain…."[1] While it is true that such protests are often made by the professional rhetoricians (many times without their capitals' knowledge, by the way) in the Conference on Disarmament and in Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conferences, a dispassionate look at the facts suggests that the nuclear-weapon states are indeed fulfilling their NPT commitments. First, even using as a baseline the number of nuclear weapons that existed at the time the NPT entered into force (let alone the size of the U.S. and Soviet arsenals at the height of the Cold War), the nuclear-weapon states have been steadily reducing their nuclear forces and stockpiles. The U.S. nuclear arsenal today, for example, is 90 percent smaller than it was in 1972, and, it will be reduced by an additional 15 to 30 percent (relative to its current size) by 2012. Second, "the nuclear arms race," whose end is called for by Article VI of the NPT, was, for all intents and purposes, halted in the late 1980s. While all this was occurring, two new nuclear nations emerged (India and Pakistan), North Korea repudiated its treaty obligations and developed and detonated a weapon, Iran is on the brink of developing a weapon, and two other emerging nuclear weapon programs (Iraq and Libya) were terminated by superior force and skillful diplomacy. Additionally, the actions of regimes motivated by deterring U.S. conventional military forces has nothing at all to do with the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Nor do the actions of states such as Pakistan, which are motivated by regional considerations. Finally, it is important to note that rogue states and would-be nuclear terrorists seek to disrupt international stability; their desire for nuclear weapons derives directly from their own nefarious agendas and are detached completely from any reductions in the arsenals of the nuclear-weapon states. (Indeed, there is a case to be made that these states' nuclear capabilities would serve to deter rogues and terrorists from using nuclear weapons should they actually obtain them.) It is not immediately evident therefore that proliferation is linked to the existing arsenals of the five nuclear-weapon states or to the fact that four of the five continue to move toward fulfilling their NPT

obligations. In fact, the history of the past few decades seems to indicate that hard-core proliferators pursue nuclear-weapon programs independent of other states' reductions in their arsenals. Thus the prima facie case for abolition remains to be made. How and in what way would the elimination of all nuclear weapons by the five states make the world a safer place?

Nuclear Weapons Have Moderated Great Power Interactions

Answering that question clearly and unequivocably must be a sine qua non for the nuclear abolition movement. In this regard, however, the authors note in passing that the argument that "prohibit[ing] nuclear weapons 'make[s] the world safe' for conventional war"…"is not a fair demand. It is motivated by the assumption that nuclear weapons would never fail to deter major conventional war, and it neglects the consequences if deterrence fails and nuclear weapons are detonated." Deterring conventional aggression, however, is and has always been a key rationale for the existence of nuclear weapons. Since the inception of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, its primary goal has been to deter enemy attack on U.S vital interests or those of its allies. Put more starkly, the U.S. nuclear arsenal was developed to prevent a conventional third World War from occurring on the plains of Europe. NATO's role was always to deter *both* conventional *and* nuclear attack. Noting that since nation states emerged, the great powers of Europe regularly went to war with each other until 1945 (and that even the enormous devastation caused by World War I was not sufficient to prevent World War II), one must ask what changed the situation so that peace has prevailed since then? The nature of governments has not changed; rather, the stakes of going to war became too great. No longer could an aggressor look to his military's genius to defeat the enemy quickly and decisively; nuclear weapons gave the attacked party the capability to turn an aggressor's victory into massive defeat. The fact is that possession of nuclear weapons has moderated the behavior of the great powers toward one another. This does not suggest that deterrence can never fail, or that if it did nuclear weapons would not be used without horrendous consequence. But it does suggest that more attention needs to be paid to how the great powers have acted since 1945 and why. The devastation in Europe during World War II is a stark reminder that nuclear weapons are not the only cause of massive destruction and loss of life. If the authors do not believe in nuclear deterrence as the way to avoid such devastation, they need to explain what would take its place.

Political Issues Are More Difficult to Resolve Than Technical Ones

This lack of explanation is made all the more pointed by the following statements in the paper:

- "An eventual nuclear-abolition project could only succeed if it were accompanied by changes in broader military relations that convinced states that now rely on nuclear deterrence that nuclear weapons would not be necessary to deter large-scale military interventions."

- "Conventional arms-control and confidence building measures would probably need to be implemented in the regions abutting Russia and China, and in South Asia."

- "The eight nuclear-armed states will not be able to collectively envisage a prohibition of nuclear weapons until conflicts cent[e]ring on Taiwan, Kashmir, Palestine, and (perhaps) the Russian periphery are resolved, or at least durably stabilized."

- "It is difficult to imagine China, Russia, France, the UK and the US genuinely embarking on a course of nuclear disarmament in the absence of a significant reconciliation of their interests and approaches to regional and global security."

These sentences point to the heart of the problem. Nuclear weapons exist because nation states retain the option to use military force in world affairs. Nuclear weapons compensate for conventional military inferiority and moderate against the use of force by one great power against another. The problem lies not in the weapons, but in the nature of humankind. If one could actually implement the ideas listed in the bullets above, the question of nuclear-weapon abolition would become enormously easier. All of this points to the oft-ignored NPT Article VI commitment for all nations: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes 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, *and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control*" (emphasis added). The political problems that prevent abolition are daunting; they need to be analyzed and not assumed away.

Two Warnings With Respect to De-alerting and to Mirror-imaging

It would be difficult for one who has been a practitioner in the nuclear policy field for several decades to let pass without notice two other comments in the paper.

The first refers to the so-called de-alerting debate. The authors note that "quick-use forces could exacerbate instability in crises, and are vulnerable to inadvertent use." There is some theoretical truth in the argument about instability. But it is far more difficult to prescribe corrective action that does not contain within it the seeds of crisis instability. For more than twenty years, a small element of the arms control community has worried about alert intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and in particular Russian ICBMs on alert, concerned that they are particularly susceptible to accidental or inadvertent launch. To the degree that one worries about inadvertent launch, the best answer has always been to improve Russian warning systems to make an accidental launch impossible; the moribund U.S. effort to establish a Joint Warning Center with Russia attempted to help fill this need. Critics of this approach call for taking steps to disable the U.S. Minuteman force in the hope that Russia would follow suit with its ICBMs. This approach ignores the fact that Russia has far more warheads on its ICBMs than the United States has in its Minuteman force and, as a result, even if the United States were to eliminate its entire ICBM force, Russia would probably still maintain ICBMs on alert. And, to the degree one worries about "hair-trigger" responses, the prospect of taking only a portion of the Russian ICBM force off alert should raise major worries, because the remaining alert forces would logically be on even higher alert. Those who back de-alerting also tend to favor finding a way to impede the ability of ballistic missile submarines to launch their missiles (*not* a position taken by the authors); it is difficult to conceive of a more destabilizing approach to dealing with the issue of an accidental or inadvertent launch. I do not suggest to settle this ongoing debate here; I mean only to point out that the issue is sufficiently complicated that it defies easy solution. Because it is not germane to the paper's main thrust, raising it is, in my opinion, a distraction.

They also argue that: "As long as each state had survivable nuclear forces capable of threatening each other's capitals and leadership centres … conventional-force imbalances need not be less bearable than they have been historically." This statement presumes that both sides' vital interests are the same and that therefore both are equally deterred by the same threats. The history of the practice of deterrence policy suggests that mirror imaging is not a sound basis for deterrence: What might deter a U.S.

government may be quite different from what might deter a hostile power, particularly one with a nondemocratic form of government that views the world through a very different lens. Because this argument is not central to the paper's thrust either, it, too, is a distraction.

My Bottom Line

In sum, despite the useful technical contributions on verification, the paper remains incomplete. It raises important political issues but does not provide answers. And because the political issues are more resistant to solution than the technical ones, the community must await a more complete treatment of this important subject.

Note

[1] Inherent in the line of argument that the abolition of arsenals by the five recognized nuclear-weapon states will halt nuclear proliferation, too, is the idea that the NPT is a favor granted (temporarily) by the non–nuclear-weapon states to the nuclear-weapon states and, therefore, that it is not generally in the interests of the non–nuclear-weapon states either to belong to the treaty or to abide by its constraints. In reality, a treaty that prevents one's neighbors from developing nuclear weapons is manifestly in any state's national security self-interest. For this reason, all non–nuclear-weapon states party to the treaty need to abandon this appealing but clearly false rhetorical stance and to take a strong stand in favor of the continued viability of the NPT and against the proliferation of nuclear weapons.