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Rethinking a Political Approach to Nuclear Abolition

George Perkovich, Fumihiko Yoshida, and Michiru Nishida

At a 2022 summit in Bali, Indonesia, leaders from the Group of Twenty (G20) declared that "the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible." Their statement echoed the 1986 declaration by then U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva, when they said that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." At the outset of this book, it is prudent to reinforce their judgment. No one knows if a limited nuclear war can be kept from escalating. And if an all-out nuclear war occurs, everyone will lose devastatingly. It is asking too much of twenty-first-century humans and machines to believe that nuclear deterrence will work without fail over the next eighty years.

For the complete analysis, read the complete book "Rethinking a Political Approach to Nuclear Abolition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Nagasaki University Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, March 28, 2025.

Preventing nuclear war and other existential military threats requires nations today to focus more on politics than on the qualities or quantities of weapons. Yet, many participants in nuclear policy debates do the opposite. They demand abolition without addressing political-security conditions, or they advocate force building without fully acknowledging the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation or making genuine efforts to mutually stabilize relations.

Today—and for the foreseeable future—Russia, North Korea, Pakistan, Israel, and several U.S. allies feel too threatened to consider relinquishing their nuclear deterrence. Meanwhile, the United States feels it needs potential recourse to nuclear weapons to defend itself and its allies from possible attacks by Russia, China, or North Korea. None of these states can be forced to give up their nuclear weapons. Their leaders feel they would be destroyed politically if they pursued unilateral nuclear disarmament.

The political aversion to nuclear disarmament or even balanced mutual restraint reflects a reluctance of adversaries to compromise with each other domestically *and* internationally. It also reflects fear that one nuclear power will seek to remove or control the regimes of

others, perhaps abetted by new technologies that they hope will allow them to win a war without causing all-out nuclear escalation. Military-industrial complexes and worst-case policymaking also militate against the type of balanced dealmaking with adversaries that is necessary to stabilize competitions short of war and, after that, to pursue disarmament.

Most of these drivers are not new. But today's political and civil society leaders must understand and manage them in more difficult circumstances than their predecessors did. Compared with the bipolar Cold War, the number of variables and political leaderships that now need to be brought into alignment to negotiate durable restraints appears overwhelming. Picture Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, the United States' Donald Trump, India's Narendra Modi, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, France's Emmanuel Macron, the United Kingdom's Keir Starmer, and Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif and Asim Munir all negotiating nuclear disarmament with each other.

The most avid proponents of nuclear weaponry and military supremacy use the specter of nuclear abolition to gain or hold power by branding advocates of nuclear restraint as naïfs who will make their nations vulnerable to predators. Meanwhile, the United States and Russia have broken, withdrawn from, or suspended all but one arms control agreement. China is undertaking an unprecedented expansion of its nuclear arsenal. North Korea continues to diversify and increase its arsenal while blustering an aggressive nuclear doctrine. And India and Pakistan compete without even dialogue on nuclear stability. These governments engage in unstabilized nuclear competition even though it is futile, wastefully expensive, and excessively dangerous. (Chapter 6 details eight major liabilities of such competition: arms racing; crisis instability and conflict escalation; cost; futility; overkill; absence of positive incentives for adversary restraint; and disjuncture from top leaders' likely approach in a war.) Each says it is for deterrence, but if an opponent were doing the same thing, each would say the opponent is seeking advantages for offensive purposes.

To eventually overcome the political forces of unstabilized competition, this book suggests that governments and civil society organizations who advocate nuclear disarmament will need to join with those who see value in nuclear deterrence (for now, at least) to build the case for negotiating measures to stabilize it as much as possible and eventually pursue disarmament.

Deterrence cannot be completely stabilized—it is premised on the possibility that one or more competitors might act violently to change the status quo, and that opponents might respond to escalating violence by using nuclear weapons. But measures can be taken to make deterrence of conflict more rather than less stable, and to lower the costs and risks that nuclear competition imposes on everyone. Stabilized nuclear competition means the competitors have acknowledged they cannot escape from mutual vulnerability—they explicitly recognize that offensive first strikes and missile defenses cannot adequately negate adversaries' capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on them. Politically, it will be easier for people to recognize the problems with unstabilized nuclear deterrence if the alternative is not seen as unilateral nuclear disarmament—at least in states where political parties compete in projecting their strength vis-à-vis international adversaries. Political coalitions can be more readily built if a large number of other governments actively advocates for stabilization measures even though they fall far short of nuclear abolition.

Stabilization, as conceived here, entails one large goal and six guidelines to reduce nuclear risks so long as politics preclude abolition (as discussed in Chapter 7.)

The large goal is to end nuclear overkill. Overkill arsenals are defined as those whose size and potential destructiveness are dictated more by bureaucratic interests and processes than by rational considerations of what would deter major aggression by each adversary; whose use would cause more death and destruction than the aggression they are supposed to stop; and whose harm to noncombatant nations and the environment would be unjustifiable morally, politically, and under international law. In other words, overkill arsenals are those that, if fully used, would violate legal principles of necessity (no other weapons would suffice), discrimination (sparing civilians), proportionality, and avoidance of undue suffering. Defining which force postures are not overkill will always be debatable. But nuclear-armed states and alliances should engage themselves and the rest of the international community in assessing the likely effects of various nuclear war scenarios—as a new United Nations–mandated expert group is now slated to do—and then invite (or challenge) each other to adjust their nuclear postures accordingly. To advance this process, top leaders of nuclear-armed states should be asked by leaders of other states and, when possible, media and civil society to specify whether and how their nuclear postures and plans are overkill or not. Leaders responsible for ordering nuclear use historically have thought differently about whether and how to use nuclear weapons than military planners and deterrence theorists often do.

The six guidelines for making nuclear forces and policies more stabilizing and accountable to humanity—thereby strengthening the "nuclear taboo" urged by many leaders of global civil society, including Nobel Peace Prize recipient Nihon Hidankyo—are:

1. Base nuclear policymaking on mutual vulnerability as a matter of fact, recognizing that quests for nuclear supremacy will stimulate countermeasures that ultimately leave everyone worse off than they would be if stabilized policies and postures prevailed.
2. Eschew plans and capabilities to preemptively destroy adversaries' nuclear forces and command-and-control systems, if such nuclear counterforce targeting will stimulate destabilizing countermeasures such as arms racing and launch-on-warning or launch-under-attack plans. This need not lead to increased targeting of population centers.
3. Limit homeland missile defenses against adversaries' second-strike nuclear deterrents to the degree necessary to avoid counter arms racing and preemptive attacks on missile defense warning and command-and control-capabilities.
4. Plan to use nuclear weapons only on targets that cannot be destroyed by other means with the militarily available time.
5. Reduce risks of inadvertent escalation, especially by understanding how multiple-use command-and-control and weapon delivery systems could make the targeted country mistakenly conclude it is under nuclear attack and respond accordingly.
6. Bolster confidence in the political intentions of competitors by codifying restraints and devising ways to assure each other of compliance.

Admittedly, there is little political hope for much of this today (though still more than for abolition). Similar despair beclouded the early 1980s too, after the demise of détente. Then, civil society organizations in Europe and the United States joined to challenge the renewed U.S.-NATO-Soviet arms race, initially with little success. A few years later, leadership changed in Moscow, heads of states confidentially sought to reassure each other, and, within a decade, whole categories of nuclear weapons were eliminated or removed from deployment

and strategic forces were significantly reduced. True, those were simpler times and there were fewer actors. Even then, an attachment to a fantasy missile defense technology precluded deeper progress. Thirty-five years later, much of that nuclear risk reduction has been undone. Still, it is possible that societies and some leaders will recognize the unnecessary danger of current trends and begin laying the groundwork for mutual restraints to be built when political changes allow more reasonable policies. U.S. presidents, in particular, can be surprising: Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were staunch anticommunist defense hawks, yet they concluded far-reaching nuclear arms control agreements (that began through secret communications with their communist counterparts).

To begin altering the politics of nuclear debate, governments and civil society actors dissatisfied with current trends should ask leaders of nuclear-armed states and alliances fundamental questions that will not be easily or immediately dismissed. Will nuclear-armed states foreswear initiating the use of force to take disputed territory or impose changes of government on populations?[1] And, in the face of the unstabilized nuclear competition today that alarms much of the world, how do leaders of these governments justify not sustaining high-level dialogues on stabilizing strategic relations with each other and reducing the risk of nuclear war? It is especially important that leaders of countries that do not possess nuclear weapons ask these questions, as they could be most unjustly harmed by escalated nuclear conflict. Leaders who refuse to answer these questions should be asked over and over again.

The more directly, discreetly, and repeatedly that leaders talk with each other, the more likely some clarity will emerge, either to assuage worst-case assumptions or to validate them and prepare defensive actions. While it may be impossible to accurately understand competitors from vastly different cultures and systems of government, it should be possible through dialogue to assess whether their intentions are tolerable enough to pursue mutual restraint in the development and deployment of nuclear weapons. This will be as important for Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jung Un as it should be for Donald Trump.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Perkovich is the Japan Chair for a World Without Nuclear Weapons and a senior fellow in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Nuclear Policy Program.

Fumihiko Yoshida is the director of Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition at Nagasaki University and editor-in-chief of *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*.

Michiru Nishida is a professor at the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences and the deputy director of the Research Center for Global Risk, both at Nagasaki University.

NOTES

1 Reagan and Gorbachev made such a pronouncement privately to each other in November 1985 after their first meeting in Geneva and it helped open the way to the various mutual restraints that followed. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (University of Washington Press, 2016), 595.

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