

George Perkovich and James M. Acton.
Abolishing Nuclear Weapons.

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George Perkovich and James Acton have performed a service by forthrightly laying out the general conditions and steps that would need to precede nuclear abolition. Much of the discussion on whether and how to 'get to zero' avoids this kind of practical road-mapping, instead preferring to dwell on the dire necessity of the effort or on recommendations for early moves in that direction.¹

The book begins by stating its objective of seeking to encourage a goal-oriented conversation on the abolition of nuclear arms. (7) It assumes that the effort should be tried and seeks to work out how it could be done. (10) It then marches through the political conditions that would need to be established in order to increase the chances of getting rid of nuclear weapons (Chapter One), moves to problems of verification (Chapter Two), discusses the challenges posed by civil nuclear energy in a nuclear weapons-free world (Chapter Three), tries to confront the problem of enforcement once such an objective has been achieved (Chapter Four), and discusses the problems associated with hedging and managing nuclear knowledge after getting to zero (Chapter Five). By sketching out the requirements necessary to achieve a nuclear-free world (or something approximating it), Perkovich and Acton help open a new front, so to speak, in the debate: instead of talking entirely in generalities, now we can see what a plausible case would look like for how to 'get to zero' and can argue about that, too.

In so doing, they unintentionally provide another service. That is, to affirm the anti-abolitionist position by showing just how unrealistic and, even more pointedly, unappealing, getting to and living in a world without nuclear weapons would be. As their monograph shows, and occasionally even admits, (12, 83) such a project would involve the states of

the world exposing themselves to enormously increased risk at the cost of their national autonomy and flexibility in a profoundly doubtful and perpetually unstable endeavor. And all this in exchange for – well, the argument for why all this would be ventured is never advanced with the vigor commensurate with the call's demands.

The authors are ambitious. They state early that nuclear disarmament would not be feasible unless the most dangerous global flashpoint issues were resolved, including Taiwan, Kashmir, Palestine, and the Russian near-abroad, *inter alia*. (Chapter One) They further note that key regions of the world would have to continue to shelter under the United States' extended deterrence commitments, even as US conventional dominance would have to be reigned in 'by international law as understood by other major powers in determining whether, when, and how to use military force'. (25) Despite this loss of discretion, the US would simultaneously have to build up its conventional capabilities to meet these commitments in order to replace the loss in potency from removal of its nuclear forces. (30-31) Russia, China, Japan, Europe, India, Pakistan, and the other important powers would need to be satisfied that they would be protected against aggression or coercion from any of the others. (24-32) The Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs would have to be stopped. (36-37) And so on. These are not modest demands.

But the authors' point is more systematic and ambitious than a series of disjointed proposals, and is made more explicit later, in the context of enforcement: for nuclear disarmament to progress, among the great powers there would need to be 'significant reconciliation of their interests and approaches to regional and global security.' (90) This is because nuclear weapons are uniquely central to the world's security system due to their unparalleled destructiveness and consequent value as instruments of deterrence, a value the authors concede. (87) Nuclear weapons have played central and irreplaceable roles in deterring aggression, most notably against the Soviet threat (both conventional and nuclear) against western Europe and elsewhere, but also in the US-China, India-Pakistan and, more indirectly, Israeli-Arab contexts. Nuclear weapons continue to play a vital role in assuring at least thirty allies in Europe and Asia of US security commitments and, more importantly, provide a nearly unshakable backstop against future strategic and technological developments. Getting rid of nuclear weapons would, therefore, involve forfeiting the most effective known instruments of deterrence, instruments that have been correlated with – and, in all likelihood, were the principal cause of – sixty years without major great power war.²

As the authors recognize, such a forfeiture could only take place if the need for such deterrence no longer obtained; in other words, that

potentially dangerous interstate competition and disagreement no longer existed. Such a world is implausible (and perhaps impossible) if states are to retain the substantial autonomy they enjoy today. This forfeiture would require the important states of the world to find reasons and ways to cease acting in a fundamentally independent manner with respect to the management and resolution of their differences. Since conventional arms simply cannot provide the same effectiveness as deterrents, nuclear-armed states and those they shelter would have to see the decision to disarm as responsible and sustainable, a prospect only likely in a world in which states no longer fear that other states or non-state actors will exploit this vulnerability.

It would perhaps be too flippant to dismiss this as hopelessly implausible, but it is more than that. For if the proposal is offered with any seriousness of purpose, it is also a call for radical change in global governance. This is most clearly stated in the authors' discussion of the problem of enforcement in a nuclear-limited or nuclear-free world. Acknowledging that states would be intensely interested in enforcing the rules and in preventing cheating and breakout, the authors blithely state that 'it would be necessary to develop punishments that could deter states from breaching their obligations and deny states the benefits of any violation' and 'there must be decision-making avenues and procedures that enjoy international legitimacy and that would work in a manner timely and robust enough to deter or eliminate threats.' (84) This has a bloodless tone, and their suggestions – that the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council or a separate body of the nuclear eight take responsibility – seem only a marginal shift from current practice. But make no mistake. What they are talking about is a revolutionary shift in global governance: essentially the creation of a sovereign-like entity to manage international security relations. For if this entity were to be capable of assuring states that it could detect and, if necessary, punish a violator rapidly and effectively, it would clearly need to be a very different beast than the UN Security Council which, in comparison, is positively feckless. Indeed, the authors recognize that the power to make war in pursuit of these duties would be a necessary component of this entity's charter – and not only to make war, but to make it with such effectiveness as to satisfy other states that the nuclear-free world would be protected. (94) Yet if such an entity were to be effective, it could not reasonably confine itself to limited strikes, which even minor countries like Libya (1986), Sudan (1998) and Afghanistan (1998) could withstand. It would need to be able to prevent breakouts, withstand challenges if necessary and defeat recalcitrant powers. It would thus need to monitor states' most sensitive defence activities, have the strength to outmatch

any challenge, and bear the authority to act quickly, effectively and decisively – to be ‘exceptionally reliable.’ (83)

This means that even though the authors reject ‘automatic’ enforcement (which is meaningless anyway – who gets to decide what ‘automatic’ means?) the implication is to vest decision-making authority – a kind of sovereignty – with the entity. It would have the power to make decisions about states’ central security dispositions and actions and to act on those decisions – otherwise it would not provide the margin of safety other states would demand. Nor would the entity’s powers be confined to the merely technical sphere. States obtain and retain nuclear weapons for fundamentally political reasons, generally because of their security situation and, occasionally, for reasons of prestige. As the authors note, for a nuclear-free world to be sustainable, political disputes such as those over Taiwan and Kashmir would not only have to be resolved but also continuously managed. New conflicts would have to be addressed and prevented from reaching the point at which nuclear weapons would become an appealing tool. Thus political motivations would need to be an inherent part of the entity’s writ as well. Of course, these responsibilities might be shared with another entity like the Security Council. But the underlying point is that international political disputes of any severity would need to be disposed of at the international level. Thus an international entity or entities would have the power to make decisions about countries’ core security issues and to take effective actions based on those decisions.

In other words, to get to a reliably nuclear-free world, there would need to be a sovereign or nearly-sovereign international power to manage international security affairs. This would be an even greater necessity if the proposal to arm this international entity with a nuclear force were enacted. (100-101) Given that such a system is irreconcilable with the continuation of the independence of truly sovereign states, even when, as now, ensconced in numerous multilateral arrangements, it can be concluded that a nuclear-free world does, after all, demand a revolutionary change in the global political order. Perkovich and Acton approach their task coolly, with a moderate detachment, yet their conclusion inadvertently confirms that the most radical partisans of disarmament are right, after all: the goal of abolition requires something approximating world government.

Needless to say, such a prospect seems neither plausible nor particularly appealing. Which leads to the question: why, again, are we trying to do this? The authors state that their ‘ultimate reason’ is to try to ‘reduce the danger of sudden mass annihilation.’ (110) But opponents of abolition share that goal – they just think that retaining nuclear weapons

is more likely to prevent that unfortunate outcome. The real rationale seems to be something else, referred to by the authors as 'the principle of global nuclear equity.' (103) They hold to 'the basic principle that a nuclear order cannot be maintained and strengthened over time on the basis of inequity.' (10) Here is the real nub of the disagreement. Perkovich and Acton appear to think that nuclear proliferation and, eventually, use cannot be averted without all states being treated basically alike with respect to their nuclear capabilities. (10) This argument seems to be both plausible and to have moral power. But is it correct?

It seems pretty clear that it is not.³ First, is 'equity' really so important to states (and non-state actors)? Despite the clamour from some states, the historical record would certainly indicate that it is not. The very structure of today's international system not only accepts inequity, but positively relies on it. The UN Security Council, composed of the postwar world's 'Big Five', is vested by the UN Charter with 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.'⁴ On a more practical level, the cold war saw many countries such as Japan alongside Germany and other NATO powers appear content to allow the US to take a leading role in deterring Communist aggression; in fact, the allies appeared adamant that the US should not be treated alike, as this might encourage its withdrawal to its traditional insular posture. Going further back, periods of peace and stability were characterized by stark inequities in power: the pax Britannica, imperial Rome, China's role as the Middle Kingdom. More 'equal' periods – early modern or late nineteenth century Europe, for instance – have been far more violent.

Furthermore, the world is much more 'equitable' in nuclear terms than it initially appears. First, there are eight (or, counting North Korea, nine) nuclear weapons states. Second, most of the world's big economies essentially 'have' nuclear weapons: they are covered by a credible US nuclear-backed security commitment. In Europe, the non-nuclear allies in NATO have direct input into nuclear planning through established mechanisms within the alliance; some non-nuclear NATO allies are actually capable of delivering nuclear weapons themselves through 'dual-capable aircraft.'⁵ US allies in Europe and Asia thus enjoy the benefits of nuclear weapons even though they do not 'own' them. Third, many of the other big economies enjoy conventional commitments from countries (particularly the US) ultimately capable of resorting to nuclear use if necessary: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and several Southeast Asian nations would fall into this category. Fourth, many important states are 'lesser included' cases within 'protected' regions: Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden and Austria are 'free riders' on NATO's security structure. Fifth, the countries of Latin America, the South Pacific and, to a lesser extent,

Africa are in a security environment dominated by external powers effectively overseeing the security situation; furthermore, the countries of these regions are committed to nuclear weapons free zone pacts (the Treaty of Tlatelolco, the Treaty of Rarotonga and the signed but inoperative Treaty of Pelindaba). This leaves just a few 'anxiously unincorporated' states – Iran, North Korea, and Syria in particular – outside of existing nuclear or nuclear-enabled security arrangements.

This system - malleable, responsive, and realistic - seems to have worked exceedingly well. Not only has nuclear war been averted over the last sixty years, but so, too, in a break with the entire history of humanity, has conventional war among major powers. But, as Churchill observed, this cold peace is ultimately the 'sturdy child of terror.' Perkovich and Acton, in harmony with Henry Kissinger, George Shultz and a host of others, are skeptical that it is so 'sturdy.' Many others – and probably the authors, too – also recoil at the second part of Churchill's advice, better defined as promoting the threat of disproportionate and overwhelming retaliation designed to render any aggression irrational in itself, as opposed to merely 'terror.'

But Perkovich and Acton have shown what getting to and living in a world without nuclear weapons would probably look like: one nervously overseen and dominated by a sovereign entity (or entities). Achieving a world without nuclear weapons would entail sacrificing national political autonomy and, in large part, independence, because a world of free and separate states must always exist with the possibility of serious conflict, and that tension is incompatible with laying down the most effective instruments of deterrence. All good things do not go together, and this monograph shows us the stupendous costs we would incur to rid ourselves of nuclear arms (assuming, almost certainly wrongly, that it is possible). To those who believe we are perpetually only a minute away from the midnight of nuclear darkness, such a tradeoff may be, if not appealing, simply a necessity. To those who value the independence of nations, or who see world government as a recipe for gross inefficiency and unresponsiveness, if not tyranny, and who can bear the tension of a cold peace, the abolition project is to be resisted. This is also the case for those who believe such a venture to be hopelessly unrealistic and unconscionably risky, and for those who reject it for a host of other reasons. Competition and tension are inherently part of human interaction, and so success is never final. The most we can hope for then, is a cold peace based on making major aggression of any kind positively irrational. In an imperfect world, that's a lot. ■

¹ For the author's view on the inadvisability of the goal of nuclear abolition, see Elbridge Colby, 'Nuclear Abolition: A Dangerous Illusion,' *Orbis* (Summer 2008): 424-433.

² Contrary to the authors' claim, nuclear weapons are thus not like chemical or biological weapons, which have been at least nominally banned, because finding 'other means [...] to perform their functions' is vastly more difficult – if not impossible – with nuclear weapons than with other weapons' (11). In fact, the reason chemical and biological weapons have been 'banned' is precisely because they could be so easily substituted.

³ For a further elaboration of this point, see Colby, 'Nuclear Abolition,' 431-432.

⁴ Charter of the United Nations, Article 24.

⁵ 'NATO Handbook: NATO's Nuclear Force's in the New Security Environment,' <http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/hb0206.htm> (accessed January 18, 2008).