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On Order, Stability, and Nuclear Abolition

Congratulations to George Perkovich and James Acton for their valuable effort to bring some new content to the debate about nuclear disarmament. Their "thought experiment" in the real-world requirements of nuclear abolition brings home a powerful message about the obligations that would fall on many states, and not just those in possession of nuclear weapons, to make such a world viable. I am grateful for the invitation to join the conversation they are seeking to energize. I wish to focus this comment on two key elements of their analysis. The first relates to the linkage between order and abolition. The second relates to the linkage between stability and the movement toward abolition.

On Order and Abolition

First, let us review the international political conditions that might—just might—make abolition feasible. The paper lists the following:

- In the Middle East: an acceptance by Israel that it will be secure without nuclear weapons, resolution (or durable stabilization) of the Palestinian conflict, Iranian acquiescence to international demands that it remain non-nuclear, and creation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction

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- In South Asia: resolution (or durable stabilization) of the Kashmir conflict and acceptance by India and Pakistan that nuclear weapons are not necessary to deter large-scale war

- In East Asia: resolution (or durable stabilization) of the conflict over Taiwan and acceptance by Japan and others in the region that China's rise is not threatening

- In major power relations: confidence among the five nuclear-weapon states recognized by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that their conventional military power is sufficient to deter threats to their vital interests; a cooperative U.S.–Russia–China approach to strategic military stability, including substantial U.S. deference to Russian sensibilities on missile defense; Russian willingness to settle disputes around its periphery on terms acceptable to others; Russian and Chinese confidence that they need not fear the offensive potential of U.S. conventional military power; and U.S. assurances that it will not act unilaterally or with small "coalitions of the willing" in any circumstance

- Among U.S. allies: a relaxation of the need for a nuclear-backed security guarantee from the United States and confidence that its conventional power projection would be sufficiently swift and decisive to defend them and their interests in a time of need

Whether this is a definitive list is debatable. The fact that it is daunting is not. For a moment, I wondered why the authors bothered to write any chapters beyond their first. After all, it seems as if they are arguing that nuclear abolition will be possible only when the lion lies down with the lamb, "peace breaks out," and nuclear swords are turned into kilowatt-hours because of their utter irrelevance in a new and different world.

In fact, of course, the authors do not anticipate the end of conflict. They recognize that conflicts may be stabilized but not resolved, that confidence may rise but not yield full trust, and that some states cheat. Thus they argue that disarmament in an imperfect world requires effective collective security. And what would effective collective security responses to threatened or actual breaches of the nuclear peace require? They highlight the following: a "significant reconciliation of interests and approaches" among the major powers; a willingness on their part to put international stability ahead of the single-minded pursuit of national advantages; the creation of

compliance processes that enjoy broad international legitimacy; and the availability of non-nuclear means of punishment (that would be seen as credible by the targets of deterrence).

The effort to build the institutions, processes, and norms of collective security is much more than a thought experiment. This effort is now roughly a century old. The record to date can hardly be seen as encouraging for rapid achievement of the type of world the authors invite us to envision. After all, most of the failures of nonproliferation through the nuclear era are directly tied to divergent interests among the major powers or to their ineffectiveness as guarantors of countries that perceived the risks sufficient to seek nuclear deterrents. In dealing with the threat of weapons of mass destruction in particular, the record of the United Nations Security Council is not particularly distinguished. The moment of hope reflected in the "New World Order" envisioned by President George H. W. Bush in 1991, built around collective enforcement of global norms, has given way to mounting skepticism as the Security Council has failed to prevent or reverse proliferation by India, Pakistan, and North Korea; has proven ineffective at curtailing Iran's programs of concern; and has publicly fallen out over its roles and objectives vis-à-vis Iraq. Can a viable nuclear-free world be built on this track record? Would a renewed disarmament effort somehow break this pattern and bring the needed discipline to the major powers? Do their interests in fact coincide in nuclear abolition? In the quest for a world ready to permit the final moves to nuclear disarmament, these conditions seem especially difficult to fulfill.

But let us grant that political circumstances might change and that collective security institutions could be made to work as envisaged and that others might accept their compliance role as legitimate. Would these institutions then be ready and able to meet the unique tests that might come in a world where abolition has taken hold incompletely? In analyzing this particular problem, the paper paints too benign a picture, in my view. It focuses too much on the problem posed by the cheating state that has hidden the proverbial atomic bomb in the basement and too little on the problem posed by a state that openly brandishes its bombs and then sets out on some bold ambition of coercion or aggression. The question of how to deal with a nuclear-armed renegade gets little more than one paragraph in the discussion of enforcement. How would the major powers do their jobs as global sheriffs against a nuclear-armed challenger? Would their publics be willing to do so without nuclear weapons of their own? Could deterrence of such a challenger be effective by conventional means alone? Could defeat of such a state be done in a sufficiently rapid and decisive

way by conventional means to safeguard the lives of those millions who might perish in a longer war? More thinking is needed on such questions.

In sum, the international political conditions that could enable abolition do not currently exist. They seem to require major, and in some ways fundamental, reorientations in the roles and responsibilities of most of the actors in the international system. These observations leave me skeptical that the conditions that would make abolition feasible are in any way proximate. This is not to argue that we should not work to bring them into being. After all, we want to live in a world in which most of the conflicts have been eliminated, or at least stabilized, and where major powers act in concert to maintain the peace. It would be (and has been) a worthy use of U.S. power to bring such a world closer.

On Stability and the Movement Toward Abolition

That brings me to my second focus. The paper speaks alternately of the near-term steps toward the "near horizon" and the more distant steps to the "far prospect" of actual abolition. How many steps might there be in between (if the latter indeed proves possible)? Might they prove to be small steps or large steps? Because I assess the international political conditions enabling abolition as not proximate, I must conclude that the landscape between the near horizon and the far prospect is rather large. And I anticipate that the terrain will sometimes be easy to traverse but will other times require some great leaps and even some backtracking and indirect travel. I would expect also that experience along the way will significantly color beliefs about the desirability of disarmament and the means to achieve it. Hence I feel that the paper has given this part of the journey short shrift. From my perspective, a number of problems stand out in this particular part of the landscape as being worthy of deeper study. Four are highlighted here.

First, the major powers will confront new problems of instability if and as they reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons and adapt their strategic postures to new circumstances. As numbers come down, both the United States and Russia will worry increasingly about how quickly and competitively the other might try to send them back up, and each has different capacities to reassure itself that it would not be taken advantage of in this manner. If and as the numbers come down, imbalances in remaining capabilities will become more prominent; the United States will worry increasingly about Russia's tactical nuclear weapons, while Russia will worry increasingly about emerging imbalances with states along its periphery that possess intermediate-range nuclear capabilities. If and as

the numbers come down, Russia and China will worry more about imbalances at the conventional level of war (for which they compensate by nuclear means). They are already keenly concerned about being able to offset growing U.S. advantages in non-nuclear strategic strike and also missile defense. Stability in relations among the nuclear-weapon states at lower numbers will not be achieved simply by cutting to lower numbers.

Second, deeper reductions in the two largest existing nuclear arsenals will have an impact on the behaviors of other states. The authors touch on the incentives that this might create for new states to enter the nuclear club, as the cost of entry to peer status would have been reduced. Such reductions may also motivate existing members of the nuclear club to new nuclear status. For example, China's possible "sprint to parity" (by building up its arsenal to match that of the United States and Russia in a numerical sense) is a rising worry today for policy makers in both Washington and Moscow. Some in Asia also express concern about what level of nuclear prowess India might ultimately deem necessary to its desired political status. As the authors rightly argue, mitigating this problem will require bringing nuclear-armed states other than Russia and the United States into the formal reduction process. So far at least, this has proven far easier to say than do. Determining how it might be done requires a deeper understanding than has been evident so far of how leaders in these countries are trying to adapt force structures in response to increasingly complex security environments.

Third, new stability problems will emerge if and as the newest proliferators increase their arsenals and their strategic reach. Most states preach the virtues of minimum deterrence, but most also have found the search for a survivable deterrent to be long and arduous. In the coming decades, states such as India, Pakistan, and Iran may assemble arsenals of warheads numbering in the hundreds and delivery systems capable of global reach, adding tremendous complexity to the web of deterrence. The occasional search for unilateral advantage seems likely to add tremendous fragility to that web.

Fourth, if the decades ahead are anything like the decades past, we can expect to see the emergence of one or more states committed to a revolutionary ideology, a challenge that would take on a particular new and ominous hue if that state also has nuclear weapons. Such a development could well make the "rogue state" problem look easy in comparison. After all, so far at least, our experience with "rogue states" is that they have sought to commit aggression against their immediate neighbors and to use violence against their own citizens. How different a world would we

face if a revolutionary regime were to emerge, one committed to the use of nuclear threats, and perhaps also nuclear attacks, to broadly remake international borders or advance an ideology of purported global import, or simply to wage civil war? Some in al-Qaeda have articulated just such a vision—the creation of a nuclear-armed caliphate that would exploit its status as a "nuclear superpower" to first purify the *umma* and then remake the global order. Whatever the ultimate fate of such a state, the experience would likely be hugely decisive in shaping the next nuclear order.

This list is illustrative of the potential problems of consequence for nuclear order somewhere beyond the "near horizon" but before the last step to the "far prospect." But it is not a prediction. Some such problems might prove easy to manage by negotiation. Other problems beyond those anticipated here would undoubtedly emerge. As argued above, we cannot know now precisely how many and what type of steps might lie along the landscape I am trying to sketch out here.

Recognizing that the challenges of nuclear order in this interim period are unique and consequential for what is to follow has at least a couple of important implications.

One implication is that there will be some challenges in this interim period for which nuclear deterrence remains relevant. This implies that nuclear-armed states, especially those that guarantee the security of other states, must have capabilities in place that are effective for deterrence. Four of the five recognized nuclear-weapon states have established modernization plans that aim to tailor deterrence capabilities to future requirements as they are perceived. The fifth is the United States, which remains committed to caretaking a nuclear deterrent that was built in another time for another purpose and to standards of security and reliability better suited to bygone days. Many advocates of abolition have deemed any modernization of the U.S. deterrent as inconsistent with the long-term goal of abolition. It is useful to recall here the concept of nuclear order framed by William Walker: an agreed balance of restraint and deterrence. We know well what restraint the abolition vision requires, but we know far less about what deterrence that vision requires. Failures of deterrence in the decade(s) ahead could be as decisive, if not more so, to the disarmament prospect as successes in restraint. Some new foundation must be found that aligns U.S. force modernization with medium- and long-term objectives. Perkovich and Acton have done a nice job of pushing the envelope of thinking on the role of deterrence in the interim period ahead, and I only encourage further thinking.

A second implication relates to the argument with which the authors begin their paper: "[I]f it is to be sustainable and acceptable to the majority of states, any new nuclear order must be equitable and not perpetuate the disparity between the states that possess nuclear weapons and those that do not." This seems true of the "far prospect," but what about in the landscape between there and the "near horizon"? Can there be a durable but nonequitable nuclear order in the interim period? Elsewhere in social and political relations, the only basis for an unequal distribution of rights is an unequal distribution of responsibilities. This is to imply that the only possible basis for a continued international acceptance of unequal nuclear rights in the interim period is improved performance by the nuclear-weapon states of their responsibilities as stewards of the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter. Their failure to act responsibly—and to be seen to be so acting—would make even less likely the ultimate fulfillment of the international political conditions of disarmament. Their ability to act responsibly will depend critically on their confidence that they have the means available to stand up to nuclear-armed renegades.

Toward the end of their paper, the authors ask: "Why bother?" Why bother to try to flesh out a vision of what abolition requires if initial sketches suggest it might well be impossible? Why have the debate at all? My answer is twofold. First, the debate about nuclear abolition is a reminder of the responsibility of all states to lend their power as stakeholders in international order to the resolution of conflicts and to the effective functioning of collective security mechanisms. Abolition without order would be a recipe for disaster. Second, the debate about next steps and last steps can help illuminate the landscape in between and the distinct challenges to nuclear order that might erupt there. If we expect to live in that world for some time to come, more needs to be done to tailor strategies of restraint and deterrence to the requirements of order in that new landscape.