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The Power of Abolition

The project of abolishing nuclear weapons is a puzzle with a thousand pieces. Achieving it is like solving Rubik's Cube: The art is to know which pieces have to be put in place first, which later. Which steps toward the goal are *conditions* for achieving further ones? Which steps will *enable* which others? Which obstacles are showstoppers? Which can be worked around? Is a detailed vision of the endpoint necessary to guide the first steps, or can the first steps grope forward without such guidance? If so, will the endpoint emerge only through a kind of grand improvisation? Is a practical vision of the endpoint possible at all? Would embrace of the goal make "the best" the enemy of "the good"? Or would it in fact be indispensable to the progress of the good? For example, is abolition the only way to stop proliferation, or can proliferation be stopped while some states hold on to nuclear arsenals and resolve to keep them indefinitely? What about regional political crises and tangles? Are they fatal obstacles to abolition, or might abolition provide a key to solving them? What about great-power tensions? Must these be dissipated first, or, on the contrary, should their existence be a further goad pushing the world away from nuclear annihilation? Is denuclearization thus possible only for nations living in harmony, or can it to be robust enough to include rivals, even enemies? Or is there some middle course, combining steps toward disarmament with reductions of non-nuclear tensions? Hanging in the balance is not only the question of what is the right path to abolition but also whether abolition is even possible—or desirable.

The Hows of Abolition

In *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons,* George Perkovich and James Acton have carved out a portion of these questions to address. They tell us at the outset that they will investigate "how complete nuclear disarmament could be achieved safely and securely." They will not discuss "whether it should be tried." The emphasis is thus on conditions that must be met if abolition is to be acceptable to the existing nuclear powers. (The 186 non–nuclear-weapon states have each, of course, already achieved "abolition" within their own borders, in keeping with the requirements of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT.) The editorial delimitation was in one respect wise. Discussions of abolition have usually been broad-brush affairs—satellite views, so to speak, of the subject. By zooming in on one section of the problem, the Adelphi Paper affords a level of specificity rarely found in discussions of abolition. The result is a rich trove of findings, questions, and conclusions.

The discussion of "first steps," such as further reducing the U.S. and Russian arsenals, de-alerting all nuclear arsenals, and querying the lesser nuclear powers' willingness to join the process, is quite familiar. The new element here is to examine these proposals as steps toward abolition. Yet because the authors believe it is too early to commit themselves to that goal, we may wonder why states would wish to take steps toward a destination to which they are as yet unable to dedicate themselves. Their incentive would seem weak.

The paper forges into new territory when it takes up the issues of inspection of abolition, its enforcement, and the possible role of hedging or "'virtual' arsenals." Especially welcome is the introduction of political considerations into discussions that are too often purely technical. After all, it is concrete, existing countries, not countries in general, that will have to embrace abolition if the goal is to descend from the realm of rhetorical flourishes to reality. Thus, the authors pose the question—for the first time, as far as I am aware—of what political reward India might require if it were to agree to an enforcement mechanism for abolition. They conclude that the compensation might be accession to permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, with its privilege of the veto power. India, they persuasively argue, would be unlikely to permit the existing nuclear double standard to persist in new form by submitting itself to the veto of five other former nuclear powers while lacking one itself.

Also refreshing is recognition that abolition depends on consensus and strong resolve by the world's existing great powers, especially the United States, Russia, and China (the Indians would, of course, add themselves to this list), which not only are the world's chief possessors of nuclear

arsenals but also the most influential negotiating partners in efforts to solve nuclear-related regional crises. Curiously, though, the authors do not consider the problem of enforcement should one of these great powers itself violate an abolition agreement. That exercise, it seems to me, would only have strengthened one of their main conclusions: that agreement among these powers is a necessary condition both for embarking on abolition and for preserving it. For if the violator were, say, Russia, there is simply nothing the United States or any other country could do to stop it—except, of course, return to nuclear armament. The discussion of what Israel would require to move toward its already-declared goal of achieving a nuclear-weapon–free Middle East likewise injects politics into the discussion. A further strength of this general approach is the authors' use of recent or current experience, such as the international efforts to roll back Iran's nuclear program, to shed light on possible verification or enforcement crises under an abolition regime.

The Whys of Abolition

The very editorial restriction that has permitted this welcome and original profusion of detail, however, may have weakened the article in other ways. The emphasis is almost entirely on obstacles. With discussion set aside of "whether" and why abolition should be pursued, it becomes very difficult to imagine that the obstacles might be overcome. In this context, the obstacles have a way of hardening into preconditions, which multiply dauntingly. Only if the current efforts to disarm North Korea succeed, the article states, can "possessors of nuclear weapons … look over today's horizon and imagine that the elimination of all nuclear arsenals could be feasible." Likewise, if Iran continues to "defy the rules" in its current negotiations, "there is no reason for anyone to have confidence that rules to guide and secure a nuclear-weapons–free world would be enforced." So, too, removal of threats to Israel's existence "is a necessary political and security precondition for allowing evolutionary steps towards regional and global nuclear disarmament." Framed in this way, the obstacles grow into a dense bramble patch in which the abolition project seems likely to remain stuck indefinitely. If the United States and the other nuclear powers cannot even look over the horizon to envision abolition until a host of current crises are resolved, how can anyone imagine that the world will ever actually arrive at the goal?

The picture would change radically if, at each step, the reasons for choosing abolition—the whys of the matter—were set forth and kept constantly in mind. Consider the plight of Israel, at present the Middle East's sole

nuclear power. Israel's arsenal provides a steady incentive (not the only one, but a major one) for Iran and other countries in the Middle East to acquire nuclear weapons. Pakistan already has the bomb, and its "father," A. Q. Khan, was recently surreptitiously peddling its makings throughout the region. Pakistani scientists are known to have had conversations with Osama bin Laden about nuclear technology. In these circumstances, the danger is growing for Israel not just of military defeat but—what is incomparably worse—of nuclear annihilation. Thus a full consideration of Israel's safety, very much including its existence, requires more than a listing of the conditions that must be met if it is to give up its arsenal. What is needed is a comparative exercise that weighs the dangers if the region or world remain on their current path of proliferation and balances them against the admittedly large and real dangers of a nuclear-weapon–free world.

Or consider the situation of the United States. Most observers agree that the only major military danger to the United States arises from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction that might be imported onto our soil. In this respect, the September 11 attacks constituted the handwriting on the wall. At the same time, it is by no means clear that there is any sensible mission for America's own nuclear arsenal other than deterring the nuclear threats posed by Russia and China. But those threats, of course, would be removed by abolition. Considerations such as these have been key in leading former Secretary of State George Shultz and his co-authors to urge the United States to follow in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan by advocating abolition.

In short, when the whys of abolition are figured in, every specific equation of risk shifts dramatically. At each step, the dangers are then matched against the benefits. The overall anatomy of the dilemma then also looks different. The Adelphi Paper concentrates mostly on the conditions that must be met if the nuclear powers are to disarm (while also examining, though less exhaustively, what disarmament steps those nuclear powers must take to win agreement from the non–nuclear-weapon states on the kind of stringent verification and enforcement measures an abolition agreement would entail). There is very little recognition, however, that not only the steps toward the goal but even current regional nuclear crises, such as those over the North Korean and Iranian programs, might become tractable in the context of a credible global commitment to abolition led by the great nuclear powers, including above all the United States. Some critics of this view suggest that because it is not America's nuclear arsenal but its conventional superiority that North Korea and Iran most fear, a commitment to abolition would have no influence. They also argue that

the mere example of disarmament would have little sway on proliferators, who are more influenced by local anxieties. While it is surely true that the conventional balances must be addressed, these objections overlook the raw power that would be generated by a concert of all nuclear-armed states, backed by every non–nuclear-weapon state, resolved to stake their security on abolition just as firmly as many now stake it on nuclear arms. It would not be a matter of disarming first and then waiting around to see who followed the example—of ending the hypocrisy of the nuclear double standard and then hoping to see virtue rewarded. It would be a matter of launching a global campaign to exert moral, political, economic, and even military pressure against the few holdouts that dared to argue that they alone among the world's nations had a right to these awful weapons. Today, for example, the United States, China, and Russia are disunited in their approach to Iranian violations of the NPT, with the United States taking a tough line and Russia and China taking a more permissive approach. But it is unimaginable that a Russia and China that were themselves planning to do without nuclear arms would permit an Iran or any other nation to develop them. Indeed, great and small powers alike would be united in the cause. In this respect, the disarray of current negotiations, though a useful point of comparison, offers a poor analogy to negotiations in a world on its way to abolition.

Broadly speaking, two approaches to abolition are possible. One is to conclude with the authors that abolition "is too far beyond the horizon" for a decision now, leaving the goal hostage to a variety of conditions that must be met along the way. The other, which I favor, is to canvass the difficulties in advance, make a broad judgment that a world without nuclear weapons, though hardly without dangers, would be incomparably safer and more decent than a world with them, and then proceed. Embrace of the goal should come first, and the steps would then follow. As each obstacle arose, the resources of a united world community, propelled by the prospect of at last living without the horror of nuclear destruction hanging over its head, would be marshaled to meet the challenge. For a commitment to abolition would not only be desirable; it would also be powerful.

Harnessing the Power

If we ask what initial commitment would be enough to immediately check proliferation, we can imagine many answers. It might begin with a clear declaration by an American president, after full agency review, congressional hearings, and extensive public debate, that abolition of nuclear

weapons was the policy of the United States. Or else, the first step might be taken in tandem with Russia. Either way, the agreement of all other nuclear powers would be immediately sought. Part of the agreement among these powers would be a concerted policy to stop nuclear proliferation at once. Countries that already had renounced nuclear weapons should be included in the process without delay, inasmuch as the goal is not just disarmament of the armed but creation of a nuclear order that would embrace all nations. The initial goal thus would be a serious, credible, global commitment to nuclear abolition. Once stages had been outlined, steps, including those recommended in the Adelphi Paper, would commence immediately. While those were being implemented, the difficult final steps would be worked out in detail, not to discover whether they were workable but to make them happen. The process would by no means end with abolition, a term susceptible of many definitions—technical, legal, political, and moral, especially when the latent nuclear capacity of nations, which can never be entirely erased, is considered. The effort should continue with steps "below zero" nuclear weapons to fortify the new order. The final step would be a formal legal ban on nuclear weapons, whose mere possession would be defined as a crime against humanity.

In short, the project should be less like *The Odyssey*, a voyage from one adventure to the next with the outcome uncertain each time, and more like D-Day—a clear plan to reach the goal with provisions made in advance to surmount each obstacle based on a commitment to ultimate success.

It's true that the concluding chapter of the Adelphi Paper does after all articulate reasons for wanting abolition. Those named are: fulfilling the nuclear powers' NPT commitments to full nuclear disarmament; making the expansion of nuclear energy safe by banning nuclear-weapon technology; preventing nuclear terrorism; ending the incentives for proliferation; and—the big one—reducing "the danger of sudden mass annihilation" (p. 110). But these reasons come too late in the argument to be brought to bear on the detailed discussions of specific decisions that form the main substance of the paper. Had they been included earlier, it seems to me, many preconditions for abolition would have turned back into mere obstacles, even as the sources of the global will to overcome them would have been placed on view.