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Nuclear Disarmament: The Need for a New Theory

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Nuclear disarmament: the need for a new theory

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman

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There remains a striking contrast between the demonstrable awfulness and futility of a nuclear war and the practical discussion of ways out of the nuclear age. Eyes burning bright with indignation at the prospect of universal death and the foolishness of our leaders soon begin to glaze over as discussion moves on to the nuances of treaty language and the details of verification. The evaluation of technical proposals can be quite tedious, especially when the proposed solutions fail to rise to the enormity of the problem. This was particulalry true during the cold war, when the focus was on arms control rather than disarmament, on managing nuclear relationships rather than ending them.[1] After the end of the cold war came the opposite problem: the urgency seemed to go out of the issue. A considerable amount of disarmament took place, prompted by the evident and benign change in the international environment and requiring scant recourse to intense negotiations between specialists.

It did not take long, however, for this consequential disarmament to lose its momentum. The nuclear issue remained on the international agenda, although in the form of concerns about proliferation rather than disarmament. First there were the Indian and Pakistani tests of 1998, though few doubted that both countries were already nuclear powers before this confirmation. The continuing debates about North Korea and Iran have been bound up with their rogue status in international affairs, and not just their nuclear aspirations. The unnerving albeit speculative spectre of nuclear terrorism has brought together discussions of familiar sources of insecurity with the new patterns emerging in the form of al Qaeda and other extreme Islamist groups. Meanwhile we have found other things to worry about, notably climate change and environmental degradation. Instead of a cold nuclear winter we have turned our attention to a hot carbon summer.

[1] Lawrence Freedman, *Why is arms control so boring?* Faraday Discussion Paper No. 9. London, Council for Arms Control, 1987.

Now nuclear disarmament is back in vogue. It may just be that these various nuclear crises are starting to have a cumulative impact, or that a period of bad temper between Russia and the NATO countries triggered fears of a return to the cold war, or that the shift in the international mood as a result of the economic crisis has encouraged a general pessimism about the ability of the community of states to cope with big challenges. Perhaps it is just a developing view that this collection of issues is too serious to be neglected much longer. It is over sixty years since the first and only time that nuclear weapons were used in anger. But can we really expect this record of non-use to continue indefinitely? Are we not riding our luck?

For whatever reason, the last couple of years have seen a series of initiatives designed to convince international leaders that the time has come to make a serious effort to eliminate nuclear arsenals. The aspiration is reflected in opinion pieces from elder statesmen, notably the American gang of four of Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn and Bill Perry.[2] The Global Zero initiative, which was launched in Paris last December, has acquired many distinguished signatures. The International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament chaired by Gareth Evans and Yoriko Kawaguchi has now begun work. President Obama has promised that he will seek 'a world in which there are no nuclear weapons.' While this would not be unilateral, he promised to work with Russia to 'dramatically reduce the stockpiles of our nuclear weapons.'

Global Zero has released a poll demonstrating that public opinion across 21 countries would overwhelmingly favour an international agreement that would eliminate all nuclear weapons according to a timetable and with all countries monitored to ensure they followed the agreement. This was fully supported in the top five nuclear weapons states, with over 80 percent in Britain, France and China, just under in the United States and a still substantial 69 percent in Russia. The danger with such polls is that by specifying ideal conditions they do not test opinion when the choice is more difficult and the proposed policies carry a high degree of risk. I suspect that similar poll numbers could have been readily obtained at any time over the last 60 years to the same proposition.

This issue has reached the international agenda because key members of the international policy-making elite have come to take it seriously rather than because of a surge in public opinion or in response to mass protests. While the environmental movement has influenced political discourse at all levels, from the local to the global, this is not as yet the case with nuclear disarmament. The major powers currently do little that is overtly provocative in this area, compared to, say, twenty years ago, when proposals to introduce cruise missiles into Europe could bring hundreds of thousands onto the continent's streets, and the Freeze Movement gained widespread support in the United States as a

[2] George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, A world free of nuclear weapons, *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007.

reaction to President Reagan's apparently cavalier attitude towards nuclear issues (although Reagan was a barely closeted abolitionist). These days the nuclear powers make few large claims for the strategic value of their arsenals, deny that they would be sorry to lose them altogether, but still work at keeping them in a decent state of repair. Even when it comes to proliferation issues, 'peace' groups are reluctant to take the claims of western governments at face value and suspect instead that complaints about individual proliferators are Western pretexts for wider strategic interests, and thus depend on exaggeration (with the intelligence dossiers on Iraq cited as evidence for the prosecution), as well as reeking of hypocrisy and double standards.

For these reasons there is hardly an intellectual ferment associated with this revived interest in nuclear disarmament. The old hands in the field are picking up where they left off, dusting down a variety of treaty proposals that will move governments in the right direction, while the same cautionary notes as before are being sounded by those who do not think disarmament should be pursued without regard for considerations of security. There is a danger that once again we shall have the advocates contrasting the irrationality of deterrence with the rationality of disarmament, and then proposing practical measures that barely match the problem yet still require years of negotiations or else grand schemes that can too easily be dismissed as utopian and unrealistic.

The last time there were real breakthroughs in theorising about nuclear disarmament was about half a century ago. Then campaigns for nuclear disarmament were active and made themselves heard, while in the universities and think-tanks new conceptual frameworks were being devised that sought to use nuclear weapons to keep world peace while reducing the risk that they might be part of a catastrophic war. This was in reaction to what were perceived to be the simplistic notions inspiring the disarmament campaigns. It led to theories of deterrence and arms control that still influence thinking about nuclear issues.

Let us go back to those debates of the 1950s and a vigorous proponent of general and complete disarmament, Philip Noel-Baker. He had played a major role in the foundation of the League of Nations and in the 1932 Geneva Disarmament conference, and then as a Labour Minister acting for Britain in the foundation of the United Nations. Nothing, not even the dismal experience of the inter-war years, diminished his conviction in the supreme rationality of his cause. The only problem was that it had not been pursued vigorously enough. In 1958 Noel-Baker set out his beliefs in a book called *The arms race: a programme for world disarmament*. The next year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. His Nobel lecture displays to the full the moral and intellectual confidence he had in a set of beliefs he had first embraced as a young man. '[I]t makes no sense to talk about disarming', he asserted, 'unless you believe that war, *all* war, can be abolished.' This was the heart of his beliefs. War was a terrible way to settle disputes: there were far better forms of dispute settlement

and they now needed to be applied. ‘Unless there is an iron resolution to make it the supreme object of international policy and to realise it now’, he insisted, ‘I believe all talks about disarmament will fail.’ With this iron will then there could be success. Disarmament could come in stages, and an eventual treaty of general disarmament would be ‘a long and complex document’, but, he was not of the view that the devil would be in the detail. Here he quoted the Spanish disarmament negotiator Salvador de Madariaga: ‘Technical difficulties are political objections in uniform.’[3] So Noel-Baker’s objectives were hardly modest. He sought an answer to the problem of war, not just nuclear war, and saw the remedy, in part, in general disarmament, and not just nuclear disarmament. The other parts of the remedy would be provided by the United Nations and collective security arrangements. He did not claim to be seeking an end to conflict, but there was a clear message that nothing was at stake in any conflict involving the major powers for which it was worth risking war.

When preparing his book on the arms race Noel-Baker had recruited a bright young Australian to help him out. The partnership did not last. Hedley Bull soon became convinced that Noel-Baker’s approach was both dated and mistaken. It would never make much progress, which was just as well, as otherwise it would make a bad situation worse. As a precocious 26 year old he published a trenchant review of *The arms race* in 1959 which remains a seminal statement of the arms controllers’ critique of the disarmers. At its heart was an analysis of the relationship between disarmament and peace. Bull offered a succinct ‘realist’ explanation of why general and comprehensive disarmament was probably impossible.

> ‘In an international society in which war is a possible outcome between politically competing states, and there is no supreme coercive authority, a state can provide for its security and protect its interests only by its own armed strength and that of its allies: this is the context in which states have armaments and maintain their own control over the level of these armaments.’

Disarmament can occur but only as a result of a prior reduction in tension, because contrary to the belief of the disarmers, ‘armaments are a consequence, not a cause, of political tension’, and so ‘disarmament can occur only in the wake of a political agreement.’ Bull acknowledged that armaments could aggravate tensions but that did not remove the problem of bringing arms races to an end if the tension persisted. This was evident in the problem of inspection – what we now call verification. The need to police the implementation of a disarmament agreement arises from the fact that states do not trust each other to implement spontaneously, yet even establishing such a system requires a considerable degree of trust.

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[3] Philip Noel-Baker, Peace and the arms race, Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1959: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1959/noel-baker-lecture.html#not28.

Disarmament à la Noel-Baker required substituting a system based on states taking responsibility for their own security with an alternative system based on collective security. The key principle would be that 'any act of aggression, anywhere, by anyone, against anyone, will be resisted by all the members of the system collectively; faced with this threat of overwhelming power, no state will resort to aggression.' This Bull describes as 'a quite abstract and unhistorical conception of international relations, in which states are bloodless, passionless units, having no natural sympathies or antipathies, loyalties or hostilities and, like the citizens of Victorian tracts on representative government, are moved only by the rational contemplation of right or interest.' I will return later to the danger of this 'abstract and unhistorical conception'.

The desirability question Bull answered by noting the growing view in the West 'that the nuclear stalemate is a preservative of peace, and should therefore be left well alone'. This explained why Noel-Baker seemed such a lone voice. The focus was now on second-order questions such as nuclear testing. Contrary to Noel-Baker's view that armaments could go because war was now an anachronism, according to Bull war was anachronistic was because of the terrible armaments. In this respect, therefore, the 'function of nuclear armaments in the international system at the present time is to limit the incidence of war.' This situation may not be satisfactory but it was unlikely to be abandoned without confidence in the replacement. Bull concluded: 'in the present world states are not only unlikely to conclude a general and comprehensive disarmament agreement, but are behaving rationally in refusing to do so.'[4]

From the mid-1950s US disarmament policy increasingly reflected the view that nuclear weapons could play a constructive international role by underlining, in the starkest possible way, the dangers of all-out war. The key insight was to accept that mutual vulnerability was the source of stability which it would be perilous to disrupt, for example through the development of an effective anti-missile system. This insight dominated strategic debate, culminating in the US embrace of the doctrine of mutual assured destruction. Reporting for a study group set up by the new (and not yet International) Institute for Strategic Studies, Hedley Bull reflected the trend of specialist opinion and served it up in his fresh and crafted prose in 1962 on *The control of the arms race*. The only tension in the book lay in his need to serve up policies. This was because he was not sure that there was much that could be usefully done and also because he was always unsure about whether analysts should be advocates: 'The world is much more complicated than the arguments in this book', he admitted, 'and the destinies of nations are not determined by simple choices of the soul'.[5]

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[4] Hedley Bull, Disarmament and the international system, *Australian Journal of Politics & History,* Volume 5 Issue 1 (May 1959), pp 41-50.
[5] *The control of the arms race*, p 212.

Interestingly Bull's book was reviewed negatively in the same journal in which he had taken Noel-Baker apart. In this case the reviewer was one John Burton, also about to leave Canberra to make his name in London. He cited Bull's modest conclusion that avoiding the 'worst dangers of our environment' would require 'the constant application of palliatives.' This might be the case, observed Burton, but if so only because 'there are in Britain and elsewhere so many Hedley Bulls, brought up in the tradition of balance of power, peace through preparedness, and the inevitability of conflicting strategic interests, which tradition was logically if not emotionally destroyed with the discovery of nuclear energy'.[6]

Burton missed the point: At issue was not whether power politics had become untenable because of the nuclear age, as it showed no sign of fading away, but whether it had been tamed. Nuclear weapons provided good reason to approach potential conflicts with extra caution. This was the good news; the bad news was that should the caution prove insufficient and hostilities begin then the consequences could be dire. The challenge therefore was to maintain the reasons for caution. This meant confirming rather than qualifying the frightfulness of war, while at the same time ensuring that the caution was not lost in moments of panic or through failures of communication. The great vision of disarmament might have been to remove the cause of war; the modest vision of arms control was to ensure that nuclear relationships remained sufficiently stable for governments to remain in control, and with direct lines of communication open, even at times of the gravest international crisis.

Though in some respects this debate still seems fresh, the great power paradigm within which it was framed is dated. For Noel-Baker it was natural to suppose that as armaments caused war then special responsibility lay with those states who had acquired the most armaments of the highest quality – the great powers. For Bull as well there was no doubt that the key decisions on war and peace were to be taken in a relatively few capitals – there were after all at the time only three nuclear powers. A political agreement between NATO and the Warsaw Pact to end their differences and together construct a just new order, or simply an understanding that they dare not push their differences too far, were alternative responses to the problem of war to large-scale disarmament and handing over sovereignty to a reconstituted United Nations. For Bull, and many since, nuclear weapons reinforced stability and so made the balance of power less dangerous. For Noel-Baker they confirmed the need to abandon the old ways of power politics before the madness killed us all.

The fact that official thinking followed Bull rather than Noel-Baker reflected the key features of the cold war: the bipolar antagonism, with both sides each led by a superpower and, in broad terms, equal in key military capabilities, especially in the nuclear sphere. As a result the relationship acquired

[6] Review of Control of the arms race, by John Burton, *Australian Journal of Politics & History,* Volume 9 Issue 1 , (May 1963), p 121. Burton does not seem to be aware that Bull is a fellow Australian.

significant elements of balance in both political and military terms, and came to be institutionalised, with elements of both antagonism and cooperation in the relationship. Upon these elements of cooperation it proved possible to build. Whether talking about their military programmes or arms control initiatives both sides learnt to describe their goals in terms of stability and followed measures designed to sustain political control at times of crisis. The aim was inherently conservative, not so much to create a new stability but to consolidate one that already existed. The surrounding rhetoric might claim that events were hurtling out of control in some 'mad momentum' of an arms race or the aggression implicit in a Soviet military build-up. In reality, the relatively stable conditions infused all actions. New weapons systems were prepared for a decade ahead on the assumption that the strategic environment would barely have changed, while arms control negotiations were conducted at leisure over prolonged periods. Arms control, and its associated activity, became one mechanism for adjusting superpower relations. The signals sent through the enthusiasm and seriousness with which the negotiations were conducted communicated warmth or anger according to the general state of the cold war.

No independent body was established to assess compliance with treaty provisions and penalise transgressions. No third parties were involved at all. Because the agreements reflected and reinforced a strategic balance there were limits to the advantages which might be gained by cheating and also to the response of the aggrieved party if cheating was discovered. The invocation of ultimate punishments to enforce treaties was precluded by the very circumstances they sought to control. Because a state could not be made to comply with a treaty, if it nonetheless did so this could be read as an important statement of goodwill and confirmation that it honoured its obligations. Indeed, a whole theory was developed to prove that intrusive verification and surveillance of regular military activities could have a significant value of its own, beyond the substance of that being verified, in building confidence between potential belligerents and so softening antagonism. Inevitably this meant that a substantial amount of arms control activity took the form of an audit – counting items in known inventories and checking them against the amounts declared. Arms control was thus a natural extension of statecraft. It represented a medium by which great powers conveyed their readiness to reach some sort of understanding with each other, demonstrating respect for vital interests and a capacity to make commitments and accept responsibilities.

The stability model upon which all this was based became irrelevant at the point of its greatest triumphs when decades of arduous negotiations suddenly concluded with intricate treaties on conventional and strategic arms, and also the end of the cold war. This event settled the debate over whether measures of disarmament might be the key to an improvement in political relations, or whether they must wait upon such an improvement taking place for other reasons. The manner of the cold war's conclusion confirmed that cooperative agreements on armed forces are shaped by, rather

than shape, core political relations. Thus the conditions which obtained in the late 1980s made traditional arms control and even measures of disarmament more possible to achieve but also rendered the agreements largely irrelevant. The value of the negotiating process had been in its informal aspects as they provided important opportunities for communication and reassurance. In practice these negotiations reinforced the dominant political tendency of the time. When tensions were increasing they could aggravate the process (through, for example, rows over compliance or intransigence over apparently trivial points of negotiating detail). When tensions were easing they could accelerate an improvement in relations, as with the spate of agreements from 1987 to 1990.

All this suggests that disarmament campaigners must work with the grain of international relations, and in particular avoid, what Bull described as 'a quite abstract and unhistorical conception' of the system, deprived of its cares and passions, and driven by an uncommon urge to rationality. It may be asking too much to demand of the international community a sustained sharpness and continuity of purpose over an extended time. Plans for the abolition of all nuclear weapons require that all the key powers be engaged and accept the project's logic. The process can be staged, for clearly the larger arsenals must come down before the smaller arsenals can come into play, but at some point everybody must disarm together, in an orchestrated and synchronised process. To switch metaphors, the project takes the form of a grand geopolitical engineering enterprise. All working parts of the international system are examined to see how they need to be tweaked or transformed to contribute to the ultimate goal. Consideration is given to the vital interests of the key players as well as to the areas where they might reasonably make compromises. Barriers are to be cleared by judicious treaty language here, a technical fix there, and a confidence-building measure to follow. This can't be rushed. It will take time to gain the requisite political support and then to implement. Decommissioning is expensive and slow.

But while it would be nice to think that such grand schemes can be carried forward by reasonable people making demonstrable progress at a steady pace and without breaking ranks, this is inherently unlikely. Governments change, as do their priorities, and policy will always be influenced by the interaction of the particular issue, undoubtedly of weighty historic significance, with whatever else happens to be on the public agenda at the time and the passing concerns of the moment. At the moment there is no domestic clamour for governments to fast forward on disarmament. If things do start moving it is possible to imagine nationalist politicians warning that security is being put at risk and demanding a halt to such naïve foolishness. If progress was really made towards abolition then nerves would have to hold. As the numbers go down the significance of individual nuclear devices goes up. Core issues could no longer be fudged. Normal diplomatic ruses – procrastination, creative ambiguity – would not suffice. There could be no question of hanging on to some nuclear advantage

after others have disarmed. The agreement and the process would have to be both transparent and definitive.

The international system's dynamic, constantly changing character should warn against contemplating a grand disarmament plan along traditional lines. We need a new theory because we have a new system. This new system has two key features, one hopeful and the other less so.

The hopeful feature could be described as the end of the great power era. Without wishing to speculate on future sources of conflict, ignore the potential significance of tension points around Russia's and China's peripheries, dismiss scenarios for matters getting out of hand through careless diplomacy or inadvertent provocations, or deny the residual influence of traditional balance of power thinking, there is no reason to suppose that the greatest danger to global stability lies in a major war between great powers. Absent the great colonial rivalries or ideological competitions of the past, and given the interdependencies between the major economies and the particular strengths of the United States and its allies, we have moved significantly away from the old model of the international system, and the sort of dangers that preoccupied both Noel-Baker and Bull. This is why there has been a modicum of nuclear disarmament over the past two decades and why it is widely held to be a propitious time to make the final push to zero.

The second and less hopeful feature of the system is that many parts of the world suffer from multiple problems leading to chronic instability. Many states, often quite recently independent, suffer from weak economies, deep social cleavages and immature political institutions. When they fracture, this can lead to terrible violence, on occasion spreading into their wider neighbourhoods. Instead of thinking about balancing the power of states with aspirations to be as great or even greater it has became necessary to consider how to compensate for frailties of this sort. A new role has been identified for the major powers in addressing these conflicts and there have been tentative moves in this direction. The reasons for the tentativeness are not hard to discern: distinctive interests in particular parts of the world, uncertainties over how to address the issues of religion and identity which often seem to drive conflict, the dangers (for example of terrorism) of getting entangled in distant conflicts and the reluctance to expend too much blood and treasure in direct interventions. Nonetheless, elements of a rudimentary collective security system are now in place whereby the major powers do accept some responsibility to act in the face of gross breaches of international law or to prevent or alleviate humanitarian disasters.

Noel-Baker and those currently working in his tradition would be astonished to be told the international system was starting to work along the lines they had advocated. This is not really what we had in mind, they would complain. They would note that the UN Security Council does not apply

international law in a disinterested manner, and the majority of countries are content to leave it to a few to enforce its resolutions. The great powers act in line with the Council when it suits them, but act outside when it does not. They fail to act when they should and then rush in when they shouldn't. My point is not that this is, or is even close to being, a functioning classic collective security system. It is only that we do not get and should not expect designer world orders, engineered to ensure that they work smoothly and safely at all times. Instead systems evolve through jerks and starts, and occasional backward movements, in messy and sometimes contradictory ways. On occasion crises are handled efficiently and effectively; on occasion everything seems to go wrong.

This observation seems to me to have important consequences for how we treat issues of arms control and disarmament. The old arms control models are not wholly irrelevant. They may retain some validity in the US-Russian nuclear relationship and anywhere where there is a possibility for a dyadic balance of power (for example India and Pakistan). Old arms control explains how to add extra stability to an already stable relationship. Over the past two decades, however, the main need has been to stabilise unstable situations. While in the cold war context a nuclear balance might have made some sense, at least qualitatively if not quantitatively, in these unstable situations trying to get opposing military forces in some sort of balance makes little sense. Even if one could produce an accurate measure, taking into account such intangibles as training, morale, tactical grasp and strategic design, a conventional military balance does not necessarily produce stability. It just creates uncertainty about the outcome of armed conflict while a definite imbalance produces the sort of certainty that reduces temptations to fight. In the 1932 Geneva Conference and the late 1980s talks on conventional forces in Europe an attempt was made to get round the artificiality of parity for its own sake by focusing on types of equipment suitable for surprise attack and general offensive operations. Leaving aside the question of the validity of the offensive/defensive dichotomy, and the simplification of complex military relationships to fit them into a negotiating framework, this approach was always only relevant to conflicts in which the danger was of a classic act of aggression across recognised borders and on terrain suitable for armoured warfare. It had little significance for conflicts erupting out of civil wars or confused border disputes, marked by skirmishing militias rather than regular battles, directed against civilians as much as professional combatants.

As NATO grappled with the dynamics of conflict in the former Yugoslavia it became apparent that quite different measures were required: arms embargoes; air-exclusion zones; air and land humanitarian relief corridors; control of artillery pieces; cease-fire lines. These measures were often clearly partial in controlling only limited types of military activity while other types were unconstrained, and also partial in tending to favour one side rather than another in the conflict. They led to agreements which could not be self-regulating but had to be externally enforced, using such non-military measures as diplomatic isolation, expulsion from international organisations, loss of

sporting and cultural links, and economic embargoes, and in extremis military measures, from air strikes to the introduction of multinational armies (notably often called ‘stabilisation’ forces). Whereas with traditional arms control time rarely was of the essence – controversies over compliance could linger for months – in these more dynamic, and often deteriorating, situations, measures need to work quickly. Regulating armaments in these conditions is bound to be pragmatic, for each measure has to be judged according to its immediate political effects rather than its long-term promise. Measures are parts of complex packages and are apt to be, with these packages, expedient, temporary and inconsistent.

This combination of good news and bad news has implications for the grander disarmament projects connected with nuclear weapons. In the past the priority was to disarm the great powers. This now ought to be more feasible. Recent statements from both Washington and Moscow encourage optimism that strategic arms reductions can pick up again, getting numbers well down from the excessive stockpiles of the cold war. Sceptics might note that this will involve getting down from gross overkill to mild overkill. This only removes surplus capacity. In the mid-1950s there was a view that a balance of terror would be in place with stockpiles of 200 weapons on each side. The numbers games became complicated by questions of first and second strikes, but by the end of the cold war the US and Russia each had well over 20,000 warheads. The arsenals are down to about 5,000 warheads, with about half that number operational. President Obama has now mentioned a target for the next round of strategic arms talks of about 1,000. It would be wrong to dismiss the significance of such a move. Every weapon decommissioned is one less that might be the subject of some future, catastrophic accident or security scare, or mitigation of the ultimate tragedy should nuclear exchanges begin in earnest. At a more prosaic level, an agreement will be welcomed as a statement of improved US-Russian relations and of a disinterest in some of the more fanciful concepts of nuclear strategy. Additionally, such an agreement, by demonstrating some moves in the direction of complete disarmament, as required by Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, will contribute to a less fractious review conference in 2010.

There are limits on what this process might achieve. Getting numbers down from high levels will not have an enormous strategic impact. At some point the numbers will get so low, however, that they will affect the calculations of the major powers. It will be seen as removing one of the most dependable security guarantees that could ever be imagined. For some countries, including the NATO members, there are good arguments why they should feel more secure in a non-nuclear world. That is because they are better able to fight a conventional war. But for those countries unsure of their conventional strength nuclear deterrence still matters, and as the numbers get lower, uncertainties may well start to develop about whether the process is creating new vulnerabilities. In the right political conditions these issues might well be resolved by removing the risk of war – as Noel-Baker argued –

but so long as the risk of war is there then the nuclear issue will not go away. The point is simple: when it comes to nuclear weapons small numbers really matter. Cutting down the large numbers is the easy part.

This is why so much of current debate is about very small arsenals. There is more concern about a single terrorist bomb than the whole Russian arsenal. Technical arguments would question the priority. The damage the Russians could do to their enemies in a war would be complete and terrible. There are no strategic ruses or defensive systems that might negate the threat, nor any reasons to believe that the systems would not work as intended. We have learnt not to worry about this arsenal because the Russians share the horror at the thought of its prospective use, and while they might see it having a residual deterrent role they do not see that as an active feature of their contemporary diplomacy. By contrast, the normal assumption is that if an al Qaeda type group got hold of a weapon, however crude, they would use it. They might try some political extortion first, demanding major political concession in return for non-use, but the bargaining process involved is difficult to imagine, and the group might well judge that its bargaining position would be better after a demonstrated nuclear capability than before. The issue is not capability but intent and strategic circumstances. The Russians are part of the culture of non-use which has been the most welcome and surprising feature of the nuclear age: a terrorist group would not be part of that culture.

The same issue is there with the new, and still by and large, small nuclear powers. Although it will be argued that the exemplary and conspicuous disarmament by the declared nuclear powers will remove excuses for would-be proliferators, the safest assumption remains that individual nuclear decisions reflect particular security circumstances. For the moment the greatest danger comes with those stockpiles that risk getting caught up in localised conflicts in South Asia, East Asia or the Middle East. These conflicts do not fit in with the standard 'disarmament to zero' model. The numbers of weapons involved are often tiny, certainly in comparison with the US and Russia. The controversies surrounding every attempted act of proliferation remind us that the difference between zero and just a few operational nuclear devices is of far greater strategic significance than that between a few and quite a lot. They also undermine the neat notion that the only real value of nuclear weapons is to deter their use by others. This was never the case even during the cold war. That would mean that nuclear weapons could be extracted from post-1945 international history and everything else would remain the same. Clearly that is nonsense. The intensity of the cold war, the formation of alliances, the occasional crises and the eventual resolution were all influenced in some way by nuclear weapons. This is also very much the case in those regional conflicts currently influenced by the actual or prospective introduction of nuclear weapons. These regional conflicts also risk implicating the declared nuclear powers. The measures necessary to stabilise them may involve recourse to what was known as extended deterrence, that is the ability of non-nuclear powers to draw on the strength of

nuclear powers in the face of severe threats. For example, if an Iranian bomb is not to encourage wider proliferation in the Middle East there may be demands for guarantees to states that feel threatened, and this could disrupt the processes of great power disarmament. As it is, in the face of growing Chinese power established American allies, such as Japan (and Australia), might be nervous about whether a purely conventional deterrent would be effective. The same is true of many of NATO's newer members viewing their former Russian ally.

With the new nuclear arsenals there is also a serious risk that they might get used, either through anger or accident. To say the least, this could have a disruptive effect on the orderly and planned progression to abolition. The fact that we don't worry about effect as much as we might – or indeed should – illustrates the extent to which we have come to rely on the 'norm of non-use' to give us some comfort that a major effort to rid the world of these weapons need not be a race against time. While at the great power level this may be warranted, at the lower levels it may be unduly complacent. We can not even assume that actual use will necessarily produce a clamour for abolition. If the use were perceived to have served some strategic purpose then the consequences could be to encourage holding onto arsenals and more proliferation. It is vital, therefore, that nuclear weapons do not get drawn into active conflicts. In this regard the key measures may be drawn from the old cold war handbooks of crisis management.

Small forces and regional conflicts are already a top priority for international diplomacy and rightly so. If we accept that the basic objective is to avoid war, and especially nuclear war, then this may require a range of regional and international interventions, which may well include the regulation of armaments, but of the type we have already seen in areas of instability – that is expedient, temporary and inconsistent. There may not be a great fit between the particular needs connected with these unstable situations and the grander disarmament plans. This can be seen in such issues as the influence of the US-India nuclear agreement on non-proliferation norms, plans to cope with chronic instability in Pakistan should it affect nuclear facilities, the possible tolerance of high levels of uranium enrichment by Iran in return for a promise not to fabricate actual weapons, and special concessions to North Korea in the face of its nuclear extortion. So while there may be a strand of the disarmament project that is long-term and uni-directional, there is another strand that is bound to be opportunistic, based on norm setting and consolidating gains where possible.

The founding assumption for any new theory of disarmament must be the same as the old. It is a means to an end and not an end in itself, and the true end is the prevention of nuclear war. We can agree that total abolition of nuclear weapons is the best way to achieve this, but only so long as the process itself does not trigger the event we are trying so hard to avoid. This can best be achieved by constant attention to the changing nature of the international system and not by setting down plans

and schedules to be pursued doggedly without regard to the wider context. What is new in the current situation is that the conceptual problem is not so much bringing down the arsenals of the great powers. It remains a practical problem but there really is no good reason why stocks should be as high as they are, and they can be reduced drastically without any risk to international stability or national security. The conceptual problems now reside in the interaction between small arsenals and complex and often highly volatile regional settings where political relations are strained, and how this might impact on the more orderly processes of disarmament that are now envisaged. This is where we need a new theory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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