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Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Sense, Nonsense, No Sense

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Abstract. This article considers commonly posited benefits of nation-states' possessing nuclear weapons.

Two significant international security issues concern the (1) proliferation of nuclear weapons and associated personnel and technology and (2) the quest to develop and deploy an anti-ballistic missile defense primarily against nuclear weapons employment. The first issue is predicated on the notion that nuclear weapons proliferation is incompatible with international peace, stability, and security. Yet this notion is somewhat belied by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council who are nuclear weapons powers, and who support--at least publicly--anti-proliferation initiatives, yet seem to not seriously consider undoing past proliferation by engaging in their own nuclear disarmament. They may argue that preventing further proliferation is easier than undoing their own proliferation and that they will get to the latter eventually. However, in the interim, a nuclear weapons apartheid seems to encourage the have-nots to become the haves.

The second issue is predicated on the notion that ballistic missile defense will deter certain types of nuclear weapons attacks. Yet this notion can be countered by asserting that defense planning and moves to deploy may elicit attacks before the defense is ready, that a defense may re-initiate a nuclear weapons race with the nuclear haves increasing numbers of missiles and multiple warheads, and that a defense may elicit nuclear weapons attacks by other than ballistic missile means. In many ways, a nuclear weapons defense may be said to complicate and work against efforts at nuclear weapons proliferation and employment.

Finding a way out of a strategic morass on both issues is difficult because--unlike the basic postulates of geometry--there is little of any consensual foundation concerning the meaning of nuclear weapons. What follows is a look at two candidates for consensus.

Can nuclear weapons be said to have independent strategic and ethical value? One might strategically assert that such weapons buy a nation-state or other political grouping breathing room against an attack and a means of attack--both to secure political objectives. One might ethically assert that there are concerns of ends and means that should preclude or support the securing of strategic benefits of nuclear weapons. However, values--ethical and moral--are part of a political entity's strategic essence. As a political entity can lose economic viability, territory, lives, and freedom to navigate on the international stage, it can lose its sense of right and wrong, of ultimate purpose, of identity. The independence of strategic from ethical concerns is but an abstract construction without concrete basis. Moreover, an increase in nuclear weapons prowess (as one part of one's strategic strength) can even lead to a significant decrease in other parts--from economic through ethical.

Do nuclear weapons support strategic deterrence--i.e., prevention of a nuclear war? One answer is that a state that has such weapons may still use them against another that does not--as the United States (US) did against Japan in 1945. This may just apply to an ongoing war wherein one side develops such weapons and the other does not. But deterrence seems at best a one-way proposition.

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A second answer is that a state that has such weapons may threaten to use them for political purposes--including attempting to deter a war threatened by another entity against a third party--against others that do not have them or have them only in the sense of some significantly inferior status. Historians suggest that the US did this to the Soviet Union to deter a Soviet incursion into Iran. Assuming the threat was not a bluff, deterrence again seems at best a one-way proposition.

A third answer is that adversaries who have reached some crude parity as to nuclear weapons will at least continue their political conflict--but at levels below the threshold of employing nuclear weapons to destroy the other's people or material infrastructure. This may have been the case during the Cold War, although nuclear weapons testing continued for much of it, and weapons development continued through and beyond it. In this case, deterrence may have worked. On the other hand, it should be noted that nuclear weapons development often obviates one's own conventional superiority if it has existed--a caveat that should be considered if one's own nuclear weapons development induces a conventionally weak adversary to "become nuclear" as well. (Moreover, one could argue that a non-nuclear power developing conventional superiority over an adversary risks inducing that adversary to "become nuclear.")

A fourth answer is that knowledge bearing on the validity of deterrence is unknowable. One may argue that mutual assured destruction, massive retaliation, or parity may have induced a no-nuclear-war world. On the other hand, supporting the argument with inductive or deductive logic, pure observation, experimentalism, and/or authority is fraught with epistemological vulnerabilities. Fate, luck, accident, and the unknowable may be the salient causal factors. Or the knowable may have been pertinent only to the Cold War without generalization to what has followed and will follow. Or there may not be any causality to know save for the deterrent value of a world without nuclear weapons.

So. Why such a strong belief in the independence of strategic and ethical aspects on the one hand and the deterrent aspects of nuclear weapons on the other? Three interrelated answers come to mind. First, nuclear weapons actually are conceived as a vehicle to seek strategic benefits--economically, diplomatically, militarily (conventionally)--for a political entity. Divorcing the strategic from the ethical precludes thorny and uncomfortable problems. However, again, nuclear weapons may actually weaken pre-existing strategic strengths. Second, nuclear weapons actually are conceived as the acting out of psychodynamic conflicts of political leaders and garner more support arising from the conflicts of pro-nuclear citizens. If this is the case, disarmament could be tantamount to mass psychological suicide. Third, nuclear weapons are intended to be employed and let the chips fall where they may.

That such disparate answers may all have validity in supporting unsupportable contentions underlines a perspective of nuclear weapons development, deployment, and employment as insanity. What is more puzzling is what sanity then becomes: containment, rollback, or joining the nuclear club? (See Anderson, T. (1993). A hard nut to crack: Evolving English metaphors for insanity in social-historical context. *American Imago*, 50, 111-130; Beer, F.A. (1984). Controlling nuclear weapons: The evolution of morality, politics, and science. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 20, 323-342; Cioffi-Revilla, C. (1999). Origins and age of deterrence: Comparative research on Old World and New World systems. *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 33, 239-264; de Rivera, J. (1984). Facing nuclear weapons. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 27, 739-756; Kristiansen, C. M., & Matheson, K. (1990). Value conflict, value justification, and attitudes toward nuclear weapons. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 130, 665-675; Kull, S. (1986). Mind-sets of defense policy-makers. *Psychohistory Review*, 14, 21-37; Mack, J.E. (1986). Nuclear weapons and the dark side of humankind. *Political Psychology*, 7, 223-233; Mayer, T.F. (1986). Arms races and war initiation: Some alternatives to the Intriligator-Brito model. *Journal of*

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Conflict Resolution, 30, 3-28; Roberts, C. F., & Golding, S. L. (1991). The social construction of criminal responsibility and insanity. *Law and Human Behavior*, 15, 349-376.)(Keywords: Deterrence, Ethics, Insanity, Nuclear Weapons, Strategy.)