

Stable at Zero: Maintaining a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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In the last three or four years, in opposition to those who advocate retaining nuclear weapons, Kissinger/Schultz/Perry/Nunn and others in the US and UK have advocated the long-term goal of getting to zero, a view given support by President Obama.

The key question regarding nuclear weapons is not whether we can disinvent them – put the genie back in the bottle – but whether they are useful and appropriate for the task required. The question arises: would nuclear weapons remain attractive in a world without nuclear weapons?

Nuclear weapons were initially thought of as epochal and world changing, a kind of magic, but in fact, they did not make war unthinkable, nor did they create leverage, preserve empires, prevent defeat or provide victory.

For example:

- The Soviet Union occupied Eastern Europe when the US had a monopoly on nuclear weapons but the Soviets weren't deterred.
- In turn the Soviet Union as a nuclear weapons state was 'defeated' by the Afghans. Another example is Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands, when the UK did not threaten to use nuclear weapons against Argentina.
- In 1973 Syria and Egypt were not deterred from attacking Israel although it was known that the latter had nuclear weapons. It has been argued that the US threat to put nuclear weapons on alert deterred the Soviet Union from further assisting Egypt at the end of the war – but this ignores the failure of a nuclear threat to prevent the war occurring in the first place.

Nuclear weapons are blunt instruments – precision weapons are much more effective. If an attack were to focus on US weapons silos, the result would be messy, with many civilians killed as a result of radiation. A four-star US general expressed to him the view of many military men, who feel that tactical nuclear weapons are of virtually no use: they are seen as dangerous for troops as well as civilians.

How useful then is a monopoly on nuclear weapons? The standard trope is a madman who acquires a few nuclear weapons. In a world free of nuclear weapons what might be the outcome of aggressive scenarios where a state attempts to cheat? A dictator who wants to build a bomb for conquest of territory faces several challenges:

- 1) Shortness of time before it is discovered that he has the bomb – likely to be six months to a year. Once the bomb is discovered, other states will start building or rebuilding an arsenal.
- 2) Locking down gains – how to hold onto gains/changes imposed on the world if the cheater’s arsenal became one among nine or ten?
- 3) A grand coalition against the aggressor – the Second World War suggests that, despite disagreements, there is a dynamic that brings together coalitions against an obvious threat.
- 4) How many bombs should the dictator build to be safe? If nuclear weapons are ‘magic’ – only one; if Hiroshima and Nagasaki are deemed to have ‘worked’ – two bombs. However, US war plans in the early 1950s called for 113 bombs targeted on 70 cities in the Soviet Union. But some argued that this alone would not induce the Soviet Union to surrender – a ground attack would be required.

The conclusion is that the dictator would need to build at least 100 bombs, but if US, Russia and China were to rearm, more would be needed. The consensus of verification experts is that it is impossible to build 100 bombs without being detected. You can’t stop an individual madman, who could, for example, destroy New York with a nuclear weapon.

But if nuclear weapons are not ‘magic’, but weapons like others with drawbacks and dangers, it is difficult to imagine that it is possible to cheat successfully. **Enforcing a world free of nuclear weapons is, therefore, a solvable practical task.**