

The Nonproliferation Complex

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For more than four decades the twin goals of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament have been an almost unchallenged objective of the “international community.” Like drought prevention, or bans on the use of child soldiers, nonproliferation remains a mostly uncontroversial, largely universalistic initiative to which few object. The proponents of nonproliferation are fond of stressing that the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) has more signatories than any other arms control treaty. Who would not want to prevent more states from obtaining nuclear weapons? And who, for that matter, would oppose the ideal of a world free of such weapons?

When an international initiative is widely accepted as an obvious universal good, and when, moreover, it commands the support of the world’s most powerful states and funders, the opportunity arises for the establishment of a powerful institutional regime. The “nonproliferation complex,” as we call it, comprises dozens of governmental agencies, international nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and academic programs and institutes.¹ The complex is extremely well-financed, has dominated discourse about nuclear weapons around the world for years, and helps to shape the foreign policies of leading powers to an extent that other international initiatives can only envy. Its influence and wealth is not a reason in itself to attack it, and for most of its existence the complex went largely uncriticized in mainstream Western discourse. This began to change after the second Iraq war—seen around the world as a disaster of the first order—which was waged in the name of nonproliferation, and was supported (or not opposed) by leading members of the complex.

The complex’s role in helping justify the war in Iraq must be placed at the center of any account of that conflict’s origins. In this essay, however, we develop a

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larger critique. First, we trace the history of the rise of the complex during and immediately after the cold war. We show how nonproliferation and disarmament organizations and advocates turned toward ameliorative approaches in the face of great-power refusal to accept more substantial change, or indeed defended an international order favoring the status quo. We then identify three contemporary consequences of this position: the creation of a permanent justification for intervention and war; the fomenting of widespread cynicism about nuclear peace; and the establishment of a dominant discourse about nonproliferation and disarmament that excludes serious ideas about dealing with nuclear danger.

Our analysis, then, is a study of a classic case of a liberal international institution founded upon universalistic ideals that has, over time, been adapted to suit the political interests of the great powers—above all (and especially since the end of the cold war) the United States. The story, in this sense, is nothing new: it reflects a long-standing tendency, as E. H. Carr put it seventy years ago, for international institutions to perpetuate “an identity of interest between the dominant group and the world as a whole in the maintenance of peace.”² Carr’s point then, and ours now, is that this comes at a price.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NONPROLIFERATION COMPLEX

The signing of the NPT in 1968 represented an important moment in the history of the nonproliferation complex. While there were several initiatives to stem the spread of nuclear weapons prior to this point, the treaty ensured that nonproliferation became a formal objective of the international community.³ Most of the world’s sovereign states signed and subsequently ratified the NPT, and it entered into force in 1970. The treaty’s basic bargain is well known: the states not possessing nuclear weapons, typically referred to as the “have-not” signatories, agreed to forgo any pursuit of the bomb in exchange for international assistance, if they wanted it, in developing peaceful atomic energy. As for the nuclear “haves”—that is, the states that managed to manufacture and detonate a nuclear weapon before 1967—their end of the bargain was to commit in good faith to the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.

This latter covenant, expressed in clear language in Article VI of the treaty, reflected the widespread understanding at the time that the “have-not” signatories were unlikely to eschew the acquisition of nuclear weapons indefinitely if the nuclear “haves” simply kept their bombs. Why should they respect an antinuclear

ideal while the major powers defied it? There can also be no doubt that many of the treaty's founders were genuinely committed to the cause of nuclear peace, and grasped the obvious fact that the danger of nuclear war stemmed not only from the proliferation of the bomb to other states but also, and more apocalyptically, from the existing arsenals of the haves.⁴ This is why the ideal of disarmament was twinned with nonproliferation from the outset. But in 1968 the world was mired in a cold war between two heavily-armed superpowers. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was ever going to disarm without absolute assurance that the other had as well, and the only entity that could have provided such assurance would have been a supranational institution able to verify and enforce a permanent disarmament—which meant, effectively, a world state. Because the United States and the Soviet Union were unlikely to agree upon the political and economic orientation of such a state, disarmament was never going to happen as long as the cold war raged. And, indeed, supporters of the NPT and nuclear peace in Europe and North America could hardly be faulted for failing to demand that the West disarm when they had no means of persuading the Soviet Union to do the same.

Leaders of nonnuclear states were well aware, however, that this concession transformed the nonproliferation regime into a game rigged to keep them permanently subordinate to the nuclear powers. Indeed, this was a complaint that countries such as India, which refuses to join the NPT, frequently voiced throughout the cold war. Initially, many states did not even send representatives to the review conferences; when they did attend, they denounced the duplicity of the nuclear haves.⁵ At the 1980 review conference, for instance, disagreement over the issue of nuclear disarmament precluded the adoption of a final declaration.⁶ Thus, it became evident soon after the signing of the NPT that the mostly Western organizations dedicated to nonproliferation and disarmament faced a choice. This was either to adhere to the original spirit of the NPT by insisting upon the connection between the two objectives, a decision that would get them nowhere and probably lead to their institutional demise, or to develop a new approach to the problem that essentially avoided great-power disarmament. They chose the latter strategy. In the last decade of the cold war, two variants of this new nonproliferation regime began to emerge.

One approach sought to shift the complex's attention to more proximate aims, namely, the cause of nonproliferation with respect to smaller nonnuclear states that appeared interested in acquisition of the bomb. At a higher level, this

incremental approach focused on the reduction and stabilization of the super-power arsenals by means of measured and negotiated arms control treaties. Prominent academics such as John Simpson, who is perhaps the most formidable proponent of the incremental approach, produced numerous and influential studies arguing that the existing nonproliferation regime was best suited to handle these tasks. These included an edited volume focused on sensible policy goals for the nonproliferation agenda in the 1990s.⁷ Recalling how in the early 1980s the Ford Foundation awarded a major multiyear grant to the University of Southampton, Simpson's institutional home, he noted that "one area singled out for intensive investigation was nuclear non-proliferation, for if additional states were to acquire nuclear weapons it would drastically alter the future context of global security relationships."⁸ This meant, as Simpson put it, that "it is vitally important that the NPT be extended for a prolonged period of time in 1995."⁹ Disarmament, insofar as it was considered at all, was written off as the impossible-to-achieve ideal that undermined the attainable good. Incremental advances were therefore viewed as preferable to radical—but unrealistic—visions of a nuclear-free world.

A different and more instrumental approach was articulated by Harvard University's Joseph Nye. After serving in the Carter administration as a deputy undersecretary of state in charge of nonproliferation policy, Nye returned to Harvard, where he continued writing on the subject as part of a larger project. In line with his liberal institutionalist conception of international politics, he focused on the question of how nonproliferation helped to uphold the existing international order. In his book *Nuclear Ethics* (1986), Nye argued that the inequality of possession of nuclear weapons might be justified not only thanks to the order and stability it creates but that such inequality could also be morally acceptable "if certain conditions were met."¹⁰ Nye identified four such conditions of moral acceptability: if the purpose of nuclear weapons was limited to self-defense; if special care was taken to reduce the risk of their use; if the independence of states and other values created by the order were preserved; and, finally, if steps were taken to diminish reliance on nuclear weapons. Ultimately, however, what underpinned his moral argument was the core assumption that in the given global setting the alternatives—a more equitable distribution of nuclear weapons or total disarmament—would have increased the risk of nuclear war. Nonproliferation was required in the name of order and stability, which was in the overarching interest of both the nuclear haves and the have-nots. In Nye's

view, this was the reason why many states signed up to the inherently unequal NPT and why it was worthwhile to maintain and eventually extend it.¹¹

While the incremental approach emphasized the wider legitimacy of broad international cooperation and the instrumental approach stressed primarily super-power management, there was, of course, a degree of overlap between the two views. And under the conditions of the cold war, with disarmament out of the question, the compromises offered by both options appeared sensible. As Carr would have predicted, however, the effect of these compromises was to institutionalize an ameliorative approach that posed no threat to the nuclear haves, and indeed seemed to lock in their permanent superiority. This became obvious at the cold war's end, and especially at the 1995 NPT review conference, held a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only was the conflict peacefully over, but due to a provision in the original document, the nonproliferation treaty itself was set to expire that year. Delegates to this first post-cold war review conference had to decide how long to extend the treaty, or even whether it should be extended at all. This gave an unprecedented opening to representatives from nonnuclear weapon states, whose demands had been stifled in the name of cold war practicalities whenever they tried to argue that the nuclear haves should begin to disarm, as Article VI and the whole logic of nonproliferation insisted they do. Certainly, this did not mean that the arsenals could all be dismantled immediately. What became obvious, rather, was that the focus of the NPT had to be redirected away from nonproliferation and arms-control efforts toward the more fundamental cause of great-power nuclear disarmament. If that did not happen, nonnuclear weapon states would have every reason to conclude that the NPT was indeed nothing more than a scam to keep them weak, and the dream of eventual nuclear abolition would fade away.

The participants at the 1995 review conference faced a choice. They could have made a collective and forceful decision to demand that the nuclear haves begin serious disarmament measures, and the obvious way to add substance to that position was to threaten to renounce nonproliferation efforts unless the powerful states finally met their responsibilities under Article VI. They also had the option of renewing the NPT for a limited period, but not indefinitely. Or they could have insisted that if the nuclear powers refused to commit to disarm, the NPT might as well be allowed to expire. There was much acrimony over the disarmament issue, but in the end the review conference concluded by extending the treaty in perpetuity.¹²

Veteran nuclear complex figures endorsed this decision, repeating their long-standing mantra that the NPT simply had to be extended, or instability and chaos would ensue.¹³ They saw attempts to emphasize nuclear disarmament as a fruitless continuation of “the stilted and confrontational manner of a bygone time.”¹⁴ Characteristically, they insisted that it was much more practical to focus on the reiteration of “principles” underpinning the treaty and a “strengthened review process” in the years to come. These arguments eventually formed the core of the extension decision, which was adopted without a vote.

The practical reasons why the nonproliferation complex advocated the treaty’s indefinite extension are quite clear: without the NPT it would have lost its *raison d’être* and so, in all likelihood, its claim on the funds of its supporters. These were powerful governments and foundations in the West that had long and generously backed the complex’s justification of the nuclear status quo.¹⁵ A decision to stand on the principle that serious nonproliferation would require the recognized nuclear states to live up to their part of the bargain meant, for the vast majority of those who profited from the complex, an almost-certain disappearance of funding and a descent into impoverishment and marginalization. By contrast, a continued focus upon isolated nonproliferation efforts, combined with vague talk of nuclear abolition, ran none of these risks. As Richard Betts concluded, several years after the 1995 review conference, “in contrast to its original rationale, the NPT now constitutes a simple demand to the nuclear weapons have-nots to remain so.”¹⁶

Since the 1995 conference, therefore, the nuclear complex has remained divided into its two schools of thought, with each adjusting to the new opportunities and conditions of the post-cold war world. For the incremental school, there has been no shortage of work: the end of the Soviet Union, the discovery that Iraq came close to developing a nuclear arsenal despite being a signatory of the NPT, North Korea’s march toward nuclear weapons while it was still a treaty member, Libya and Iran’s flirtation with the bomb, as well as actual nuclear detonations by India and Pakistan, have all provided it with a host of new opportunities to continue advocating small and “realistic” steps. With so many emerging challenges, the complex could warn about the abundance of loose nuclear material and offer its expertise in safeguarding this material. As Darryl Howlett and John Simpson wrote in 1999: “Whereas the East-West division enabled the Soviet Union and the United States to constrain proliferation among their allies and client states through security guarantees and conventional arms transfers, the world

that is now evolving has led to both new insecurities and the potential for new nuclear proliferators.”¹⁷ In the late 1990s, the complex repeatedly warned of the danger of a nuclear weapon falling into the hands of an unstable anti-Western regime, a scenario that was beginning to replace the Soviet Union as the predominant threat in the minds of many conservative figures in the West.

This changing geographical and political focus also led to a shift from nonproliferation toward more aggressive policies of antiproliferation or counterproliferation.¹⁸ Those representing the instrumental approach found ample reasons to emphasize the danger posed by inactivity. Indicative of this broader turn is a series of publications released by Harvard University’s Center for Science and International Affairs. In 1993 the center published *Cooperative Denuclearization*, a book examining the nuclear dangers posed by the deteriorating situation in the Soviet Union. A similarly focused volume with the more alarming title of *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy* appeared in 1996. By the year 2000, *The Coming Crisis* was global in its attention and examined an even broader range of threats.¹⁹

As the tone changed, so did the proposed policies. *Cooperative Denuclearization* stressed that “safety could only be sought through new policies emphasizing cooperative engagement,” because “a collaborative and international effort is appropriate and, indeed, required for prompt denuclearization.”²⁰ The Marshall Plan and the coalition assembled prior to Operation Desert Storm were suggested as historical models worth considering. By the mid-1990s there was a palpable degree of irritation with the slow and limited nature of such an approach. The authors of *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy* called for “a determined program of action to prevent nuclear leakage that is as focused, serious, and vigorous as America’s cold war strategy.”²¹ International efforts, such as the indefinite extension of the NPT, were still welcome, but the analysts made it clear that “traditional nonproliferation approaches are not sufficient for dealing with the problem . . . which threatens to undermine the entire NPT regime.”²² At the turn of the century, *The Coming Crisis* considered implications of, and policies to deal with, the actual or potential spread of nuclear (and also biological or chemical) weapons to states such as Iran, Iraq, or North Korea. Although most authors were careful to warn that assertive, unilateral actions were unlikely to succeed and would serve neither U.S. interests nor any other states’ interests, their concerns reflected the rise of a more aggressive counterproliferation discourse.

The rise of the instrumental approach was part of a larger trend in post-cold war theorizing about international relations that focused on the concept of

hegemonic stability.²³ According to this line of thinking, an international order dominated by one hegemon, while not always delightful, provides real benefits. These include a stable international economy, security guarantees (and, correspondingly, lower military budgets) for the hegemon's allies, and the absence of competitive great-power rivalries—the kind that led to two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. From the point of view of hegemonic stability theory (and of some U.S. foreign policy-makers), nonproliferation is not actually a universal project of nuclear peace, but rather one of many tools that help to perpetuate an international arrangement that is overtly unequal, yet for that very reason makes for a peaceful and prosperous world, at least for the major states.²⁴

In sum, the complex now propagates a conservative ideology of post-cold war nuclear politics, one that privileges a stable international order dominated by status-quo large nuclear powers, and that has forsaken its original blueprint for a nuclear-free world.²⁵ On one hand, these powers, together with subordinate international organizations, work to deny nuclear weapons to revisionist anti-Western states that might be tempted to use the bomb aggressively, or even to transfer their handiwork to subnational terrorist groups. On the other, nonproliferation is employed, if tacitly, as a means of preventing revisionist states from acquiring a nuclear arsenal to defend themselves from Western coercion and threats by the time-tested means of basic deterrence. It is much harder to compel a state to act according to one's wishes, much less to change its regime entirely, if that state possesses a nuclear arsenal, because the *ultima ratio* of war becomes much less plausible—a fact that the governments in both Pyongyang and Tehran surely understand all too well. By keeping the bomb out of the hands of such states, therefore, the international community makes it much more difficult for them to act aggressively toward the nuclear powers and to defy Western domination. That may be unpleasant for the nuclear have-nots, but it does prevent them from challenging an international order that is, in historical terms, quite stable and peaceful.

CONTEMPORARY CONSEQUENCES

There is certainly a widespread understanding among scholars and practitioners concerned with nonproliferation and disarmament institutions that all is not right with the current regime. The pages of *The Nonproliferation Review* are routinely filled with substantial criticism of it, and prominent figures in the

international complex frequently despair at the lack of urgency with which the world is dealing with nuclear danger. The alarmist tone of the modern-day complex is epitomized perfectly by the famous clock on the cover of every issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which is rarely set earlier than ten minutes or so before midnight. But the response to this urgency is typically that the twin goals of nonproliferation and disarmament must be pressed ever harder, and that world leaders and the public must be made to understand that these twin goals can be achieved within the current international environment.

If an institutional regime is broken, however, intensifying its objectives only benefits those who prosper from it, while the problem the regime is purportedly dedicated to never gets solved. One might concede this, though, and still argue that in the world in which we live the nonproliferation complex does little actual harm: it is not, relatively speaking, very expensive; it keeps governments and people focused upon nuclear danger; it has certainly played a part in the decisions by some states to forgo nuclear capability; and at the least, it serves as a useful tool for U.S. hegemony, which may be keeping the world peaceful and stable.

Our claim is not so much that the nonproliferation complex is failing to achieve its stated objectives. It is that by refusing to challenge the interests of the nuclear haves, and hence advocating policies that cannot succeed, it is helping to entrench the permanent nuclearization of international politics—precisely the outcome that the original founders of the NPT were so determined to prevent. In what follows, we focus on three consequences: how the complex has helped to justify wars of nonproliferation; how its acceptance of the hypocrisy inherent in the NPT system has fostered a cynicism toward nuclear idealism; and how its embrace of an ameliorative discourse has pushed to the fringes alternative ideas that engage more directly with nuclear danger.

Wars of Nonproliferation

The complex plays a central role in providing major powers, and in particular the United States, with a powerful justification to wage wars against small states that might be attempting to obtain the bomb. The most obvious example is the disastrous case of Iraq, whose population endured a sanctions campaign throughout the 1990s and then a war beginning in 2003—both of which were undertaken in the name of nonproliferation, and both of which have caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In *Atomic Obsession*, John Mueller insists that responsibility for these deaths must be laid directly at the feet of the

nonproliferation regime.²⁶ He asks whether something like a million dead Iraqis, not to mention the staggering material costs of the war, was a worthwhile price to pay to prevent Saddam Hussein from getting a bomb—one that he would have been unable to use without risking the vaporizing of Iraq, not to mention the end of his rule.

Clearly, the sanctions campaign and especially the war were about more than just preventing Iraq from going nuclear. Powerful political forces in the United States and United Kingdom lobbied for a war in Iraq for reasons that had nothing to do with the cause of universalistic nonproliferation, a reality that is demonstrated by the fact that few in Washington or London demanded any serious action at all in response to the actual successful acquisition of a nuclear weapon by North Korea. In addition, it should be stressed that the enormous casualties in Iraq in the 1990s were not only a consequence of the sanctions but also of Saddam's decisions to spend his money on palaces and armies rather than hospitals. But Mueller's larger point stands. The single-minded focus on keeping the bomb out of the hands of anti-Western dictators provided the architects of the sanctions and the neoconservative advocates of the war with a useful liberal justification to pursue their campaigns. It was an argument that few in the international community could dispute: if one keeps calling for something, eventually someone might take those demands seriously. That is exactly what the Bush administration did in 2002–2003. As George Perkovich, otherwise critical of the Bush administration, had to admit at that time: “[Preemption] is not the crazy idea it is often portrayed to be. To enforce a robust nonproliferation regime, preemption might actually make sense in certain cases.”²⁷ Caught in a trap of their own making, few prominent members of the complex openly opposed the war during the tumultuous days of 2002–2003.

The widespread understanding in the United States and throughout the West that the Iraq war was a disaster that must never be repeated might prompt defenders of the complex to characterize it as a one-off event, less attributable to the politics of nuclear nonproliferation than to the hysterical climate after the September 11 attacks and to the presence in Washington of a uniquely dysfunctional presidential administration. It has also become popular to distinguish between counterproliferation and nonproliferation: the former is often characterized by the aggressive, even reckless, use of military force, whereas the latter is defined by the application of more subtle diplomatic tools. The war in Iraq is then simply dismissed as an alarming instance when counterproliferation gained

the upper hand. But this view overemphasizes the distinction between these two approaches. To be sure, while there are more belligerent and less belligerent ways of denying states nuclear weapons, military force always remains the ultimate means of stopping proliferation—which is precisely why the complex failed to speak out during the run-up to the war in Iraq.²⁸ In any case, and most important, the structural environment established by the nonproliferation complex presents major powers with a permanent condition of *casus belli*, regardless of whether one advocates counterproliferation or nonproliferation measures.

Wars of nonproliferation have thus become a core element of what Anthony Burke calls the “new internationalism.”²⁹ Burke claims that this “sweeping effort to combine preventive war and unilateral humanitarian enforcement into a new normative framework for international intervention” is “likely to undermine the [UN] Charter and the nonproliferation regime even more than unilateral actions such as the invasion of Iraq.”³⁰ Contrary to Burke’s argument, however, the new internationalism and the nonproliferation regime do not stand in opposition to each other: the nonproliferation regime is well-suited to provide comfortable and readily-available justifications for interventions such as Iraq. These justifications rely not only on the claims of the great powers (with their obvious interests) but also, crucially, on the perpetual arguments made by the nonproliferation complex about the NPT regime’s demise.³¹

Because the regime permits signatories to the NPT to acquire peaceful atomic technology, it allows for the “spreading of the bomb without quite breaking the rules,” as Albert Wohlstetter pointed out in the mid-1970s.³² Thus, it is always possible for states to act in a way that might raise suspicions that they are considering building a bomb; and unless a world in which all states are forever regarded by the United States and other major powers as reliable friends comes into being, it is always possible for those who seek war to sound the alarm of dangerous proliferation. Simply put, in a world of nuclear technology and international anarchy, the proliferation problem will always exist, and so, therefore, will a justification for war.³³ As long as nonproliferation is seen as an indisputable public good, a universal objective so important that the international community must accept war as a legitimate last resort, another war like Iraq is bound to occur.

Hypocrisy and Cynicism

An outside observer might wonder how it is that most states seem to believe in the nonproliferation regime, and have even eschewed nuclear weapons, when the

existing nuclear powers have made no attempt to disarm despite the clear language of Article VI and the simple political logic that connects proliferation with disarmament.³⁴ The answer is simple: Because nonproliferation continues to be seen as an indisputable public good, it behooves advanced industrial states to cooperate with the regime as long as they believe that their international environment is essentially secure—that is, that they are not threatened by the existing nuclear powers or by other states that a nuclear arsenal would deter. Tellingly, the drive for the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 was publicly led by Canada, even as the great powers were twisting arms behind the scenes.

Over the long term, however, the hypocrisy of the nuclear haves threatens to undermine the cause of the nuclear regime. To mention a recent example of this hypocrisy, not long after President Barack Obama famously called for a nuclear-free world in Prague he signed on to an \$85 billion modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal—a move applauded by leading members of the complex, such as William Perry, because it facilitated the passage of a moderate arms control deal with Russia.³⁵ This staggering decision, which could hardly have been better designed to signal to the rest of the world that the United States has no intention of disarming anytime soon, sends a clear message to such states as Japan and Germany, which have made a point of rejecting nuclear weapons, not to mention Brazil and Argentina, which abandoned their projects: Article VI is a sham, and those who take it seriously are fools.

Again, such hypocrisy does no short-term damage as long as putative nuclear states do not feel threatened in the current international environment. The problem here, comparable in many ways to that of wars of nonproliferation, is one of time. It is possible that a unipolar world dominated by the United States will never slip out of its current condition of equilibrium—that the world's leading industrial nations will never once feel endangered by U.S. power—but the history of international politics suggests otherwise. Anarchy eventually slips into disequilibrium; the world cannot forever remain as it is. In a pre-nuclear world, the decline of U.S. hegemony would mean the return of traditional balance-of-power politics and a possible descent into conflict and war. In a nuclear age, of course, states have another option: rather than embark upon the impossible task of trying to match U.S. military power, they can build a basic nuclear arsenal and obtain the security that comes with knowing that they can deliver a devastating retaliation against any state that may try to conquer them.³⁶

One of the most important and laudable aspects of the NPT as it was conceived in the late 1960s was its recognition of this potential danger. A key idea underlying the premises of both nonproliferation and Article VI was that nuclear weapons needed to be *stigmatized*—that possession of a nuclear arsenal was in the end an immoral act, necessary perhaps for the time being and for some states, but intolerable over the long term if the human race were to survive.³⁷ As T. V. Paul and other scholars have argued, the antinuclear norm lay at the center of nonproliferation politics over the past half-century—perhaps not so much among insecure countries such as Israel or Pakistan, but rather among safer non-nuclear states such as Canada.³⁸ The difficulty with universalistic norms, however, is that they cannot withstand endless betrayals. More than forty years after the signing of the NPT, and twenty years after the ending of the cold war, none of the nuclear-have signatories have moved even nominally toward a policy of actual disarmament. Should the current international condition of unipolar equilibrium begin to disintegrate, the United States and other nuclear haves will have few means at their disposal (other than preventive major war) to discourage advanced states from quickly developing a basic nuclear arsenal. They might well appeal to the norm of antinuclear morality, but after decades of hypocrisy, vulnerable states would hardly take such an appeal seriously.

Suppression of Serious Alternatives

“The ultimate success of a national policy,” wrote Joseph Nye, “occurs when a country is able to elevate its interest to the level of a general principle. In that sense, U.S. nonproliferation policy over the years has been surprisingly successful.”³⁹ In two sentences, Nye puts his finger precisely upon the third consequence of the nonproliferation complex. When a universalistic principle that purports to seek a good anyone can perceive—the avoidance of nuclear apocalypse—is wedded to the policy objectives of the world’s most powerful state and its major allies, a dominant discourse is the result.⁴⁰ Those who adhere to this discourse enjoy funding, political support, and “policy relevance”; those who deviate from it do not.⁴¹ This is the way of the world and is hardly unique to the nonproliferation regime.

The problem here is not the plight of those who reject the nonproliferation line, of course, but rather that ideas that more squarely tackle nuclear danger are crowded out. As E. H. Carr pointed out in the 1930s, it is precisely in situations like this that the employment of ameliorative liberalism at the international level

can often be worse than doing nothing at all.⁴² By focusing upon “rogue states,” avoiding demands for disarmament beyond vague calls for Global Zero, and in a general sense conveying to the Western public the message that nuclear danger should be blamed on other people, and not on them, the complex has cultivated the false notion that nuclear peace can be accomplished incrementally, over time, without requiring unorthodox forms of political action. As we have seen, the quest to stop nonproliferation without simultaneously requiring great-power nuclear disarmament runs into simple and logical obstacles that cannot, over the long run, be overcome. Nuclear technology exists, the international environment remains anarchical, and so unless the United States and its allies wish to wage an endless series of Iraq-like wars to prevent states from obtaining a bomb, sooner or later some will do so. Indeed, they will do so despite such wars, and, more importantly, because of them. States thinking about building a bomb need only contrast the fates of North Korea with Libya to see this logic. For a while, it might have been possible to use the moral taboo of nuclear weapons to discourage some states from taking this step, but the ongoing cynicism fostered by Article VI hypocrisy has surely destroyed such hopes.

Not everyone agrees. It is certainly possible to argue that the world will forever remain as it is now, with all have-not nations eternally content with U.S. dominance and happy to accept the existing nuclear disparity. One cannot simply assume that more states will eventually seek nuclear weapons and that the unipolar order will fall into disequilibrium. The slow pace of proliferation so far gives credence to this claim: maybe we are moving, if a bit belatedly, into an End of History, with occasional outliers mopped up by an increasingly supreme liberal international regime. To this very important, if rather optimistic, objection, one must raise two points. First, it assumes the eternal demise of revisionist politics—that states will never get fed up with U.S. domination. If the United States were Rome at its apex, revisionism would not matter: rebellious states would get crushed. The difference now is the nuclear factor. By obtaining a nuclear arsenal, states can relatively easily defy American coercion. To stop that from happening, the United States can either threaten yet another war or it can bribe states to eschew the bomb. Both possibilities are conceivable in the case of Iran. While a war against Iran would be bad, however, it would be simply out of the question with respect to China, or Russia.

Second, risking everything on the assumption that equilibrium will remain permanent is a dangerous bet. If the present anarchical unipolar order represents a

kind of utopian international condition for the United States and its major allies—one where there is an absence of serious geopolitical conflict, and where this unipolar order has been obtained without the economic and political costs of building massive international security institutions—its unraveling could portend a global dystopia. Unipolar disequilibrium, after all, means not the return of balance-of-power international politics (then it would not be unipolar) but a spiraling increase in the number of states defying U.S. power and obtaining the one sure means of doing so successfully: a nuclear arsenal. A world of many states eager to thumb their noses at U.S. hegemony, and a United States bent on maintaining it, would be violent enough in a nonnuclear age; now, it is a recipe for unprecedented disaster. Imagine the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, but with those states in possession of a few nuclear missiles.

The indefinite perpetuation of an orderly unipolar system rests on two assumptions: that small states will never be tempted to defy U.S. preponderance, and that Russia and China will soon come into the liberal fold. If these assumptions prove incorrect, the United States will eventually find itself at a point where it either has to try to maintain its domination of a system in disequilibrium (a policy that portends an extremely violent era), or to abandon its global preponderance and let the cards fall where they may. A third option would be to begin the process of building the massive international institutions necessary to manage nuclear anarchy, a step to which we will return in our conclusion.

What about the possibility of disarmament? As we have seen, Global Zero and other disarmament movements in the nonproliferation complex have argued that it is possible to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons without radical political change, which is why their campaign goes unopposed by the leading powers. A movement that is based upon exhorting the nuclear haves to disarm gradually does not threaten them, as President Obama surely understood when he delivered his speech in Prague. Unfortunately, nuclear disarmament runs into problems as insurmountable as those confronting nonproliferation. The problem with this vision lies not in the possibility of military disarmament as such, but in the particular nature of nuclear weaponry.

Nuclear weapons differ from pre-nuclear strategic weapons, such as ships and planes, in that their relatively small physical size belies the devastating, unstoppable threat that they pose. Had the world's major maritime powers committed, say, to a policy of general naval disarmament in a pre-nuclear era, a participating state might be willing to accept the possibility of one of its rivals cheating, because

one or two ships cannot be easily hidden—certainly not once they are operationally deployed—and because a couple of ships by themselves cannot threaten a large state’s survival. This is patently not the case with nuclear weapons. Contemporary technology permits advanced states to hide relatively small thermonuclear missiles in submarines, or underground—missiles that can be delivered to another state’s territory in a matter of minutes. An attack consisting of only several of these missiles would destroy the major cities of the largest continental power, and put an end to the existence of compact states, such as Japan or the United Kingdom.⁴³ Because everyone is aware of this fact, a march to global zero will eventually come to a halt. It is possible that medium-sized nuclear powers, such as the United Kingdom, France, or Israel, will decide to disarm, if they come to believe that the extant international environment will forever obviate a need for an independent nuclear deterrent. But as the number of states with nuclear weapons reduces to four, or three, or two, the emergence of a different condition is unavoidable: a growing and universal fear that as the last powers prepare to disarm, one of them will choose to cheat. A state that successfully does so becomes the world’s only nuclear power, and if that state adopts a belligerent foreign policy, others will face the choice of acceding to its dictates or risking destruction.

In the endgame of global zero, such considerations will dominate the thinking of not only the remaining nuclear powers but also those states that have already disarmed—yet, by definition, possess the technological means to rebuild an arsenal quickly.⁴⁴ As all relevant states are aware of the extreme risks of permitting one last outlaw regime to cheat, and as they are equally aware of the relative ease of rebuilding an arsenal quickly and surreptitiously, an impasse is certain to occur. Nuclear weapons make complete national disarmament impossible, because cheating is too easy and too strategically decisive. It was this awareness, after all, that doomed efforts to establish international control over the bomb in 1946—when only one nation possessed it.⁴⁵

TAKING NUCLEAR DANGER SERIOUSLY

As Daniel Deudney has put it, nonproliferation and global zero fail because they are reformist solutions to a revolutionary problem.⁴⁶ To deal effectively with nuclear danger, more radical answers are needed, but it is these kinds of answers that have been marginalized by the dominant discourse of the complex. One of

them, espoused chiefly by the late Kenneth Waltz, is the idea that because nuclear technology cannot be uninvented and international anarchy cannot be overcome, we might as well accept the spread of nuclear weapons and the deterrence this will bring.⁴⁷ Waltz correctly pointed out that the destructive force of nuclear weapons is so apparent, and the instinct to survive so ingrained, that states that do obtain a bomb are likely to become extremely cautious. Nuclear deterrence worked during the cold war, when two superpowers armed with massive arsenals faced off around the globe; why would not the same apply to a relatively small and beleaguered state like Iran, if it were to possess a few bombs? Waltz envisioned an international system composed of nuclear “porcupine” states: hyper-defensive countries that all reason suggests are better left alone. War in such a world would be rare, which is why he famously suggested that “more [nuclear weapons] may be better,” and argued that an Iranian bomb would be a force for peace in the Middle East.⁴⁸

Waltz’s *laissez-faire* realism possesses a clear logic and unwillingness to cater to the interests of the nuclear haves—two attributes that the dominant nonproliferation discourse lacks. But over the long term, his argument runs into the same obstacle encountered by the complex: the unstable nature of international anarchy. For Waltz, and for all interstate realists, anarchy means the absence of a hierarchical authority over states, and its preeminent characteristic is the possibility of great-power war. In other words, anarchy is ultimately defined as an environment that permits a major war. If such war is ruled out for eternity, anarchy as realists conceive of it becomes a meaningless concept. What this means is that on Waltz’s own terms the spread of nuclear weapons only postpones the problem. Sooner or later a general war will happen; and in a world in which all or most states have nuclear weapons, the stakes are immeasurably higher. The *laissez-faire* school can claim that it provides a better short-term answer to nuclear danger than does the complex, but this is all it can claim.

The other, more radical, solution to nuclear danger that has been sidelined by the nuclear complex discourse is the only logical means of permanently ending the possibility of interstate nuclear war in a world in which nuclear technology cannot be uninvented: the advent of a world government.⁴⁹ If the inherent instability of anarchy undermines all other attempts to prevent nuclear war, then the obvious conclusion is to eliminate anarchy by developing an entity that can acquire and control all nuclear technologies, an act that would mean the end of sovereign nation-states. This solution, of course, was the natural one envisioned by politicians, scientists, scholars, and writers at the outset of the atomic age, recognizing

that less ambitious projects would invariably fail.⁵⁰ But the dream of world government was quickly shattered by the cold war; and what was once seen as a reasonable response to a revolutionary weapon quickly became regarded as an eccentricity. Nonetheless, such hard-nosed realists as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau concluded during the height of that conflict that only a world government could save the planet from an eventual nuclear apocalypse. They understood perfectly well how difficult it would be to achieve such an end, as well as the dangers a world state could bring. But they were both committed to a realism that insists we confront problems with open eyes, no matter how unfashionable the implications. The nonproliferation complex has chosen to follow an easier path.

NOTES

- ¹ At the international level, the International Atomic Energy Agency stands out, but there are also ad hoc groups, such as the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament, sponsored by the governments of Australia and Japan. In terms of government agencies, the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration, with its extensive nonproliferation activities, serves as an excellent example. It has counterparts in many other countries. Among academic programs, the Monterey Institute of International Studies in the United States and the Mountbatten Centre for International Studies at Southampton long set the tone, though over the course of the past decade the former has clearly overtaken the latter in terms of global significance. This no doubt reflects the decisive role played by U.S.-based organizations in the nonproliferation complex. Monterey and Southampton have also duplicated as think tanks on matters of nuclear nonproliferation, alongside many others, such as the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, based in Geneva; the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Harvard's Managing the Atom project; and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. In fact, there are now so many institutions that umbrella networks, such as the recently established European Union's Non-Proliferation Consortium, are beginning to take shape. There is no shortage of NGOs involved, either, including the U.S. Arms Control Association, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, or the Pugwash conference. Funding comes from governments as well as large foundations, including the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Ploughshares Fund, and the Carnegie Corporation.
- ² Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 82.
- ³ Susanna Schrafstetter and Stephen Twigge, *Avoiding Armageddon: Europe, the United States, and the Struggle for Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1945–1970* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004).
- ⁴ Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 159.
- ⁵ William Epstein, *The Last Chance: Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Control* (New York: Free Press, 1976), p. 245.
- ⁶ Mohamed Ibrahim Shaker, "The Legacy of the 1985 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference: the president's reflections," in John Simpson, ed., *Nuclear Non-proliferation: An Agenda for the 1990s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 9.
- ⁷ John Simpson, ed., *Nuclear Non-proliferation*.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154. Simpson refers to the 1995 NPT review conference, which was to decide about the future of the treaty.
- ¹⁰ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 85.
- ¹¹ On these two points see also Nye's article "NPT: The Logic of Inequality," *Foreign Policy*, no. 59 (1985), pp. 123–31.
- ¹² The clashes over disarmament were largely restricted to lower ranking diplomats who served on what was considered the conference's least important working body, Main Committee I on disarmament.

- ¹³ John Simpson and Darryl Howlett, "The NPT Renewal Conference: Stumbling toward 1995," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994), pp. 41–71; and Joseph F. Pilat and Robert E. Pendley (eds.), *1995: A New Beginning for the NPT?* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995).
- ¹⁴ Tariq Rauf and Rebecca Johnson, "After the NPT's Indefinite Extension: The Future of the Global Nonproliferation Regime," *Nonproliferation Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1995), p. 29.
- ¹⁵ We have already mentioned Ford Foundation's grant support for nonproliferation research at the University of Southampton. Similar projects elsewhere received funding from the John D. and Catherine MacArthur Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, or the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- ¹⁶ Richard K. Betts, "Universal Deterrence or Conceptual Collapse? Liberal Pessimism and Utopian Realism," in Victor A. Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 70.
- ¹⁷ Darryl Howlett and John Simpson, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Evolving Policy Debate," *Contemporary Security Policy* 20, no. 3, 1999, p. 209.
- ¹⁸ Brad Roberts, "From Nonproliferation to Antiproliferation," *International Security* 18, no. 1 (1993), pp. 139–73.
- ¹⁹ Graham Allison, Ashton B. Carter, Steven E. Miller, and Philip Zelikow, eds., *Cooperative Denuclearization: From Pledges to Deeds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1993); Graham T. Allison, Owen R. Cote, Jr., Richard A. Falkenrath and Steven E. Miller, *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy: Containing the Threat of Loose Russian Nuclear Weapons and Fissile Materials* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); and Victor A. Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
- ²⁰ Allison et al., *Cooperative Denuclearization*, pp. vi, 289.
- ²¹ Allison et al., *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy*, p. 2.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ²³ The classic exposition of hegemonic stability theory is Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For a contemporary treatment, see Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012), pp. 7–51.
- ²⁴ On the use of nonproliferation as a strategy, see Anne Harrington de Santana, "The Strategy of Non-proliferation: Maintaining the Credibility of an Incredible Pledge to Disarm," *Millennium* 40, no. 1 (2011), pp. 3–19.
- ²⁵ William Walker, "Nuclear enlightenment and counter-enlightenment," *International Affairs* 83, no. 3 (2007), pp. 431–53. See also the rest of this special issue to which Walker's article gave rise.
- ²⁶ John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ²⁷ George Perkovich, "Bush's Nuclear Revolution: A Regime Change in Nonproliferation," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 2 (2003), p. 4.
- ²⁸ On the link between counter-proliferation and nonproliferation, see Mark Fitzpatrick, "Non-Proliferation and Counter-Proliferation: What is the Difference?" *Defense & Security Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2008), pp. 73–79.
- ²⁹ Anthony Burke, "Against the New Internationalism," *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2005), pp. 73–89.
- ³⁰ Burke, pp. 74, 77.
- ³¹ Thomas E. Doyle, II, "Reviving Nuclear Ethics: A Renewed Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century," *Ethics & International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2010), pp. 287–308.
- ³² Albert Wohlstetter, "Spreading the Bomb without Quite Breaking the Rules," *Foreign Policy*, no. 25 (1976–1977), pp. 88–96 and 145–79.
- ³³ On how this works under the conditions of unipolarity, see Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011–2012), pp. 31–32.
- ³⁴ Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation: Examining the Linkage Argument," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012–2013), pp. 92–132.
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- ³⁶ Campbell Craig, "American power preponderance and the nuclear revolution," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009), pp. 27–44.
- ³⁷ Walker, "Nuclear Enlightenment." *op. cit.*

- ³⁸ See T. V. Paul, *Power Versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); and Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
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- ⁴⁰ Benoît Pelopidas, "The Oracles of Proliferation: How Experts Maintain a Biased Historical Reading that Limits Policy Innovation," *Nonproliferation Review* 18, no. 1 (2011), pp. 297–314.
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- ⁴² Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*.
- ⁴³ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Kenneth Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (September 1990), pp. 731–45.
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- ⁴⁵ Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).
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- ⁴⁹ Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), ch. 9; Campbell Craig, "The Resurgent Idea of World Government," *Ethics and International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2008), pp. 133–42.
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