

# Arms Control and Disarmament: A Failed Marriage

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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*The ongoing pandemic makes us obsessively aware of the precariousness of life, and if from the U.S., the mendacious incompetence of our political leadership. Yet, it also makes most of us as obsessively complacent when the threats seem remote and abstract. This complacency with respect to contagious disease greatly worsened the level of fatalities, as well as the profound social and economic dislocations associated with the still unfolding COVID-19 experience. Such a pandemic was unimaginable until it became too real and omnipresent to be imagined, but only experienced at various degrees of separation. Being obsessed, fearful, and resentful is not the same as being imagined.*

The linkage between contagious disease and climate change is too evident to ignore altogether: The falling price of oil, the declining carbon emissions, the global imperative of cooperation, uneven vulnerabilities, and the relevance of justice and empathy.

With respect to nuclear hazards, especially from the weaponry and their possible use, there is a growing disconnect between risk and behavior, a combination of nuclearism prevailing among the political elites of the nuclear weapons states and public disregard. There is a greater appreciation of the dangers associated with nuclear energy. The disaster at Fukushima, and longer ago at Chernobyl, are grim reminders of risks and potential catastrophe.

Yet surrounding nuclear weaponry there is an aura of complacency reinforced by a false sense of self-interest. The complacency arises from the startling fact that no nuclear weapon has been exploded during a combat situation in the 75 years since the horrifying attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Complacency also feeds off the suppressed realization that governments base their ultimate security on threats to annihilate tens of millions of innocent persons and subject our natural habitats to extreme disaster. With regard to nuclear dangers assuming the dreaded will never happen could turn out to be the greatest bio-ethical folly in the entire history of the human species. We forget folk wisdom at our peril: 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.' Governments need to invest their energies and resources in *anticipatory* approaches to impending disasters and not entrust the collective fate of humanity to *reactive* responses when various dark unimaginables happen as they certainly will.

In this spirit, I argue for a better understanding the distinction between arms control and disarmament approaches to nuclearism, which helps explain why choosing the disarmament path is vital for the human future. Despite this contention, nuclear disarmament is currently so low on the policy agenda of the nuclear weapons states as to be dismissed as either superfluous or utopian.

The Distinction

It is often argued that arms control is a realistic approach to national security in the nuclear age that can be thought of as satisfying preconditions for negotiating a verified nuclear disarmament agreement when international conditions are right. Arms control measures have the added benefit of reducing risks of an accidental or mistaken use of nuclear weapons and of avoiding wasteful costs associated with arms competition designed to maintain security in relation to adversaries. There are good faith beliefs present in this support for arms control, but this advocacy hides, often unconsciously, an important quite different more complex and confusing parts of a broader story. In addition to reducing risks and miscalculations of intended nuclear war or expensive and dangerous extensions of competition in nuclear armaments, arms control seems to have as its primary goal bringing as much stability as possible to a structure of world order that is presumed to be nuclear armed. It also has a secondary seldom avowed goal of providing an instrument useful in the conduct of foreign policy. It allows some nuclear weapons states to take tactical advantage of their posture of nuclear superiority when confronting one another or of positing nuclear threats, especially against non-nuclear hostile countries in confrontational situations.

In contrast, the advocacy of nuclear disarmament believes unconditionally that the only safe and decent course of action is to do everything possible to get safely rid of nuclear weaponry as soon as possible. Nuclear weapons pose threats to human wellbeing and ecological stability in the form of catastrophe and even extinction. Disarmament goals are as a practical matter at odds with the arms control approach for at least three major reasons. First of all, a disarmament process threatens widely accepted ideas about nuclear stability. Instead, it generates uncertainty, especially if not coupled in its latter stages with a global demilitarization process. The arms control view is that the more stable the overall political environment with respect to the weaponry the safer and more secure the world. The attainment of such stability carries with it a lessened incentive for political leaders to embark upon a denuclearizing disarmament alternative. This reluctance is not primarily, as often alleged, because of destabilizing risks of cheating and fears that any renewal of nuclear arms competition would be more dangerous than is a world order in which the nuclear weapons states exercise prudence and prevent further proliferation of the weaponry, but reflects militarist habits and geopolitical calculations.

Secondly, there exists a powerful nuclear establishment joining parts of the governmental bureaucracy with weapons labs and war industry private sector interests. Thirdly, and least acknowledged, is the degree to which foreign policy planners in several nuclear weapons states find and propose roles for these weapons to deter provocations, to solidify alliances, exert geopolitical and tactical leverage, and provide a hedge against future uncertainties.

Although such considerations are not unfamiliar in the strategic literature, the link to arms control rarely is explicitly made, or if made, is done so in a rather misleading and superficial manner that presupposes its compatibility with disarmament advocacy. Sometimes, the argument is made that arms control is a confidence-building step toward disarmament or that nuclear disarmament, although not presently attainable, remains the *ultimate* goal, but the time must be right. The lesson drawn is that in the meantime given existing world conditions, arms control is the most and best that can be hoped for, while nuclear disarmament remains the shared hope of humanity if conditions ever become suitable to move seriously toward the elimination of the weaponry. Underlying these justifications for relegating the prospects of getting rid of nuclear weaponry to forever horizons—by proclaiming disarmament as the ‘ultimate’ goal—is to signal that it is not really a goal at all except as a way of keeping genuine disarmament advocates appeased and confused.

The true story is that the national security establishment, at least in the U.S., and undoubtedly elsewhere, is *opposed to* nuclear disarmament as a policy option, for two interrelated reasons. First, possession of nuclear weapons gives states international prestige and leverage even if never actively relied upon. Secondly, avoiding disarmament keeps in being a regime of 'nuclear apartheid' enabling nuclear weapons states to pose unspeakable threats in crisis situations that are likely quite effective, given the extreme vulnerability of non-nuclear states. Merely having a nuclear weapons arsenal sends an intimidating message to potential adversaries, especially if nuclear weapons are being designed and developed with future combat missions in mind.

The ambiguities of arms control are most vividly exposed with respect to the establishment and maintenance of the anti-proliferation regime. The United States claims that it is carrying out a positive world order role by taking responsibility for 'enforcing' the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). This form of geopolitical enforcement, that is, without UN authorization or legal prerogative, is directed against certain outlier countries (e.g. Iran, North Korea) that are accused of seeking such weaponry. It is questionable whether such behavior should be treated as arms control. It seems more appropriately viewed as an integral nuclear component of global hegemony.

### The Anti-Proliferation Regime

There are other features of the anti-Proliferation regime that occasion suspicion.

Double standards pervade the implementation of the NPT. The standards of nonproliferation found in this widely ratified treaty are not applied consistently. If the government evading proliferation controls is a strategic ally (Israel) or if the country crossing the nuclear threshold is too large to challenge (India, Pakistan), the enlargement of the nuclear club will be tolerated, or even encouraged. Yet if a hostile country seeks the weapons for credible deterrence reasons, then it will experience various forms of pressure, and even become subject to sanctions and threats of attack.

Nuclear deployments and threats to use nuclear weapons confer geopolitical advantages and options on the nuclear weapons states, besides giving some security about the threats of being attacked. Qaddafi was undoubtedly correct when he said that Libya would not have been attacked in 2011 had it possessed nuclear weapons, and Iraq in 2003 was likely attacked because it didn't have a nuclear deterrent. It is instructive that North Korea was not attacked once it crossed the nuclear threshold even in a small, largely symbolic, manner.

This rationale for retaining nuclearism was starkly confirmed by the formal statement issued by the U.S., France, and the UK on July 13, 2017 as to why they totally rejected any connection with the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, emphasizing the positive role of nuclear weaponry in keeping the peace. In view of these considerations, why do NGOs in civil society continue to act as if they are working for nuclear disarmament when they do not reject the essential elements of an arms control approach?

Above all, despite experience and evidence, 'the arms control first' community believes that reducing the size of the arsenal and agreeing not to develop some weapons systems are helpful measures on their own as well lending themselves to being promoted as stepping stones to disarmament negotiations. Additionally, there is the belief that the retention of nuclear weapons is so entrenched that only arms control agreements are feasible, and

disarmament a diversionary pipe dream. From this perspective, arms control arrangements are better than nothing even if completely unrelated to achieving nuclear disarmament. Finally, as arms control activism is concentrated in Washington, the only way for political moderates in civil society to get a seat at the table set by government is to shed the utopian image of disarmament advocacy and settle for what is feasible although it means dancing with the devil.

We can ask, then, where does this leave those dedicated to peace, and especially to avoiding any threat or use of a nuclear weapon in the course of a war? In my view, it is not appropriate to adopt an either/or position of saying no disarmament because unattainable or never arms control because it legitimates nuclear apartheid, and closes its eyes to geopolitical reliance on the leverage gained by wielding the weaponry. It is currently important to challenge public complacency about nuclear weaponry because these weapons have not been used since 1945, and to become attentive to the warnings of impending danger signaled by moving the highly credible, risk-assessing Domsday Clock of *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* to within 100 seconds to midnight, or closer to doomsday than it has ever been since established in 1947. In effect, it is delusional to suppose that we can indefinitely co-exist with this infernal weaponry, especially given the lethal blend of demagogues and nationalist passions that dominate the governance structures of the world.

It would also be helpful to call attention to the fact that the NPT in Article VI imposes an unconditional obligation of nuclear weapons states to engage in good faith nuclear disarmament negotiations as part of the agreement reached with other states to forego the nuclear weapons option. The obligatory character of this legal commitment was unanimously affirmed by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion delivered in 1996, and yet by continuing to invest heavily in the continuous modernization of the nuclear weapons arsenal, including the development of new nuclear weapons designed for possible combat use means that this central legal obligation of the NPT regime is being defiantly ignored. There is no disposition on the part of any state to call for the geopolitical enforcement of Article VI, and until this happens the treaty is mainly functions as a disguise for nuclearism and nuclear apartheid.

Even if this Article VI legal commitment did not exist, the idea of resting security on discretionary threats to retaliate by destroying tens of millions of innocent civilians and contaminating the atmosphere of the entire planet quite possibly causing what experts call 'a nuclear famine' and widespread disease. Such omnicidal courses of action underline the immorality of resting security on such massive indiscriminate nuclear strikes that would fill the air with contaminating radioactivity. The UN ICAN Treaty, now formally ratified by 37 of the 50 States needed to bring the agreement into force is an important move in the right direction, and far more a helpful signpost than is an uncritical endorsement of this or that arms control proposal. Yet unless the ICAN Treaty is extended in its coverage to the nuclear weapons states it remains in the realm of rhetorical moralism lacking behavioral consequences.

There are arms control measures that can be supported in good conscience, including No First Use Declarations removing ambiguity from threats to use the weapons, and de-alerting measures that gives leaders more time to avoid accidental or unintended uses. Such measures rarely motivate champions of arms control because their advocacy hampers cooperation with geopolitical pragmatists who are running the world. The refusal to embrace No First Use thinking in doctrine and practice is revealing: it suggests that the real interface of compatibility is between arms control and geopolitics rather than as proclaimed, as

between arms control and disarmament.

In the end, anyone genuinely devoted to world peace needs to recognize the urgency of taking an unconditional stand against retaining nuclear weapons as an indispensable step toward achieving peace for all peoples on earth and part of the challenge of being ecologically responsible guardians of planetary viability.

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