

# Assessing the Resilience and Fragility of the Nuclear Taboo

Written by Rizwana Abbasi

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RIZWANA ABBASI, MAR 19 2016

Nuclear weapons have not been employed since the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. However, in many crises and wars in history, there was the possibility of employing nuclear weapons without fear of retaliation. However, states did not use the nuclear option, even though they might have paid a higher price in the theatre of war. This in spite of the existence of many variables which might have supported the employment of nuclear bombs, such as widespread nuclear weapons possession internationally; states' technical efficiency with regards to the operationalisation of such weapons; transfer of nuclear weapons from old to new proliferators within an asymmetric balance of power; the importance of nuclear weapons in states' national security policies and their strategic doctrines; states' distinct strategic cultures, traditions and unique political systems; and more significantly, the absence of legal prohibition of the possession and use of nuclear weapons.

To fully understand why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945, Nina Tannenwald in her award-winning, *Nuclear Taboo* [i] and T. V. Paul in his *Tradition of Non-use of Nuclear Weapons* [ii] have revisited this debate. This article draws upon Tannenwald's and Paul's investigations and argues that the notion of a "taboo" may be helpful, and that it is proliferated because no state has used nuclear weapons since 1945, even in the case of compelling circumstances. Certain significant factors have explicitly or implicitly contributed to the establishment of this taboo. These are guided by and based on the United States' national security interests and other material factors. Thus, this article contends that a single approach or a cultural or normative analysis alone cannot explain the taboo. Only with reference to both, material and non-material or ideational factors, can the non-use of nuclear weapons be explained comprehensively.[iii] Realist and neo-realist theorists argue that states are primarily concerned with their own survival in the international order. Great powers have dominated the system, and anarchy has been the key ordering principle of that system.[iv] Thus, it is fair to assume that during the Cold War the two superpowers' national security interests and their strategic gains dominated a bipolar world. Nuclear weapons changed their strategic thinking in the following ways: First, nuclear competition between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union in the 1950s helped them achieve a sufficiently efficient amount of weapons to maintain their doctrinal posture and preserve the credibility of deterrence. The former Soviet Union broke America's nuclear supremacy and monopoly, which had certainly helped regulate the nature of war. Second, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were two leading global powers, desiring to maximise their global political influence. Thus, based on their technological capabilities, they realised there could be no victory in the nuclear domain. Moreover, the two superpowers had to project their power beyond their respective geographical regions. Thus, they preferred peace and settlements over confrontation and war. Third, the U.S. wanted to establish a favourable world order by preaching peace and minimising violence. Fourth, the introduction of new conventional technologies, such as ballistic missile defences and missile interceptors, reduced the role and utility of these weapons globally and indeed modified the U.S.' behaviour.

Constructivist approaches, on the other hand, are based on ideational factors and thus help support Tannenwald's taboo argument. [viii] President Truman's assigning a non-military or political role to nuclear weapons was based on the horrendous consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. Strategic thinkers' contributions were based on their scientific work at institutions such as RAND. Theorists like Bernard Brodie,[ix] Thomas Shelling[x] and Albert Wohlstetter[xi], Henry Kissinger[xii] and Herman Kahn[xiii] promoted vigorous strategic thinking at the political and strategic levels regarding the role of nuclear weapons, promoting the idea that there could be no victory in a nuclear

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war. Moreover, the United States' reputation was damaged due to the employment of nuclear weapons in WWII and further use was contrary to the role of the U.S. as a leading power in the post-World War II international order. In parallel to this, the fear of the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons generated human rights debates, civil society movements, and anti-nuclear weapons pressure groups in the U.S. and Europe. In this process, public opinion in the West was much more developed with respect to the horrific effects resulting from the use of nuclear weapons, and an increased sense of responsibility at state level emerged in this respect.

It goes without saying that the proliferation of nuclear weapons has slowed down. A decline in the number of nuclear warheads in the arsenals of the U.S. and Russia has strengthened non-proliferation frameworks and the spirit of disarmament. The indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 and the treaty's membership reaching 190 states are hallmark developments. The introduction of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between the U.S. and Russia, a diminishing role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policies, the Global Zero Movement and President Obama's efforts are great steps towards the survival of the taboo. The arrival of smarter conventional technologies such as Global Prompt Strikes (GPS), missile anticipators and shifting power centres, as well as global integration, interdependence, and regionalism have reinforced the spirit of the non-use taboo, thereby minimising the utility of nuclear weapons.

Despite its successes, the NPT has failed in achieving its desired goals based on its three pillars, which constituted a grand bargain. One, under the NPT, five countries are recognised as nuclear weapons states, while the rest of the treaty's signatories are regarded as non-nuclear weapons states and barred from acquiring nuclear weapons. Such an arrangement has raised global criticism of this regime's efficacy and it underscores the interests of great powers. The non-universal nature of the NPT is a major problem that needs to be addressed. Another problem is that the NPT's articles are vaguely defined and therefore are used by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to give waivers to non-NPT states allowing them to transfer nuclear technology. Arguably, the U.S. waiver (2008) to India and the U.S.-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) have damaged the essence and spirit of the taboo by complicating regional politics between India and Pakistan. Thus, it goes without saying that India's and the United States' shared interests have created a regional imbalance and mistrust. States' interests at the system level can indeed be damaging to established institutional norms, thereby making regional politics highly complicated. Against a backdrop of existing realities such as the growing reliance of India and Pakistan on nuclear weapons, the absence of an arms control regime, the non-existence of CBMs, the existence of ambiguous doctrinal strategies and contingency plans, and an aggravated arms race in South Asia the fragility and vulnerability of this taboo are obvious.

No progress has been made in the implementation of Article VI, prescribing disarmament of NWS. In particular, the NPT extension conference referred to Article VI of the NPT and the obligations of the nuclear weapons states to pursue efforts in good faith towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Export control regimes, particularly the NSG, are under immense stress against the backdrop of globalisation, and the rising demand for energy security in developing countries in Asia and shifting global energy trends from fossil to non-fossil fuel, and especially, clean energy. Thus, the NPT clauses on non-proliferation and peaceful uses require major changes if a better non-proliferation regime is to emerge. A new taboo against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, plugging the gaps that exist in institutional arrangements and agreements directed to promote non-proliferation is needed.

## References

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[iii] See Rizwana Abbasi, *Pakistan and the New Nuclear Taboo: Regional Deterrence and the International Arms Control Regime* (Cambridge, New York, Bern, Peter Lang, 2012).

[iv] See E. R. Carr, *The Twenty First Century Crisis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939);

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[v] See Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, 'The Promise of Institutional Theory', *International Security*, 20/1 (Summer 1995).

[vi] See Rizwana Abbasi, *Pakistan and the New Nuclear Taboo*.

[vii] Orde F. Kittrie, "Averting Catastrophe: Why the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is Losing its Deterrence Capacity and How to Restore it", *Michigan Journal of International Law*, vol. 28 (Winter 2007), p. 339.

[viii] See Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.) *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his critics* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[ix] Bernard Brodie (ed.) *Absolute Weapons: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1946), p. 76.

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[xi] See Albert Wohlstetter, 'The Delicate Balance of Terror,' *Foreign Affairs Journal*, 37, No.2, Jan 1959, pp. 211-234.

[xii] Henry Kissinger, *The American Foreign Policy* (United States: Norton, 1969).

[xiii] Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (New York: Praeger, 1965).

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**Rizwana Abbasi** received her PhD from University of Leicester, UK specializing in International Security and Nuclear Non-proliferation. Presently she is a fellow of East West Institute, USA and Associate Professor in the Department of International relations at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. Previously Rizwana was associate professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Bahria University, Islamabad. Formerly she was placed as associate professors in the Department of International Relations at National Defense University, Islamabad. She was a Stimson Centre visiting fellow earlier. Rizwana was a post-doctoral research fellow and has been teaching at the University of Leicester. She was also a research fellow at the University of Leeds. She is a graduate of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS), Hawaii, and USA. Her latest book is *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace* (Oxford: Rutledge, 2019). She has also authored: *Pakistan and the New Nuclear Taboo: Regional Deterrence and the International Arms Control Regime* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012).