

Nuclear Non-use: Rational Deterrence, Prudence or a Long-lasting Taboo?

Written by Aura Sabadus

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AURA SABADUS, AUG 23 2009

The subject of this essay asks how the issue of nuclear non-use lends itself to constructivist understandings, namely to the interpretation of ongoing processes of social interaction determined by shared ideas. An analysis of nuclear non-use which would purely focus on the shared ideas which underpin it without touching on the constructivist theory's normative aspect defined by Brown as 'that body of work which addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation by the discipline'[1] would be simplistic. Following on from the basic tenet of the theory that the interests of actors are constructed by shared ideas rather than given by nature[2], this essay proposes to demonstrate that nuclear non-use lends itself best to normative considerations which explain how beliefs related to the weapons became embedded in practices and ultimately solidified into a taboo.

So far a number of theories have been mooted to explain nuclear non-use, raising the question whether the phenomenon should be understood in realist terms as a result of rational deterrence theories and as a tradition of prudence or as a constructivist account which explains nuclear non-use as the expression of a taboo.[3] Given Sagan's distinction, I shall seek to demonstrate in the first instance that a realist reading which takes in consideration long-term material factors falls short of capturing essential elements of the debate and therefore cannot be considered as the dominant explanation for nuclear non-use.

I shall then argue that these elements, of which the moral dimension remains quintessential to the discussion, are better understood through a normative reading of the historical patterns of non-use and that the notion of 'taboo', as the ultimate prescriptive and proscriptive norm, has (so far) played an important part in delegitimizing the use of nuclear weapons as weapons of war.

The discussion will start with a review of the arguments proposed by Sagan and Waltz regarding nuclear non-use as well as the shortcomings of these suggestions which have been disproved by historical events. I shall refute Waltz's claims that deterrence is the dominant explanation for why states remain inhibited against use as they fear uncontrollable escalation, high costs and retaliation.

Having once established the drawbacks of a materialist explanation of nuclear non-use, I shall examine the motivations which led political leaders to switch from a keen interest in using nuclear weapons 'just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else'[4] to self-restraint.

The discussion will explore how the ideas and beliefs that started to form in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became embedded in norms and practices and ultimately reached their most proscriptive form – the taboo.

Following on from the arguments proposed by Kratochwil[5] and Wendt[6] regarding the role of norms in the conceptualisation of states' interests and the formation of identities, the analysis will show how the nuclear taboo has entered a broader discourse of international law and diplomacy, defining what it means to be a 'civilised' member of the international community.

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The essay will also argue that the nuclear taboo which has led states to describe themselves as 'good, righteous, peaceful' as opposed to 'barbarians who would use nuclear weapons'[7] is imbued with ethical considerations, prevailing over neo-realist claims that 'the consequences of one's actions should be given higher moral priority than the moral attractiveness of the means that one employs'.[8] And finally, the analysis will question the future of the nuclear taboo in the light of technological progress as well as the emergence of non-state actors who follow a different logic and who eventually may be tempted to open Pandora's Box.[9]

I have found of particular use for this essay, Nina Tannenwald's book 'The Nuclear Taboo' as well as the works of some notable proponents of the normative/constructivist theories such as Karin Fierke, Mervyn Frost, Ted Hopf, Friedrich Kratochwil, Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt.

THE DEBATE: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE VERSUS A CONSTRUCTIVIST ACCOUNT

An explanation which is routinely mentioned for why states have abstained from using nuclear weapons since 1945 is deterrence. Kenneth Waltz's arguments that 'uncertainty about the course that a nuclear war might follow, along with the certainty that the destruction can be immense' [10], remain at the heart of rational deterrence theories quoted by proponents of classical and structural realism. For them, concerns regarding exogenous factors such as high-costs, uncontrollable escalation and retaliation which might threaten the very existence of states represent automatic deterrents. Precisely because of these factors Waltz argues that 'the presence of nuclear weapons makes war less likely'.[11]

Apart from the longer-term material factors discussed by Waltz, Sagan is also concerned about the setting of precedent in using the capabilities.[12] By the same token, he argues, the non-use of nuclear weapons has led to a tradition of prudence based on the realisation of their overwhelming destructiveness – all the explosive power used in World War II could fit in one three-megaton bomb.[13] The argument is cogently disproved by Tannenwald who maintains that traditions of prudence depend on precedent and reciprocity and can be easily disrupted by a violation.[14]

Nye has suggested that one way to test the validity of the nuclear deterrence theory is to subject it to counterfactual analysis.[15] One example which disproves the rational deterrence theory as a means to inhibit nuclear use is Washington's refusal to resort to nuclear weapons to prevent the spread of Moscow's influence in Eastern Europe or the Soviet invasion of Azerbaijan shortly after the end of World War II even though the US held the nuclear monopoly at the time.

Tannenwald further presents four non-deterrence explanations which could be summed up as lack of utility, material constraints, fear of the future and obsolescence of war.[16] However, she concedes that while the first two are difficult to prove or disprove given that nuclear weapons have not been used in battle, the last two are not entirely materialist and therefore cannot account for a realist explanation of non-use.

If a materialist reading cannot justify why decision-makers switched their interest in using a nuclear warhead, like any other conventional weapon, to complete self-restraint, then an explanation ought to be sought at an ideational level.

If we consider 6th August 1945 not just the moment which ushered in the atomic era, but also the point in time when the process of understanding the devastating effects of the nuclear power was set in motion, we can *construct* a framework which would facilitate the explanation of nuclear non-use. August 1945 then marked a watershed in the history of humanity, leaving men and women alike to face probably one of the biggest value judgements of all times: to use or not to use nuclear weapons.

The acknowledgement of the destructive power of nuclear weapons as described by Nye earlier in the analysis, the fear of another large-scale war after 1945, the growing interest in human rights throughout the 20th century have convinced individuals of the need to recoil from the use of such capabilities. Opting for a self-imposed nuclear restraint therefore 'does not merely reflect the world' as Frost argues, but is in itself 'a construct made for specific purposes'[17] concerned here with the very preservation of life. This choice became subsequently anchored in norms

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'seen as a standard of right and wrong' and which in turn solidified into a nuclear taboo.[18]

Tannenwald argues that a taboo refers to a powerful prohibition, a ritual avoidance which involves 'socially constructed notions of danger as well as institutional mechanisms to localise the danger and regulate behaviour'. [19] She further claims that the essential distinction between a norm and a taboo should be made in terms of their 'inter-subjective, phenomenological aspect, namely in terms of the meanings they have for people'. [20] Tannenwald maintains that the dual meaning of the bomb as both an 'awesome and awful temptation' to leaders is evident in the internal deliberations of all states that considered acquiring the weapons.[21]

In an analysis of the discourse that began to be constructed in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Mehan, Nathanson and Skelly argue that the topic was no longer the remit of decision-makers, but engaged all sections of the society from scientists to humanists and clerics.[22] Clerics, the authors say, denounced deterrence as 'sinful', if it did not lead to disarmament, scientists had discovered the dangers of a 'nuclear winter' while humanists attacked nuclear strategic thinking as the 'enemy of the earth and humankind'. [23]

Within less than 50 years the language of politicians and policy-makers had undergone a complete sea change from their hair-trigger exhortations to use nuclear weapons 'as a bullet or anything else', [24] to a complete dismissal of nuclear weapons and the related nuclear ballistic or cruise missile.

Following on from Fierke's contention that language games provide the rules of contextually specific acts, we can move on to the next stage in the constructivist framework to understand how the nuclear taboo came to be enacted in laws and practices.[25]

We have so far argued that once actors internalised the disastrous effects of nuclear weapons and chose to oppose their use, they inter-subjectively constructed a set of norms which subsequently solidified into a taboo whose meaning is reflected in language. As soon as the opposition to nuclear weapons was stepped up, simple utterances began to acquire perlocutionary force, leading to the materialisation of the taboo into tangible laws. Thus, politicians' or lobby groups' *demand* 'to halt', 'reduce' or 'curb' nuclear proliferation has found its expression in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty etc.

As a norm, Tannenwald argues, the taboo therefore displays not only a regulative effect, embodied in the injunction against the use of nuclear weapons, but also a constitutive effect, emphasised by constructivist perspectives which refer to practices that define behaviour, roles and identities.[26]

Once acknowledged, the taboo develops and is maintained through societal pressure, normative power politics, construction of categories, institutionalisation and iterated behaviour of non-use over time.[27]

In the process of acquiring understandings about the self, by participating in such meanings, actors also acquire identities which, Wendt argues, are the basis of interests.[28] One of these interests refers to the security of the self under anarchy. Rejecting the Hobbesian claim that loyalties and social bonds disintegrate under the fear of death, Kratochwil maintains that under conditions of anarchy, people hold on to their group identity.[29] It is important to note here that the nuclear taboo acts as a linchpin of communities, shaping their views and guiding their actions. A relevant example refers to the concerted actions undertaken by the US and EU3, Britain, France, Germany in clamping down on Iran's nuclear programme.

Tannenwald notes that the nuclear taboo is also part of a broader international discourse and diplomacy of the society of states which defines what it means to be a 'civilised' member of the international community and helps actors to define their ethical stance.[30] One of the requirements of being seen as a 'civilised' state is therefore participation in the regulation of warfare and those who refuse to comply are seen as 'uncivilised' and are likely to attract moral opprobrium. We are here on highly disputed grounds as the ethical dimension of nuclear non-use has been equally claimed by neo-realists and constructivists. Resorting to a consequentialist analysis, Martin argues that actions and outcomes ought to be judged ethical or unethical on the basis of their consequences, not on whether they comply with abstract moral principles.[31] She claims that since there is no overarching international authority to

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enforce laws, states, and states only can decide what action should be taken to ensure their survival. It is therefore dangerous, she claims, to introduce morality in the anarchic international system, especially when a state assumes that its moral views should be universal. And finally, she says that a state that refrains from fighting wars because it believes that taking human lives is immoral will soon find itself conquered by another state.[32] This was indeed the case of Iran, during the Iran-Iraq war when Ayatollah Khomeini opposed Iran's acquisition or use of chemical weapons on grounds that this would violate the Qur'an's injunctions against polluting the atmosphere. This resulted in devastating losses as up to 100,000 Iranian soldiers are thought to have been killed during an Iraqi chemical attack.[33] However, when discussing the use of nuclear capabilities, one has to admit the exceptional nature of the weapons, which will affect not just a segment of a population within a community or state. Nuclear weapons, unlike conventional, chemical or biological weapons are weapons of *mass destruction* and are likely to cause irreversible devastation on a large scale. The Chernobyl explosion, albeit a civilian incident, has proved that the nuclear fallout had a ravaging impact both on the immediate surroundings and over vast areas of Europe. I would therefore argue that the neo-realist view that the consequences of one's actions should be given higher moral priority than the moral attractiveness of the means that one employs cannot be quoted as a valid argument in the case of nuclear use, precisely because the action performed by one actor can turn against itself.

The acknowledgement of a universal nuclear taboo would not be the result of a hegemonic order whereby the strongest actor imposes its will upon the others, but a recognition, in Waltz's own words that: 'decisions to use nuclear weapons may be decisions to commit suicide'.[34]

Compliance with the taboo has helped individuals to define their collective identities in the international system through comparison with other less-compliant actors, and the nuclear taboo itself has become part of the contemporary discourse of 'civilisation'. It is interesting to note here the American discourse used to demonise Saddam Hussein – 'only a barbarian would use nuclear weapons', or the identification of the alleged nuclear states Iran and North Korea with rogues states inhabiting an 'axis of evil'. Even at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy underlines his concern to identify himself with 'those of sound mind', the 'civilised ones' and 'normal people' who would condemn the use of nuclear weapons.

'You can regard us with distrust, but in any case you can be calm in this regard, that we are of sound mind and understand perfectly well that if we attack you, you will respond in the same way... this dictates that we are normal people, and that we correctly understand and correctly evaluate the situation'. [35]

The debate has so far attempted to demonstrate that a materialist understanding of nuclear non-use has important shortcomings and cannot explain a whole sequence of historical events.

An alternative constructivist/normative reading proves more exhaustive and seems to provide a better framework for the understanding of how nuclear weapons came to be relegated to the realm of the proscribed.

One way to test the efficacy of the nuclear taboo theory is, to paraphrase Nye again, to subject it to counterfactual analysis. And the only way to do so is to predict whether it will withstand the challenges of 21st century technological progress and the emergence of non-state, terrorist actors.

As scientists and decision-makers alike are increasingly preoccupied with the miniaturisation of nuclear weapons and the production of small nuclear bunker-buster it is difficult to foresee whether the nuclear taboo will offer the same protection against use as it did during the cold war.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the emergence of terrorist groups which follow a different logic may plunge the efficacy of the nuclear taboo into serious doubt. Recognising the challenges facing the taboo, Kratochwil argues that only a normative understanding of the emerging relationships between state and non-state actors can predict whether the genie will eventually be let loose.[36]

CONCLUSION

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This essay has set out to assess whether the issue of nuclear non-use lends itself to constructivist understandings and if so, how.

I demonstrated that a materialist reading of nuclear restraint in terms of rational deterrence theories fails to explain a sequence of historical events. Furthermore, I showed that Sagan's argument that the phenomenon of non-use should be seen as a 'tradition of non-use' rather than as the expression of a taboo is cogently disproved by Tannenwald who maintains that in contrast to the former which depends on precedent and reciprocity and is easily disrupted by a violation, the latter is an 'absolute prohibition' and 'does not permit reciprocal behaviour in response to violation'.[37]

I have also shown that a constructivist understanding of nuclear non-use in terms of shared ideas underpinning social interaction is simplistic and that a more sophisticated interpretation which acknowledges the existence of norms and ultimately of a taboo will do the subject justice.

The fact that the habit of nuclear non-use has become an expected behaviour 'does not merely reflect the world',[38] as Frost argues, but is the result of a value judgement reflected in norms and practices imbued with ethical considerations and breaking those rules will inevitably attract the moral opprobrium of states.

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*Written by: Aura Sabadus
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Professor Mervyn Frost
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