

A World Without Nuclear Weapons?

Written by David Gardner

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DAVID GARDNER, JUN 18 2010

"Today I can declare my hope and declare it from the bottom of my heart that we will eventually see the time when the number of nuclear weapons is down to zero and the world is a much better place." [1]

Colin Powell

Colin Powell may have an idealist view that his utopia is without nuclear weapons. In this paper I will assess the argument for and against the proliferation of nuclear weapons: it is important to note that this is not discussing arguments for and against nuclear disarmament. As we have nuclear weapons and we cannot 'un-invent' them, arguing from a hypothetical conjectural microcosm, in which 'there are no nuclear weapons' would provide little practical conclusions, thus I will argue from a practical and realistic perspective. For the purpose of this paper, I define 'proliferation' as "the spread of ... nuclear weapons to countries not originally involved in developing them"[2]. In order to effectively assess the arguments both for and against further proliferation I will look at the fallibilities of proliferation arguments and critique them with arguments against proliferation. I will first assess deterrence theory and mutually assured destruction (MAD), which both support proliferation and then I will assess the main argument against nuclear proliferation: terrorism. Although, this paper is about the arguments for and against proliferation I will also consider the implementable policies, which could result from this debate as they in themselves contribute to the discussion.

There has been much debate in the academic study of International Relations as to the advisability and rationality of nuclear proliferation. Gallois, an advisor to DeGaulle, argued that the mere possession of a nuclear arsenal was enough to deter other nations from waging a war, and as a result he argued that the spread of nuclear weapons would increase international stability.[3] Gallois argued that the retaliation threatened if one actor is attacked, is so great that aggressors are deterred if they do not wish to suffer great damage as a result of an aggressive action; it becomes irrational to attack. Harvey examined twenty-eight crises worldwide, involving superpowers from 1948-1988, and concluded that nuclear weapons had, in fact, made them behave exceedingly carefully, which he argued was proof that deterrence theory was a practical and implementable theory.[4] However, Morgan counters that this prudence can be achieved without nuclear warheads, as he maintains that deterrence does not rely on what people actually have; it relies on what an opponent believes one to have. This leads him to argue that "nuclear weapons are an unmitigated evil ... Everything nuclear weapons do for the US and its allies can be done without them." [5] His argument is clear and concise, he shows that deterrence works in the way a situation is perceived and constructed, yet he mistakes one important fact: we have nuclear weapons and therefore discussing what we 'could' do without them, will provide few logical and practical solutions.

Deterrence theory and game theory have been used in proliferation analysis: this led to the notion of MAD in which a full-scale use of nuclear weapons by two opposing sides would effectively result in the destruction of both the attacker and the defender.[6] MAD is effectively a form of the Nash equilibrium, in which both sides are attempting to avoid their worst possible outcome: nuclear annihilation.[7] Sagan and Waltz argue that MAD logic should work in all security environments, regardless of historical tensions or recent hostility. They see the Cold War as the ultimate proof of MAD logic – the only occasion when enmity between two Great Powers did not result in military conflict. This was, they argue, because neither Washington nor Moscow would risk nuclear armageddon to advance territorial or power goals, hence a peaceful stalemate ensued.[8] However, Parrington argues that MAD was developed during a

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time of unreliable missile technology and maintains that “times have changed”[9].

Most opposition to deterrence theory challenges key neo-realist assumptions: the opponent is rational and the opponent is a state.[10] There is much concern about the utility of deterrence in dealing with allegedly irrational states.[11] Economic rationality underpins deterrence theory: the cost of attacking, and the consequent retaliation is greater than the benefit of doing so, and therefore one does not attack. There are many other critiques to the assumption of rationality, due to word constraints I can only cover this briefly. In many cases the opponent has values or perspectives alien to us – he is not irrational but might as well be. Morgan argues that if we don't know whether the opponent is rational then asking whether they are irrational poses a question that can't be answered, thus there is no point in asking.[12] Hence in such cases, “the standards of rationality are clearly more complex than before.”[13] Morgan argues later that for deterrence to work it is not rationality that is important but the benefit of a hypothetical attack weighed up against the costs to the attacked. This is economic rationality. Morgan tries to counter anti-deterrence arguments, but not by solid logical and cohesive reasoning: simply by re-defining his idea of rationality.

The concept of rationality may be undergoing slight redefinition but MAD is based on several key established and unchanging assumptions. Firstly, it assumes that a first strike must not be capable of preventing a retaliatory second strike or else mutual destruction is not assured. In this case, a state would have nothing to lose with a first strike.

Modern technological advances, such as stealth aircraft, also critique the practicality of MAD, making the MAD notion of perfect detection highly unlikely. These are modern technological issues, which undermine the practicalities of MAD in the current world.

It may not be a physical attack or restrictions that prevent retaliation, but the intangible international societal norms, by which most states behave. I would argue that it is more likely for a 'rogue state' to launch a nuclear attack, due to their disregard for the norms and socially constructed framework of international society. Equally, it is unlikely an established state, such as UK or other EU member states, would retaliate with similar nuclear warheads. Due to the framework of international society, a superpower would have to justify 'an eye for eye' attack on a weaker state, when perhaps a non-nuclear attack would suffice. Such justification reduces the chances of nuclear retaliation from established states, and consequently reduces the cost of an attack to a 'rogue' state. Thus, I would argue that it can be rational for states to launch limited nuclear attacks, when nuclear retaliation is highly unlikely.

Assuming that actors are rational does not mean that it is always irrational to use nuclear warfare. Deterrence theory assumes that both sides have common peaceful goals. In some real-life situations, such as the Yom Kippur War, leaders felt that internal or external political considerations forced a conflict. Jervis highlighted evidence which shows that the internal military and political discussions within the Egyptian high command in 1973 indicated that senior civilian leaders, including Anwar Sadat, believed that they had to fight a war in order to have enough internal political support to negotiate for peace.[14] As a result, the Egyptians believed that, ironically, to achieve peace they had to create war albeit non-nuclear. However, this highlights the fact that sometimes it will be rational for actors to create conflict be it with or without the use of a nuclear arsenal.

It is ultimately these faults, which I have assessed, with the arguments in support of nuclear deterrence that leads Morgan to conclude that “our theoretical grip (of deterrence theory) has never been satisfactory to make it a policy tool”[15].

With the recent surge of terrorism; the rise of religious fundamentalism and the increasing influence of 'rogue' states, the fear of such groups acquiring nuclear warheads[16] has lead some to argue that deterrence and nuclear capability are useless against a stateless enemy.[17] Many states are not in a position to safely guard against nuclear use and it is believed that weak states will be unable to prevent, or will actively provide for, the disastrous possibility of nuclear terrorism. In the event of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons the state centricity of deterrence, and the indiscriminate destructive nature of nuclear weapons does not allow for much leeway. Terrorist groups are not states, thus the actions of (nuclear) terrorists would be different to the actions of sovereigns. Their interests are very

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different from that of politicians as they do not have nations and economies to contend with nor do they need to worry about securing resources or defending territory.[18] The existence of nuclear weapons is a double edged sword and the possibility of that power being used against its maker is very real.

Waltz[19] and Mearscheimer[20] have argued along similar lines to Gallois' argument in favour of nuclear proliferation. Mearscheimer has argued that Waltz' aforementioned view of laissez-faire proliferation is a dangerous strategy in the current international system. He maintains that with Waltz's hypothesis some countries could predispose the transfer of nuclear materials falling into the hands of groups not affiliated with any governments. Such countries would not have the political will or ability to safeguard attempts at devices being transferred to a third party. Mearscheimer offers an alternative to laissez-faire proliferation in the form of selective proliferation. In essence, this limits the proliferation of nuclear weapons, to selected states. The difference between this and non-proliferation is negligible as the strict criteria, likely to be imposed on proliferation, would realistically see a minute rate of nuclear proliferation. Mearscheimer has argued that selective proliferation would prevent states, where the arguments I have mentioned apply, obtaining nuclear warheads. However, such selectiveness is likely to increase tensions with non-nuclear states, who feel they are more polarised as the number of nuclear states gradually increases. Gamal Abdel Nasser once said "they did whatever they wanted to do before the introduction of the NPT[21] and then devised it to prevent others from doing what they had themselves been doing before"[22].

Nasser's view reflects that of Thucydides, when writing his dialogue on power he said "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must".[23] This highlights an important point, albeit an ironically moral question raised from a realist writer: what gives certain countries the right to say others are not entitled to such protection? Without Wendt's global government[24], a world police or a body to enforce selective proliferation; we rely solely on societal constructs and norms to force states into following this policy. Yes, selected proliferation prevents some of the obstacles I have discussed: it prevents rogue states, and reduces the possibility of terrorists acquiring nuclear warheads. With UN sanctions or embargoes being the harshest consequence of developing nuclear warheads, as was witnessed in June with continued efforts by DPRK, it is naïve to think that there is this simple solution to such a complex problem.

The problem is complex; the ideal form of proliferation will depend on the point of view of the analyst. Personally, the status quo and no proliferation may act in my favour; Britain having nuclear weapons and thus it is in my self interest that other nations do not acquire them. However, much of the problem with recent debate as I have mentioned about Morgan and Mearscheimer's discussions is that in academic circles the debate on proliferation is being clouded by slight redefinition of terms rather than deep analysis of the true issue.

I have assessed the arguments for and against proliferation by critiquing the arguments for proliferation to highlight the main arguments to counter. I then debated non-proliferation arguments, before looking at the strategy that may be implemented as a result: an import factor contributing to the arguments in favour of and against proliferation. This debate is one that will recur with time, as new technology and weaponry is developed many of the arguments that apply to nuclear proliferation will apply to other technological developments, and thus it is imperative that the true issues are debated. Colin Powell may have been naïve when he said that he wished to see zero nuclear weapons in the world, but hopefully true debate will help to "make the world a better place".

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*Written by: David Gardner
Written at: University of St Andrews
Lecturer: Dr. Ali Watson
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