

Why is Controlling the Spread of Nuclear Weapons So Difficult?

Written by Matt Finucane

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MATT FINUCANE, MAR 8 2014

The short history of nuclear conflict has forever been, in part, an unsuccessful yet unrelenting war against itself. By first establishing the reason why states continue in their pursuit of such weapons (expounded primarily by political Realists), each and every means to limit their proliferation (via treaties, sanctions, and individual action) can be individually dismissed on its failure to address this most compelling want. Following this, there must be appreciation for the successes of non-proliferation—however few—and an assessment (and dismissal) of Waltz’s controversial argument when confronted with the actualities of the contemporary world.

Political realism offers the most basic, yet persistent, explanation for why non-proliferation has forever been so difficult. While its scholars diverge on more peripheral matters, there are nonetheless two fundamentals: first, Kenneth Waltz’s insistence that “survival is the primary goal” of states; and second, John Mearsheimer’s “uncertainty of intentions,” that no state can ever be sure of another’s purposes, be they benign or otherwise (Waltz, 2001, p.160; Mearsheimer, 2001, p.31).

Fundamentally, realists treat nuclear weapons as weapons of any other rank: Waltz observes only their “unit-level change in the extent and rapidity with which some states can hurt others” (Waltz, 1986, p.327). He also writes that “great powers always counter the weapons of other great powers, usually by imitating those who have introduced new weapons” and since nuclear weapons are to be considered as such (the latest instance of an eternal arms race), it should be the rational desire of all states to pursue them (Waltz, 1981, p.7).

Attempts to constrain other states’ power are therefore declared inherently political. The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, designed to preclude a costly naval arms race, did so favouring the interests of the British and Americans, whilst soliciting the inferiority of the French, Italians, and Japanese (Bull, 1987, p.132).

While states are “always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals,” there are specific triggers for nuclear proliferation, a clear example of this being Israel (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.29). Given the supremacy of nuclear weapons over conventional forces, even in the face of overwhelming numerical strength—that which Israel has faced repeatedly—they are a greater deterrent, as well as a “cheaper and safer alternative to running economically ruinous [...] conventional arms races”; as Waltz concludes, “[t]his is reason enough for Israel’s nuclear weapons” (Waltz, 1981, p.8). Again, paying witness to America’s anxiety in 1946 to “protect its [nuclear] monopoly,” and to the Soviet Union’s desperate quest to acquire a weapon (Rumble, 1985, p.220), Waltz writes that “[i]t was not surprising that the Soviet Union developed atomic and hydrogen bombs, but rather that we thought the Baruch-Lilienthal plan might persuade her not to” (Waltz, 1981, p.7). The question thus arises, how can this desire ever be quelled?

The most basic attempt comes via the treaty. The first nuclear examples of this, the above-mentioned Acheson and Baruch-Lilienthal plans, were suggested and defeated in 1946 at the newly-established United Nations. Objections were made on the grounds that Stalin feared the American monopoly, the US wanted a guarantee that the USSR *could not* make a bomb, and the US would not cede their bomb until it had “more than words to reassure it” (Office of

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the Historian, 2009; Ungar, 1992, p.50 n.25).

No such guarantees or further reassurances were made, *nor could they be*; the USSR thus detonated its first nuclear weapon on August 29th 1949. The failure of the 1946 Baruch plan laid bare the foundational difficulties that every further treaty to impede proliferation has faced since.

Nevertheless, throughout the ensuing Cold War there were many more, bringing with them further difficulties and often only semantic successes. The first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), for example, while partially curtailing proliferation, was only bilateral (between the USA and USSR), and as Alva Myrdal of the UN Disarmament Conference argues, only accelerated the arms race “in new directions, particularly into MIRV technology” (Freedman, 2003, p.340; Rumble, 1985, p.227). SALT I and SALT II, like the Washington Naval Act before them, also faced Hedley Bull’s “problem of the ratio” (Bull, 1987, p.132). While SALT I was considered more favourable of the Americans, and SALT II more of a balanced agreement, their political nature was still glaringly apparent—only made more so by presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan’s protestations (Hoffman, 2009, p.28), and never more so than in 1979 with the discovery of a “Soviet combat brigade” in Cuba, over which the Carter administration “threatened to overturn SALT II unless it was disbanded” (Jervice, 1982, p.193).

The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) was, by contrast, hailed a success in the sense that it halted a new arms race based on a new technology (Rumble, 1985, p.227). However, whether a state will adhere to a treaty is a further matter, flouted by the US in this case, who claimed their Ballistic Missile Defence research and development did *not* contradict the treaty, when it most definitely *did* (Rumble, 1985, p.227).

And again the more crucial matter of whether a state will choose to remain bound, a decision Japan declined in 1934 when it withdrew from the Washington Naval Treaty (Bull, 1987, p.132), and in 2001 the United States made a similar decision to withdraw from the ABM six months later (Office of the Press Secretary, 2001).

Beyond these came the more significant, multilateral treaties. The Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTB) that would evolve into the un-ratified Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968. As realists might have predicted, none of these was without limitations. Firstly, as the test ban treaties demonstrated, subscription was dependent on the severity of the measures imposed. While it was relatively easy to solicit an agreement to halt “all [nuclear] tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and in the oceans” this was undermined by the fact that “underground explosions were frequent” and neither side would consider compromising on them (Hoffman, 2009, p.254). Similarly in the agreement to cease proliferation entirely, the NPT, initially “the countries most likely to develop nuclear capability—Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil—had refused to sign” (Adams, 1991, p.174).

Again the power of the treaty to compel was tested when India, who had not signed the global effort to cease proliferation, detonated its first device in May 1974, citing its “desire to be treated as a power of the first rank, with the respect denied during the years of colonisation” (Freedman, 2003, p.444). This was considered the “first failure of the NPT”, but would prove only to be the first of many (Bull, 1987, p.218). Waltz wrote of the nuclear issue in 1981 that “a country without nuclear allies will want nuclear weapons all the more if some of its adversaries have them” and that since China and India had become nuclear powers, he predicted that “Pakistan will probably follow” (Waltz, 1981, p.8). Indeed, they did in 1998, their program having operated since 1972, but not without some assistance. While a certain degree of divergence from the rules can be expected of what Waltz calls ‘revisionist’ powers, what might not be anticipated is the vacillating commitment on the part of the supposedly ‘status quo’ United States, who in 1978 waived the NPT and delivered nuclear fuel to Pakistan to “promote stability in the area and bolster [their] relations with states there, *particularly those that can play a role in checking Soviet expansionism*” (italics added) (Waltz, 1981, p.8). The arming of Pakistan also paid what little was due to sanctions as strategy. Sanctions against both India and Pakistan had failed to halt their illegal programs, and indeed were waived in the wake of the September 11th bombings when, again, it became politically expedient (Farzana, 2002). Additionally, with the rejection of enticements, their imposition on North Korea brought to the fore ethical considerations, since the sanctions might well have exacerbated the already-fraught humanitarian crises (an Amnesty report recently indicated that a steadily increasing 30% of the North Korean diet consists of grass [Amnesty International, 2010]) while having

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little effect on Pyongyang's decision-making (Taylor, 2010, p.26).

A further problem emerges from the conflation of Mearsheimer's and Jean Jacques Rousseau's observations. Given the impossibility of discerning either benevolent or malevolent actions of another state, and given that no state can "begin to behave decently unless [it] has some assurance that others will not be able to ruin [it]," the matter of verification becomes paramount (Rousseau cited in Waltz, 2001, pp.6-7).

Such assurances, however, have not been forthcoming, and non-proliferation advocates remain haunted by the impossibility of verification, since "possession—but not use—could be kept secret" (Blix, 2004, p.17).

However, it cannot be denied that there has been some significant progress, with the CTB in particular. It is now "technically possible to detect most explosions large enough to be of military significance," and indeed, North Korea's 12th February 2013 test was first detected by the US Geological Survey as "unusual seismic activity" (Bull, 1987, p.237; BBC News, 2013). Whether this can be considered a 'success' is another matter. While it certainly constitutes progress, it still faces all the tribulations of past attempts; curiously, the US's reason for not ratifying the CTB at Russia's invitation *remains* that tests cannot "be effectively verified" (Hoffman, 2009, p.255). The NPT, too, is not without progress, perhaps its greatest success being the establishment of the NPT "norm." Beyond the most obvious logic that "the best guarantee against these weapons being used against [states] lay in their simply *not having them*" (italics original) (Blix, 2004, p.17), Freedman points to Germany and the Ukraine's disinterest in nuclear weapons as indicating the "importance of normative factors" (Freedman, 2003, p.442).

In the case of the post-USSR Ukraine it is highly unlikely that—had it found itself nuclear-armed in a world *without* the NPT norm, a world in which all powerful states possess nuclear weapons—it would have consented to its disarmament (Bunn, 2003). There is, however, a missing variable in the Ukraine's case: it, unlike those states defying the NPT today, was not in circumstances of imminent danger or instability. While the Ukraine's disarmament represents a success of individual action, it is by all accounts the exception, not the rule. Indeed, it makes for interesting juxtaposition with Iraq, a country subjected to a "counter-proliferation" effort pursuing weapons that would last nine years and yield negligible results (Blix, 2004, p.273). This was not the first attack on Iraq's nuclear facilities. Indeed, the 1981 Israeli airstrike on the 'Osiraq' facility—internationally condemned, targeting a generator that ill-equipped to generate plutonium, and cited as likely having *increased* Saddam's commitment to developing weapons—by and large set the tone for what was to come (Reiter, 2005, p.354). Hans Blix concludes his *Disarming Iraq* by writing that it "did not strengthen the case for a right to pre-emptive action," although this unfortunately does not make it any less likely; in the light of how unsuccessful all attempts to disarm non-compliant states have been, few choices remain. Clearly other states are aware of this as there is, after all, a reason for why Iran builds its nuclear facilities underground and of the most bomb-proof materials ever manufactured (The Economist, 2012).

As has been established, there is no uniform means to prevent nuclear proliferation, and it is irrefutable that each method produces *only* mixed results; those states that agree to non-proliferation often are in no circumstance to warrant them, while those that disagree invariably foresee their immediate necessity.

Amidst such circumstances, what then of Waltz's controversial claim made in his 1981 paper, that perhaps controlling the spread of nuclear weapons is difficult because *More May Be Better*. Since nuclear weapons have made "the cost of war seem frighteningly high," surely, as Bruno de Mequita suggests, an injection of nuclear weapons into "areas where nonnuclear states face nuclear-armed adversaries" would reduce their chance of fighting "to zero" (Waltz, 1981, p.3; cited in Sagan and Waltz, 2002, pp.46-47). Waltz goes further than this and calls for global proliferation to pre-empt all major wars, and while there is a cool logic at work, he must be forgiven his oversight: his state-centric focus. Indeed, the greatest fear in recent times has not been of a state attaining weapons, but of a non-state actor; there is an ever-present fear that since North Korea rejects much of its foreign aid, it might consider selling its nuclear technology to Iran or Al Qaeda (Freedman, 2003, p.447; Levin, 2007, p.109). "Transfers of bargain basement nuclear weapons represent a chilling prospect,"—especially when transferred to a non-state actor, since it makes retaliation (and therefore deterrence) entirely impotent (Freedman, 2003, p.446). Similarly, with the chaotic breakup of the USSR, it was concluded that not a single nuclear facility had "adequate safeguards," and the challenge of preventing such material reaching non-NPT states—those most active being North Korea and Iran

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(Hoffman, 2009, p.458; Kampfner, 1994, p.216)—has again produced mixed, and only temporary results (Hoffman, 2009, p.456); while Iran lacks material, North Korea lacks scientists (Hoffman, 2009, p.409; Kampfner, 1994, p.216).

Controlling the spread of nuclear weapons remains an impossibility, for as history has shown, more often than not those states which desire them will achieve them. Its successes—the establishment of the non-nuclear norm, the enticement of most ‘status quo’ powers into the NPT, and the control of weapons and material in the former Soviet Union—sit amidst its wealth of failure; the only long-term successes have *all* come about in compliant states, all methods have met with mixed results—some of which greatly exacerbated already-fraught situations—and for better or worse, the realist tenets still impede those who would see a safer world.

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