



A Slightly Contrarian Perspective on a Nuclear-Free World

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Abstract

This analytic piece penetrates into ironic implications of nuclear weaponry and nuclear disarmament efforts, including those embodied in the renowned START treaty. Some of these implications seem to undermine international security and the framework of world order, and some actually appear to threaten global and human survival. Again, irony will indeed be seen to permeate the unconventional conclusions adduced.

1. Introduction

Since their invention over seven decades ago, nuclear weapons have been the obvious and unrelenting bane of mankind. Because of their mega-destructive power and grisly lethality, the instruments have cast a pall of dread over the world for the entire memory span of most people alive today (actually about 97% of living humans, per the world population age distribution). Many also can recall the Cold War period when much of humanity lived every day of their lives in constant, conscious, and justified fear of instant mass annihilation. The more senior American and Russian readers would have experienced “civil defense” nuclear attack drills during their formative school years, literally involving crouching under classroom desks—as if that would have done very much good for anyone in the event. As J. Robert Oppenheimer of the Manhattan Project famously said in 1965 to capture the gravity and mood, “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” As many of us said in the ’60s and ’70s, “Nukes are bad for kids and other living things.”

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Surely this assessment is one of the few generalizations that all can accept. Maybe all except those Neanderthal, Luddite, war-mongering, right-wing reactionaries, that is! To the contrary, if only it were that simple. Rightly, we would also have to add the governments of North Korea and Iran to the roster of dissenters, so afflicted are they with “missile envy” and megaton lust that they race to develop or enhance nascent nuclear weapons capability.

But then what of the governments of the extant major nuclear powers, holders of thousands of thermonuclear devices and delivery systems presently despite much public clamor for disarmament?

In the interest of balance, arguments supporting the societal utility and moral worth of nuclear weapons can be noted for the record: (1) In their only wartime use, two of them drastically shortened the deadliest war in human history—although at considerable cost to about 150,000 Japanese civilians who perished. (2) If not for the mutual nuclear arsenals numbering in the tens of thousands, how many conventional world wars would the United States and Soviet Union have fought with each other and their allies during the 45-year Cold War era? It is plausible that the deterrent effect of the specter of uncontrollable planetary devastation indeed worked to prevent the worst war of all, the World War III that never happened. Or not. (3) If nuclear weapons were, in fact, totally eliminated from the face of the earth, how long would it take for any rogue state (e.g., North Korea, Iran, Russia, or name your favorite) to reconstitute its nuke-dedicated arsenal—thereby establishing a hyper-military monopoly against which the rest of the world would be defenseless? Is that a sanguine prospect, or is it more sanguinary? Would the consequences be benign? Abolishing nuclear weapons does not also delete the widespread knowledge of how to make those things, unfortunately. The apparent inability of peace advocates to grasp this reality, along with its strategic implications, is one of the most vexing frustrations for the peace movement's sympathizers and fellow travelers. What about abolition followed by international enforcement? Attempted enforcement of weaponry restrictions on outlaw regimes is as quixotic and chimerical as expecting common criminals to abide by strict gun laws, as recent history demonstrates at both ends of the weapons spectrum.

Regardless, water under the bridge or idle speculation as of now, it may appear, yet historical or hypothetical diagnosis may still be of value insofar as yielding lessons pertinent to contemporary crises. Looming nuclear proliferation in the Middle East tinder box as an ironic artifact of inept U.S. and U.N. efforts to prevent that very outcome would be one of those crises. Could escalating the potential consequences of war help to forestall mortal military conflict—again? Or will it all depend on the type of society that controls the nuclear weapons, perhaps vis-à-vis its cultural, religious, and/or moral orientation? Alternatively, might Iran or Israel draw the lesson that a nuclear first strike can be its salvation or Holy Grail, so to speak? Time will tell, and time seems to be running out.

So much for the garden variety nuclear landscape. More exotic dimensions may be gathering in the offing.

2. The Global Defense Issue

If not enough on the world's nuclear plate already, the worst may be yet to come. And this time, the conventional pacifistic zeitgeist concerning weaponry morality could itself prove massively fatal. Shifting gears to mere policy blundering, charitably assuming honorable motives, the situation is even graver than before with a quantum jump in potentially catastrophic effects. While the reader may have been distracted by mass murder, worldwide terrorism, economic meltdown, global warming, and a pending U.S. national election with major implications for international war and peace, America and the world have been recklessly endangered in a new and ironic way: A nuclear weapons treaty between the United

States and Russia has been approved and then put into effect as of the early part of President Obama's second term. Moreover, Mr. Obama himself declared a national policy commitment to completely eradicate the world's supply of nuclear weapons. Is there a problem with this auspicious progress? Brace for something very different.

One non-traditional aspect of this new, ersatz START agreement (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) and environment, in particular, does not seem to have registered cognitively with some important international leaders, the relevant media, or the world public. Has everyone forgotten about the contingency plans for defense against near-earth asteroids? Yes, it is now about asteroids. Really.

Granted, we know that attacking an incoming asteroid or comet with a barrage of nuclear weapons blasts is not necessarily the optimal approach. Science has established that such a method is completely ineffectual given some physical conditions—but also the most viable chance in others, especially as a last resort against genuine doomsday. (See *Near-Earth Object Survey and Deflection Analysis of Alternatives*; NASA 2007.) NASA, in fact, along with the U.S. National Research Council (2010), has endorsed nuclear explosives for planetary defense against near-earth objects in certain circumstances. So, the former Obama administration's fetish for reducing U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles toward zero, a desire also held more broadly, of course, would cripple that essential alternative capability. Might the policy stance do more good than harm, or vice versa?

The grimmest eventuality suddenly is more tangible and urgent, with scientists at the Russian Space Agency now forecasting higher than normal likelihood of a major asteroid impact around the year 2030 (*ICN* 2010). The private B612 Foundation estimates a 30% probability of catastrophic asteroid collision within this century (Lu and Rees 2013). Due to population expansion and mass urbanization, a reproduction of the 1908 Tunguska impact (projected to occur about every 300 years; Su 2015) would likely produce a substantial body count of casualties. Although the most recent species-extinction asteroid collision with earth was tens of millions of years ago, since the 2013 Chelyabinsk airborne meteor explosion that injured 1200, it is no longer possible to claim no mass casualties (at least of the injury type) from such objects in human history. In other words, we may need the world's nuclear arsenals for species survival someday fairly soon. Thanks to President Barack Obama and his like-minded national security apparatus, those vital assets may not be available when needed most. And Mr. Obama's eight-year suppression of the U.S. manned space program could also be recalled very unfavorably by doomed earthlings about 10 (or 80) years hence.

Apart from political disagreement, widespread domestic misgivings in some quarters about Barack Obama's own experience and readiness for office now seem to have been ratified, reified, and even understated, if anything. The completely non-melodramatic expression of this unfolding epiphany is that some of the world's most powerful leaders have put that world in considerable jeopardy, literally. The ominous is being realized. In particular, in the view of critics, the Obama administration's rare combination of scientific ignorance, strategic irresponsibility, and preternatural arrogance could not only become the undoing of its own country but could even bring about the destruction of humanity and the earth itself! (Other than that, how was the play, Mrs. Lincoln?) At least the American president meant well. But can we expect the scientifically illiterate Donald Trump to do any better?

Or is all this not to be taken seriously? If it were not serious, however, the U.S. and other leading techno-powers would not have devoted serious resources to a terrestrial defense project known as the Near-Earth Object Program (NASA, 2007). The threat is recognized by experts as deadly serious. Until recently, it was by the U.S. government also. In fact, the field of planetary science concurs that it is only a matter of time before the inevitable threat materializes, and we should not be defenseless against it (Schweickart 2009). In the political realm, the U.N. General Assembly and its Scientific and Technical Subcommittee have formally endorsed development of an international asteroid warning network (IAWN). Nuclear disarmament by the superpower(s) does leave the world naked against at least one variety of the asteroid threat. Even depleting, if not erasing, the world's supply of thermonuclear devices leaves us with an emaciated capacity against the bigger space rocks, the ones that matter in terms of total extinction. (Ironically, the pro-ballistic position now may be seen to have some merit at the high end of the weaponry spectrum. Most readers may hope that lower-end weapons advocates such as the NRA do not notice that analog.)

The unfortunate and unforeseen moral of the story is that the world's nukes may not have been an unalloyed evil after all. Food for thought; the author actually hopes to receive an effective rebuttal. And some say that Barack Obama's critics have been too severe. It turns out that the critics may have been wrong after all, but by unduly moderating their criticism. When Mr. Obama said he would restore science to its rightful place, we did not expect this outcome.

3. The International Security Issue

Back to earth, the only good news, at least in this regard, is that the Russians probably will not be eliminating their nuclear weapons at all (while the U.S. side destroys its own) because the latest START treaty is ultimately unverifiable on the Russian end. The successful regimen of the 1991 START agreement is to be abandoned in the new bilateral contract, with inspections reduced from 40 to 18 per year (U.S. Department of State 2013). Why should we believe that the Russians will choose to violate an arms treaty? That is what their general historical pattern of behavior has been, across the full range of weapons of mass destruction categories (Leitenberg and Zilinskas, 2012; Siegel, 2013).

Other weaknesses of the revised START treaty are adequately covered elsewhere (see Arms Control Association 2012; Kyl 2010), but the verification lacuna is the most salient one, terrestrially if not celestially, as America and the world may come to learn. So, improbably, there is an ambivalent trade-off between international and interplanetary security. "There are more things in heaven and earth..." as the prescient Shakespeare wrote.

By the way, if the U.S. and Russia are restricted to about 1500 warheads each, as they are under new START, what will be the combined total for Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Pakistan—and even Israel and France, for good measure—relative to the United States' 1500 (down from its former and indomitable 25,000 or so)? Does the prospective answer really make you feel safer, whether you are an American or not? Do you really feel that world peace is enhanced when aggressive outlaw states such as some of those listed will collectively be more powerful strategically than the U.S.—the nation that saved the world from tyranny at least twice, generously rebuilt post-war Western Europe including a former

enemy, maintained the balance of peace during the Cold War period, fed most of the world, developed and shared unparalleled medical science for humanity's common welfare, and has exercised its power more temperately overall than any superpower in world history (yes, including the atomic bombing to end World War II, which is estimated to have saved hundreds of thousands of lives, net)? And the objectivity of the last proposition is confirmed as one futilely seeks a counterexample. If readers had not thought about it this way, maybe some in strategic leadership positions should have. Pleasant dreams, comrades.

4. Conclusion: Primary Culpability

Now the main subtext and unifying theme of this note become clear. The present confluence of events emerges as the suitable occasion for an omnibus treatment, given social, national, world, and even *celestial* circumstances. It is timely to bring together some under-the-radar issues that an audience dedicated to the peace of the world should be alerted to and sensitive about. Underscore "under the radar."

From domestic and international machinations to celestial mechanics, of all things, when real vision, wisdom, and statesmanship are needed, even for an issue of supreme (forgive me, *cosmic*) magnitude for the planet, it is sometimes amateur hour at the White House, with the world's most consequential public officials strategically and technologically myopic. Perhaps they are too focused on prosaic politics. No inescapably amateur conclusion about the quantitative level of asteroid impact danger is offered here, in this non-technical document, obviously. Rather, it is the contrast between the expert community's seriousness and the former Obama administration's frivolous unpreparedness, still uncorrected to this day by a subsequent U.S. administration, that is cited as conspicuously imprudent. Even non-technicians with a modicum of reason are capable of that discernment.

Ridding the world of nuclear weapons is a noble ambition indeed, yet could also be a specious one until a new form of terrestrial defense is invented. One can only hope that the next advance in global defensive technology will not also have the familiar offensive corollary effect that atom-splitting has.

For better or worse, civilization depends on energy for development and even survival. In a remarkable irony, we happen to be at a juncture when the unique energy signature of one particular nuclear power variant could become a literally vital component of that successful formula. Unfortunately, a curious form of political short-sightedness impedes such basic understanding.

This concern connects full circle in a poignant way: If an American president is capable of the worst possible decision-making error—if that is what it is—with the stakes no less than the survival of mankind, what credibility can there be on more mundane issues such as war and peace? It is past time for such a question to be raised. (Or is it heresy to challenge the infallibility of one who was bestowed a Nobel Peace Prize, although "on the come"?)

Barack Obama's critics, partisan or otherwise, like to ask sardonically, "How's the hope and change working out?" Those humans still alive to ponder the question in the wake of a future asteroid collision, if any are, will know the answer—and may have strong opinions

about the peculiar politics-science intersection of our era. If any members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee survive, perhaps they will reconsider that 2009 Peace award.*

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* The author's primary research specialization is the study of social and political power and conflict. He is a long-time registered Democrat, as well as an occasional registered Republican—intermittently, not concurrently—which should dispatch any erroneous impression of partisanship.