

Cold War Relics: Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

by Howard W. Hallman

Today near the end of the first decade of the 21st Century nuclear weapons should be seen as cold war relics, outmoded but highly dangerous. They are leftovers from the global confrontation between two superpowers and their allies that characterized world politics from 1946 to 1991 and spilled over to other regions. As I indicate in another essay, they are useless weapons with no legitimate military utility in today's world and are not needed to contain nations with nuclear weapon ambitions. Their only function is to deter other nuclear weapons, a task better achieved by total elimination. This means that the nuclear deterrence doctrine is another cold war relic, an obsolete holdover.

Course of Proliferation

From the beginning the development of nuclear weapons has been a course of reaction then action. The United States with British participation developed atomic bombs in part because of fear that Nazi Germany might be doing so. There is some evidence that when the United States destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the only nuclear weapons every used in war, the publicly stated purpose of ending the war with Japan was supplemented by a desire to send a warning message to the Soviet Union.

The Soviets reacted by developing their own A-bomb and then the H-bomb. Within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) the United Kingdom and France, both with seats on the U.N. Security Council, wanted their independent deterrent against Soviet nukes. China, fearing both the United States and the Soviet Union, produced its own nuclear weapons. In 1968 these five countries were given status as "nuclear weapons states" under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Subsequently other states have become possessors, or want to be, in extension of the reaction-action pattern. India after fighting a 1962 border war with China and fearful of the Chinese arsenal initiated its own program. Pakistan reacted to India by joining the nuclear weapons club. Israel's nuclear weapons were produced in response to fears of conventional attack by Arab states. Iran fears both U.S. and Israeli nukes and therefore seems to be seeking to develop nuclear weapons. North Korea's nuclear program is a reaction to the United States policy of extended deterrence for South Korea and Japan.

Indeed, the reaction-action pattern is the major cause of nuclear weapons proliferation during the last 60 years. The challenge now is to reverse this course and move toward a world free of all nuclear weapons.

Deterrence Doctrine

In the Cold War the nuclear deterrence doctrine -- the desire to deter other nuclear weapons or overwhelming conventional power of other nations by threatening nuclear counterattack -- became the primary rationale for development of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately the five nuclear weapons states have retained this cold war thinking long after the Cold War ended. They are stuck in this mode because they have all retained cold war nuclear weaponry with a portion positioned on day-to-day alert, ready to be launched on short notice. As a consequence these holdover weapons are highly dangerous because of the risk of accidental, erroneous, or unauthorized launch.

India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran, and North Korea have applied nuclear deterrence thinking to their own situations. They are also at risk during crises that could get out of hand.

Impediment to Abolition

Retention of cold war thinking impedes movement toward a world free of nuclear weapons. This is shown in current efforts to reduce U.S. and Russian strategic weapons. Don't get me wrong. What's happening is positive, but it has its limits.

President Obama and President Medvedev have publicly acknowledged that the Cold War has ended. After a meeting April 1, 2009 they issued [a joint statement](#) that affirmed "the era when our countries viewed each other as enemies is long over." They "committed our two countries to achieving a nuclear free world, while recognizing that this long-term goal will require a new emphasis on arms control and conflict resolution measures, and their full implementation by all concerned nations." They agreed to have their representatives work out a new arms control agreement that would combine and go beyond the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and the Moscow Treaty of 2002 to achieve further reductions in strategic weapons with strengthened verification procedures.

The two presidents met again in Moscow on July 6 after their negotiators had held several sessions. They agreed to [a joint understanding](#) that

commits the United States and Russia to reduce their strategic warheads to a range of 1500-1675, and their strategic delivery vehicles to a range of 500-1100. Under the expiring START and the Moscow treaties the maximum allowable levels of warheads is 2200 and the maximum allowable level of launch vehicles is 1600.

This is solid progress. It helps reset relationships between Russia and the United States. It reaffirms the value of verifiable arms control agreements after eight years of rejection by the Bush Administration.

On the other hand, negotiations are still functioning in the cold war mode. Even with reductions the new treaty will retain enormous firepower kept on high alert, enough to wipe out each nation. Nuclear deterrence remains as the governing doctrine. That being the case each side seeks maximum advantage in the negotiations. For instance, Russia wants a lower number of launch vehicles on which it can place multiple warheads while the United States prefers to stick with one warhead per launch vehicle with more launchers spread around to protect from preemptive

attack. But however this is worked out in negotiations the final agreement will retain cold war weaponry long into the future.

Alternative Approach

There is a better way. An alternative approach is to acknowledge that U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons are cold war relics that don't provide true security for either country. Both nations are stuck with them. Yet it is within their mutual interest to find ways to eliminate the threat of nuclear war between them by going to all the way to zero. The same is true with other states armed with nuclear weapons and committed to the obsolete deterrence doctrine.

I have addressed this challenge on this website in a piece that takes the literary form of “**A Dream Fantasy**”, depicting an imaginary conversation with President Obama and President Medvedev. I suggest a series of cooperative steps:

- Declaration of a no first use policy.
- De-alerting.
- Removing nuclear warheads from missiles, bombers, and submarines.
- Dismantlement.

This would be a step-by-step reduction process in which neither side is at a disadvantage at any time. It should be accomplished with effective monitoring and verification that could include international inspection teams. Other possessors of nuclear weapons would be drawn in as the reduction process continues. (Other pages on this website elaborate on these various steps.)

With the present practice of seeking nuclear arms reduction but retaining a sizable arsenal for the foreseeable future, negotiations tend to emphasize hard bargaining to gain an advantage or at least not be placed at a disadvantage. This can change with a shift to seeking the mutually beneficial goal of getting rid of all the cold war relics that both sides are now stuck with. Negotiators should emphasize a more cooperative approach in which they would look out for each other's interest in step-by-step reductions that would provide undiminished security for each side at all times on the course to zero.

Obviously the task is more complicated than this simple outline. There are other issues that must be addressed, such as, elimination of tactical as well as strategic nuclear weapons; Russian fear of NATO superiority with conventional forces; U.S. concern for Russian intrusion in adjacent, independent states; at what stage other nuclear weapons states (UK, France, China) and other possessors (Israel, India, Pakistan) should be brought into the process; safe storage of warheads awaiting dismantlement and fissile material. But none of these challenges are beyond the capability of persons truly committed to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

Admitting that nuclear weapons are cold relics without legitimate utility points us in the right direction.

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