

## SHOULD WE LET THE BOMB SPREAD?

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Editor

In 1966, Leonard Beaton, a journalist and strategic scholar, published a short book that asked: Must the bomb spread?<sup>1</sup> Mr. Beaton's query reflected the profound alarm with which proliferation was viewed shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Today that alarm is all but absent; now, not only is proliferation increasingly viewed as a given (more of a fact than a problem), but some security experts actually see advantages in nuclear weapons spreading or, at least, little harm.

Cultivation of this latter view took time—nearly a half century—and considerable scholarship. In 1981, Kenneth Waltz popularized French and American finite deterrence thinking of the late-1950s by asking whether or not nuclear weapons in more hands might be better. His answer was yes. As nuclear weapons spread, he argued, adversaries would view war as being self-defeating, and peace would become more certain.<sup>2</sup>

Although this view gained a certain following, some pushed back, emphasizing the real limits of nuclear safety and security. Drawing on official documents, Scott Sagan in the early-1990s detailed many nuclear accidents and close calls that the U.S. military had with its nuclear arsenal. He and others also focused on the risks of illicit and unauthorized use, and the chance that one side or another might misread the warning signals of a possible nuclear attack and respond when they should not.<sup>3</sup>

After the events of September 11, 2001, the question of whether terrorists might go nuclear—a worry studied in the early-1970s—regained urgency.<sup>4</sup> This concern, though, immediately raised yet another issue: Was nuclear deterrence,

which the world's superpowers had relied upon so much during the Cold War, relevant any longer for dealing with nuclear-armed rogue states and terrorists?<sup>5</sup> Once joined with enthusiasm for going to zero nuclear weapons, this question gave rise to the notion that nuclear weapons were only marginally useful to deter the most likely forms of nuclear and nonnuclear aggression (thus, highlighting how dubious the possession or acquisition of nuclear weapons might be). The more radical nuclear abolitionists went even further. For them, the bomb either did not deter or hardly deterred at all.<sup>6</sup> With this later perspective, it was but a small step to conclude that nuclear proliferation was neither good nor bad, but inconsequential.

But is it? Certainly, since 1966, the bomb has spread. Besides the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China; Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea have all acquired nuclear weapons. In addition, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Iraq, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, and Iran all tried but did not get the bomb. So far, so good. However, more proliferation in the Far and Middle East is possible (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan).

Meanwhile, support for nuclear use is on the rise. Russia and Pakistan now favor the first use of nuclear weapons either to deter or to de-escalate future conventional conflicts. This has prompted India and China to review their nuclear use policies. What might happen if any of these states fired their weapons in anger and some military advantage was thereby secured? At least one respected military thinker argues that this would

likely unleash a torrent of nuclear proliferation and far worse.<sup>7</sup>

For all of these reasons, nuclear deterrence no longer enjoys the almost religious support it once did. However, perhaps that loss of faith is misplaced. After all, America's key allies—e.g., Japan and South Korea—still believe that U.S. nuclear guarantees are critical to their survival. If they believe this and the United States is unwilling to provide Tokyo or Seoul with the nuclear assurance they desire, would it then not make sense for them to acquire nuclear forces of their own? This question is the basis of Republican U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's ruminations about the inevitability and possible value of Japan and South Korea going nuclear and UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson's speculation that we would be better served if Iran acquired nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup>

With more nuclear-armed states, and even one or two states more willing to use them, though, how likely is it that nuclear deterrence and no first use will prevail? Is the sum of all fears—a nuclear apocalypse of the sort Mr. Beaton once wrote about—again in prospect? Getting the answers to these questions, or at least raising them, is this volume's purpose. In it, six experts offer a variety of perspectives sure to catalyze further debate.

In the book's first chapter, Harvey Sapolsky, the former director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Security Studies Program, makes a case that preventing nuclear proliferation, especially with nuclear security guarantees to our closest allies—Japan, South Korea, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—is unnecessary, provocative, and costly. Nuclear deterrence and forensics, he argues, will work; and letting our allies go nuclear would be a safer, cheaper course than trying to prevent others from acquiring nuclear weapons and maintaining U.S. basing forces overseas.

Seth Carus, who served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of the Vice President, is now a resident at the National Defense University's (NDU) Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as a distinguished fellow. He argues that such optimistic views are too academic. Those that serve in government, he notes, essentially ignore such

arguments and with cause. Instead, he observes, senior policymakers worry about the destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the fragility of nuclear deterrence between various states. They are also eager to maintain U.S. power against emerging nuclear states, and to avoid the crisis instabilities further nuclear proliferation would prompt.

John Mueller, the author of *Atomic Obsession*, views these concerns as dangerous alarmism. Rather than arguing that nuclear proliferation is a positive development, Mueller makes the case that so far, nuclear proliferation has been far more benign than predicted and should be viewed as being largely inconsequential. In contrast, promoting nuclear nonproliferation, he argues, has produced war (e.g., Iraq), encouraged extortion (e.g., by North Korea), risked further wars (e.g., Iran), and deprived the world of the full benefits of civilian nuclear power.

This then brings us to former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner Victor Gilinsky's chapter, "Should We Let It All Go?" Gilinsky concedes there is much to like about John Mueller's argument. He spotlights Mueller's questioning of the value of nuclear weapons threats or use, his critique of politicians and analysts who have been alarmist about nuclear terrorism, and his challenging of America's vacuous demands and threats regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Gilinsky, however, insists that in arguing that proliferation hardly matters at all—that up to now its effects have been benign, and that efforts to restrain proliferation have done far more harm than good—Mueller goes too far. The bomb has had a significant impact on history; there certainly have been some close nuclear calls (e.g., the Cuban Missile Crisis). It is also the case that few, if any, of the bomb's possessors have been all that eager to give their weapons up. As for the harm nonproliferation has done, Gilinsky points out that such arguments mistakenly assume America's nonproliferation policies have had real teeth. It certainly is wrong, Gilinsky argues, to believe that nonproliferation was why we invaded Iraq. Gilinsky's conclusion: It would be unwise to relax whatever nuclear controls we still have and smarter still to strengthen them.

However, is the prospect for nuclear use real? Matthew Kroenig and Rebecca Davis Gibbons of

Georgetown University argue that the answer is yes. In their chapter, the authors not only review the history of possible nuclear use during the Cold War, but they also lay out why and how Russia, China, North Korea, Israel, India, Pakistan, and the United States might nonetheless use these weapons first.

This, of course, begs the question as to what the consequences might be. Dr. Matthew Fuhrmann of Texas A&M University spells them out. They include igniting a catalytic war capable of dragging the nuclear superpowers in, creating massive destabilizing refugee crises, prompting international demands for regime change, encouraging the substitution of repressive rule for open forms of self-government, and the erosion of international norms against nuclear proliferation and use.

None of these consequences are inevitable, but they are likely enough to encourage all states to avoid first use if they can. Their further spread might conceivably be beneficial, but the potential regret if their spread makes matters worse is easily large enough to recommend a less playful conclusion.

## ENDNOTES

1. Leonard Beaton, *Must the Bomb Spread?* London, UK: Penguin Books, 1966.
2. Cf. Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Paper, No. 171, London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981; Pierre-Marie Gallois, *Stratégie de l'âge Nucléaire (The Nuclear Age Strategy)*, Paris, FR: Francois-Xavier de Guibert, 1960; Commander P. H. Backus, "Finite Deterrence, Controlled Retaliation," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 85, No. 3, March 1959, pp. 23-29; and David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy 1945-1960," *International Security* 7, No. 4, Spring 1983, pp. 3-71.
3. See Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995; *Idem.*, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994, pp. 66-107.
4. Cf. Mason Willrich and Theodore B. Taylor, *Nuclear Theft: Risks and Safeguards: A Report to the Energy Policy Project of the Ford Foundation*, Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1974; Brian M. Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation,

November 1975; *Idem.*, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008; and Graham T. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2005.

5. See e.g., William J. Perry, "Preparing for the Next Attack," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2001; and "Text of Bush's Speech at West Point," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2002, available from [www.nytimes.com/2002/06/01/international/02PTX-WEBSITE?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/01/international/02PTX-WEBSITE?pagewanted=all).

6. See e.g., Ward Wilson, "The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, November 2008: pp. 421-439; and James E. Doyle, "Why Eliminate Nuclear Weapons?" *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 55, No. 1, February 1, 2013, pp. 7-34.

7. Andrew W. Marshall, "Foreword," in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015, pp. xi-xii.

8. Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, available from [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html?_r=0); Anderson Cooper, "Townhall in Milwaukee with Donald Trump-Transcript," CNN, March 29, 2016, available from <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/160329/acd.02.html>; and Boris Johnson, "Give Iran the bomb: it might make the regime more pliable," *The Telegraph*, October 12, 2006, available from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3633097/Give-Iran-the-bomb-it-might-make-the-regime-more-pliable.html>.

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