

*Re-imagining global nuclear ordering beyond proliferation and deterrence*

Implication for progressive nuclear weapons policy

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The importance of arms control and of the goal of strategic stability in the US nuclear weapons policy toolkit since the 1970s suggest that it is a fundamentally conservative realm of policymaking and that this conservative aspect might be good news as, in the nuclear realm maybe more than anywhere else. However, in nuclear weapons policy as in other areas, decision-making cannot be oriented towards pure *stasis*. This is why the study of the conditions of possibility of progressive nuclear weapons policy is crucial.

In that respect, nuclear weapons policy experts/advisers are decisive for at least two reasons: they most often eliminate a whole set of available policy options ahead of time in the name of their competence and supposed knowledge of the constraints of the policy environment; they also provide the fundamental boundaries of the imaginary of most citizens, who may put pressure on and make demands to policymakers. This is why the most policy relevant element in this paper has do with the role of nuclear weapons experts and analysts rather than policymakers directly. It does so by analyzing the boundaries of acceptable nuclear discourse and to expand them.

Nuclear discourse is most often a repetition of well-established utterances by authoritative figures, relabeling of the same ideas as “rethinking” and rehashing efforts to convince those who are already convinced. In other words, it is highly ritualized and quite averse to transformative conceptual innovation or fruitful debate. Innovation is understood here as going beyond technical innovations in warhead designs or force structures in nuclear-weapon states. The initiative on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, which started in 2013 and connects the effects of nuclear explosions with International Humanitarian Law qualifies as one of the few transformative innovations that gained traction since the end of the Cold War. This surprising lack of innovation has for long coexisted with an absence of fruitful debate.

Non-rhetorical reasons for this situation of bounded innovation are already well documented: the interests at stake are tremendous; experts and policymakers chronically suffer from a confirmation bias. However, those explanations do not account for the innovation that has taken place and its effects. So, studying the rhetorical strategies setting the boundaries of

acceptable innovation in nuclear discourse is at the same time a way to reclaim the debatable, ethical and political nature of nuclear choices by problematizing their justification, and a way of reopening possibilities for progressive nuclear weapons policy.

Self-censorship effects among nuclear weapons policy experts come from the joint use of the notions of deterrence and non-proliferation and the invocation of an expected veto player. The effects of the words “proliferation” and “deterrence” and the assumption that a supposedly important player in nuclear policy will veto proposals for change, create avenues for self-censorship and delegitimize transformative thinking. This is because the utterances including 'proliferation' and 'deterrence' do double work: they want, simultaneously, to describe the world as it is and to have an impact on it. This tension shapes a space in which transformative thinking appears to be either incompetent or dangerous. Furthermore, the invoked existence of an important player inexorably reluctant to change makes critical thinking look futile: it prevents some actors inclined to accept change in principle from actually modifying their practice.

Instead of trying to argue inside the proliferation paradigm or the categories of the discourse of deterrence, voices who intend to bring transformative conceptual innovation have to create a space to speak by challenging first and foremost the certainty of the self-fulfilling or self-denying effect of the prophecies of proliferation and deterrence. Doing so would remove the grounds on which their thinking is *a priori* delegitimized as well as the self-censorship in the name of the expected effects of proliferation and deterrence prophecies.

Therefore, *calling into question the validity of the intended self-fulfilling or self-denying effect of the prophecies of deterrence and non-proliferation* offers a way out of the deadlock and could render one of the current delegitimizing strategies powerless.

*A renewed look at the historical record* is decisive because the confusion between the intended and actual effects of the discourses about proliferation and deterrence comes from a belief that the historical record provides universal evidence for these effects. Historical investigation could restore contingencies against the appeal of a deterministic understanding of history, retrospective denial of the role of luck and neglect of alternative counterfactuals which fuel established certainties about the effects of the discourse about proliferation and deterrence. Particular attention should be paid to cases of near nuclear use the outcome of which was demonstrably caused by luck as they powerfully counter the deterrence prophecy.

Overall, reconsidering *the condition of nuclear vulnerability* appears as a fruitful shift of the conversation which reopens possibilities for transformation. By nuclear vulnerability, I mean that there is no protection against a nuclear strike, whether or not it is intentional. This has been the case at least since nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles can be launched underwater from a submarine which is impossible to detect. As a consequence, destroying the missile before it is launched became impossible and it is well established that existing civil defense programs make promises impossible to keep. Even if the current missile defense project could be made credible – there is no need for it to work; it just needs to be credible –, it is not intended as a complete protection against a nuclear strike, for two reasons. First, it focuses on threats from regional powers only. Second, it is a U.S. system and there is no prospect of sharing it. However, nuclear vulnerability has been overlooked as a condition for security through deterrence, in a context of proliferation. Going back to nuclear vulnerability itself as a problem will force to recognize the role of accidents and luck in nuclear outcomes; it will also reveal that deterrence and non-proliferation are specific political responses to a situation, which are neither perfect nor inevitable. It will finally be compatible with a reconsideration of “nuclear winter”, one of the few major intellectual innovations which did not emerge under “proliferation” or “deterrence”, came from outsiders and has had an impact.

The problem of the expected veto player in nuclear policy is probably the best indicator of what is at stake with the introduction of transformative thinking in the conversation about nuclear weapons. It reminds us that the strategies for change outlined above will not suffice to change practices. Institutional and more structural changes would be required. The suggested approach might only result in diminishing confidence in common discursive practices and justifications for conservative policies.

This apparently minimal effect would actually be decisive though, in two ways: it would confront the claims for security through deterrence and non-proliferation to the recognition of nuclear vulnerability; if policymakers versed into nuclear weapons engaged in such an exercise, encouraged their advisers to do so, or potential advisers took the initiative of so-doing, they would reassert their role and responsibility in this realm and would either make one step towards the realization of a progressive nuclear weapons policy or would recognize that they aim for a conservative approach which is not more exempt of adverse effects than its progressive counterpart.