

Nuclear Weapons Across Time : Their Significance and Challenge

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Witnesses of the unprecedented catastrophic devastation caused by American atomic bombs in August 1945 to two of Japan's cities called nuclear weapons the "absolute weapon."¹ The military supremacy the United States gained over others by virtue of developing these absolute weapons diminished substantially through the development and deployment of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the 50 odd-year history of the "nuclear age" shows that nuclear weapons have brought about changes in the military policies of nuclear powers — changes worthy of the name "absolute weapon." Military strategy after the creation of nuclear weapons has increased the salience of war deterrence, adding a new dimension to the traditional strategic purpose of war winning. In particular, nations that have deployed nuclear weapons capable of mutually crippling their nuclear adversaries equate deterrent strategy with military strategy.

As the nuclear age advances however, the international community gradually becomes aware of the inherent contradiction that the destructive power of nuclear weapons is too ruinous to be of practical use. Put another way, because nuclear weapons are so overwhelmingly successful in destructive power and indiscriminate in killing, their use has become unjustifiable on ethical and political grounds. As a consequence, nuclear powers have reconfirmed the significance of conventional weapons and pursued strengthening the traditional weapons to make up for the failings of nuclear weapons as "an unusable weapon." Based on this premise, this paper explores the desirable role and mission of nuclear weapons by reviewing their significance and limitations.

Nuclear Weapons and Prevention of War

Cold War history plainly shows that, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were confrontational,

¹ Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).

but did not go to war with one another. The biggest reason why this cold peace reigned for such a long period is found in the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union deployed sizable nuclear weapons. As both countries developed and deployed hard-to-defend ballistic missiles, the emphasis of their military strategy became deterrence based on nuclear retaliation. Since nuclear deterrence required the building of a credible retaliatory capability however, these countries came under pressure to increase the number of their nuclear warheads and diversify delivery vehicles according to, or rather in anticipation of, increases in counterforce capabilities of the other country. The result was an intensified face-off between the two countries and they remained pitted against each other with huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Moreover, since nuclear deterrence requires the display of plausible signs reminding rival countries of the threat of nuclear retaliation, the United States and the Soviet Union constantly maintain their nuclear weapons on high alert status.

For all the huge number of nuclear weapons and the “minutes-notice” launch posture they maintained, the United States and the Soviet Union never used nuclear weapons or went to war directly with conventional weapons. This is partly attributable to various nuclear arms control measures designed to maintain crisis stability. The most important reason for this, however, can be found in the fear of nuclear war shared by the two countries. Leaders in the United States and the Soviet Union pursued cautious policies designed to avert war, aware that a conventional war between the two countries could escalate to uncontrollable nuclear exchanges that would end with mutual annihilation. While nuclear weapons were not a cause of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, nuclear arsenals helped gradually entrench and protract the Cold War.

Taking a different stance on nuclear weapons, some take the view that the existence of nuclear weapons was only a factor helping to prevent war between the United States and the Soviet Union. They emphasize the horrible memories of World War II and the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union were basically status quo powers as the main reasons why war was averted between them.² To be sure the experience of World War II that brought about

² For instance, see John Mueller, “The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 1988).

tremendous human casualties and material destruction was one factor in helping avert war between the two countries. Nevertheless, judging from American and Soviet handling of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 and the U.S.-Soviet joint declaration in November 1985,³ the potential of nuclear weapons to produce devastation extremely quickly, played the principal role in preventing a U.S.-Soviet war. The conclusion from the foregoing is that nuclear weapons can effectively deter the outbreak of war, including conventional wars, among nuclear powers if they have certain and reliable retaliatory capabilities.

In addition, it has become apparent that nuclear weapons have had a considerable impact on the process of transforming the international political structure. In the past, large-scale wars among great powers played a principal role in bringing about big changes in the international political structure. However, as may be gathered from the process of change in the international political order of Europe toward the end of the Cold War, including the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons can be viewed as an important factor in bringing about such changes peacefully. It is true that Mikhail Gorbachev, the then president of the Soviet Union, had eagerly sought to resolve the East-West conflict and explore the possibility of building a cooperative relationship between the two camps. But there can be little doubt that one reason why President Gorbachev accepted the reunification of the two Germanys and tolerated the scramble among East European countries — countries the Soviet leaders had long characterized as a buffer between the East and Western camps — to a democratic system of government was his belief that the fail-safe nuclear retaliatory capability of the Soviet Union would ultimately ensure the security of his country. Thus it may be thought that nuclear weapons, if equipped with a reliable retaliatory capability, function not only to prevent war, but also to put an end to upheaval peacefully when the international order degenerates into such upheaval.

Nuclear deterrence to non-nuclear powers however, has not been as effective as it has been against nuclear powers. There are a several cases where a non-nuclear power employed armed force against a nuclear power. Among these we should include non-nuclear China's attack on UN forces led by the

³ In the joint statement, Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev affirmed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

nuclear-armed United States in the 1950-53 Korean War, the Vietnam War, the fourth Middle East War of 1973,⁴ the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, the Falklands War of 1982 and the armed resistance of Afghanistan against invading forces from the Soviet Union. One factor common to them all is that non-nuclear states took advantage of the drawback of nuclear weapons, which is that they cannot be used easily because of their awesome killing and destructive power. Although the use of nuclear weapons was considered in some of these wars, the nuclear powers gave up the idea. This suggests that the gravity of moral and political consequences accompanying the use of nuclear weapons outweighed the military advantage of using them. In other words, nuclear weapons have shown inherent limitations in preventing war between nuclear powers and non-nuclear countries.

Some Third World countries have opted to possess nuclear weapons not just for security reasons but as a means to enhance their international standing, to ensure their regional hegemonic status, and to deter military intervention in their regional affairs by traditional nuclear powers. But their nuclear weapons could become a factor that increases the danger of causing a war rather than preventing it. Due to their financial and technological limitations, it seems to be difficult for Third World countries to attain credible deterrence, namely to deploy nuclear capability with sufficient survivability. In consequence, nuclear weapons held by these countries would merely enhance dramatically their military superiority over neighboring countries and their pre-emptive attack capability, destabilizing the strategic relationship vis-à-vis neighboring countries. And in times of a severe political crisis, the possessor is likely to rush to use them and/or the neighboring countries may be tempted to launch a pre-emptive attack, simply because those nuclear weapons are vulnerable. Indeed, it must be said that nuclear capabilities not firmly backed by secure retaliatory capabilities may lead to a dangerous “use them or lose them” condition, thus increasing the risk of war.

If nuclear weapons, which have not been used for more than half a century,

⁴ The Suez crisis, erupted in October 1956, turned out to be the genesis of Israel’s nuclear weapons program. It is believed that Israel attained a capability to manufacture nuclear weapons by some time in the late 1960s. See “Israel’s Nuclear Weapons Program,” (<http://www.enviroweb.org/enviroissues/nuketesting/hew/Israel/Isrhist.html>) (November 20, 1998).

come to be used even on a limited scale by an emerging nuclear power, considerable change could occur in the international community's perception of nuclear weapons. In other words, depending on the scale of damage done by employing nuclear weapons, a widely shared sense of taboo against the use of nuclear weapons that has been built gradually since Hiroshima and Nagasaki could grow stronger. Conversely, it is also conceivable that the use of nuclear weapons could erode the moral and political threshold against the use of nuclear weapons. Although it is uncertain which way the perception of nuclear weapons will shift, if any emerging nuclear power achieves its intended political purpose by the use of its nuclear weapons, the foundations of the nuclear non-proliferation regime will be shaken. In this sense, the use of nuclear weapons by emerging nuclear powers invites the danger of greatly disturbing the international order.

A similar danger could occur from the pursuit of "usable" nuclear weapons or the "conventionalization" of nuclear weapons by some declared nuclear powers. During the Cold War, the two superpowers, the United States in particular, sought to miniaturize nuclear weapons or minimize their yield to enhance their usability, mainly with the aim of strengthening deterrence. Yet, given the possibility that nuclear exchange between the two countries would result in mutually devastating destruction, it was almost impossible for the United States and the Soviet Union to make up their minds to use nuclear weapons. No matter how strenuously they pursued usable nuclear weapons, the U.S. and the Soviet Union could not dare to decide the use of nuclear weapons as long as they were not confident that they could control nuclear use and subsequent escalation of nuclear exchanges. Recently, however, the U.S. has emphasized the possibility of nuclear attack against targets that do not entail the danger of a nuclear escalation. Chief among these are "rogue" states that possess a limited number of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), such as nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. As is the case with emerging nuclear powers that mentioned earlier, if an intended political objective can be achieved by the use of nuclear weapons against rogue states, the nuclear non-proliferation regime could be put in jeopardy.

Unlike the bipolar rivalry during the Cold War, if a situation develops in the future where three or four nuclear powers confront each other, nuclear weapons'

role of maintaining international order will be called into question. Let us suppose that China and India, in addition to the United States and Russia, emerge as great nuclear powers armed with 1,000 to 2,000 deployed nuclear warheads, and the four powers become rivals in each other's pursuit of national interests. If, probability aside, such a situation comes to pass, these four nuclear powers will conceivably be pressed to build retaliatory capability with a plural number of potential enemies in mind. Each will be pressed to further strengthen its nuclear capability. As each country has to take into account the strengthening of its primary and secondary potential enemies' nuclear capability, it would be far more difficult to achieve arms race stability among the four nuclear powers than under the bipolar nuclear-power regime. Furthermore, if the counterforce capability of any of the four countries grows visibly stronger than the others, it would be extremely difficult to achieve crisis stability among the four nuclear powers. In short, if three or four nuclear powers come to rival one another, it would be very difficult to attain strategic stability among those countries and build a retaliatory capability strong enough to ensure the security of each country.

As seen in the foregoing, nuclear weapons have positive and negative affects on the prevention of war and maintenance of international security order, depending largely on whether the possessor has a reliable retaliatory capability or not. It follows, therefore, that peace and stability among nuclear powers can be maintained by taking advantage of the war-preventing effect of nuclear weapons backed by credible retaliatory capabilities. This idea is persuasive only when a nuclear power has attained mutual deterrent relationships vis-à-vis potential nuclear adversaries and the effectiveness of its retaliatory capability does not deteriorate. However, it is not easy to maintain a credible retaliatory capability continuously. As the continual build-up of nuclear capability pursued by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War years demonstrates, it is difficult to determine the degree of a retaliatory capability sufficient to constitute a credible deterrence. Moreover, the retaliatory capability of a nuclear power tends constantly to be reduced by the strengthening of the counterforce capability of its adversaries. If a nuclear power tries to maintain its retaliatory capability under such circumstances, it has no choice but to strengthen its nuclear capability by diversifying its delivery vehicles, in

addition to ensuring the survivability of its nuclear force. As a result, it has to deploy a large number of nuclear weapons. If such a situation takes place, nuclear powers, contrary to their initial expectations, are forced to face the danger of nullifying the nuclear weapons' effect of preventing war and maintaining international order. This is because once states deploy a weapon, including nuclear weapons, they have to live with the danger of the weapons being used, and the danger would multiply in proportion to the increase in the number of deployed weapons. In short, nuclear weapons are expected to play, under certain conditions, a role that other kinds of weapons cannot — prevention of war. But it is not easy to make the most of this attribute.

Tougher Restrictions on the Use of Nuclear Weapons

As is obvious from the above, nuclear weapons are expected to contribute to the prevention of war and the maintenance of the international order under certain conditions. However, when these conditions are not met the danger of such usefulness being canceled out may arise. And if these conditions were difficult to meet, it would come as no surprise if calls for the abolition of nuclear weapons were mounted. Yet, there is no prospect of complete disarmament of nuclear weapons. Man has acquired the knowledge and technology of building nuclear weapons and cannot eradicate them—nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented. What is more, eliminating nuclear weapons and leaving international politics based largely on balances of power could have the paradoxical effect of increasing international instability and the likelihood of conflict.⁵

Even if the knowledge and technology for the production of nuclear weapons continues to exist, nuclear weapons may be abolished if people no longer consider them significant as a weapon. History shows that when a new weapon is developed, its military usefulness diminishes by (1) imitation and spread, (2) the development of countermeasures, (3) the emergence/development

⁵ For a similar view, see for instance, Albert Carnesale et al., *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 190; John J. Mearsheimer, "Disorder Restored," Graham Allison & Gregory F. Treverton, eds., *Rethinking America's Security: Beyond Cold War to New World Order* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 229; and Marc Trachtenberg, "The Past and Future of Arms Control," *Daedalus*, Vol. 120, No. 1 (Winter 1991), p. 205.

of a weapon or military strategy designed to circumvent its drawback, or simply by (4) the development of a new weapon that can outdo such a weapon.⁶ A review of the existence of nuclear weapons in light of these points suggests the following. When viewed from the standpoint of imitation and spread of nuclear weapons, it is true that the military significance of a newly invented weapon decreases in accordance with the spread of such a weapon. However, proliferation of a weapon increases in the danger of actually employing the weapon. In the case of nuclear weapons, attaining mutual deterrent relationships could lower the danger of use, but as already discussed it is not easy to build such relationships. Fortunately, under the assumption that the spread of nuclear weapons increase in the danger of nuclear use, the international community has concluded the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has made various efforts to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are too dangerous to allow them to spread in the hope of reducing their military significance.

When viewed from the standpoint of countermeasures, while the most effective way is to establish mutually deterrent relationships, such an option is hard attain. For most countries no countermeasure is available, except to possess the capability of making pre-emptive, counterforce attacks on nuclear forces or the ability to intercept nuclear delivery vehicles. As to the former option, it is not always effective against hardened or mobile nuclear forces. As regards the latter, given the attribute of nuclear weapons, namely, unprecedented destructive power, states must have a highly sophisticated interception capability. It is close to impossible, however, to attain an airtight air-defense capability, and missile-defense capabilities are in their infancy. Compared with the preceding two cases, circumventing the drawback of nuclear weapons (that their destructive and killing power is too devastating to be of any practical use), coupled with nuclear powers' self-imposed restraints, has been successful to a certain degree. With respect to finding a new weapon that can outdo nuclear weapons, there seems to be no weapon that could supersede nuclear weapons and ultimately ensure the security of states. Nuclear weapons, therefore, retain a unique military and political merit that other weapons cannot provide.

⁶ Edward N. Luttwak, "An Emerging Postnuclear Era?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 1988), p. 5.

Hopes are being raised that high-tech conventional forces, developed by rapid advancement of information and computer technologies, may make nuclear weapons outdated. In fact, inspired by the remarkable performance delivered by high-tech conventional weapons during the Gulf War, there has emerged a view in the United States that American deterrence strategy should rely more on high-tech conventional weapons rather than on nuclear weapons, in the context of regional conflict in particular.⁷ To be sure, by virtue of improved accuracy and discriminating capability, today's high-tech conventional weapons have come to acquire the capability of destroying hardened military targets and command and control headquarters to a certain extent. Up to then, only nuclear weapons had such capability. Furthermore, the argument goes, in terms of the retaliatory threat credibility of high-tech conventional weapons are superior to nuclear weapons. As nuclear retaliation causes damage too immense for human life and property, it is apt to cause retaliatory damage disproportionate to punishment normally justifiable in the case of a conventional armed conflict. This is what makes it difficult for nuclear powers to decide to carry out nuclear retaliation. States planning use of armed force know this very well, in view of the fact that non-nuclear weapon states often used armed force against nuclear weapon states. Moreover, historically, many of the countries that carried out armed invasion of their neighboring countries are totalitarian states as illustrated by North Korea and Iraq. As is often the case with totalitarian states, however, the policies of their governments do not reflect the will of their people. This notwithstanding, deterrence backed by threats of nuclear retaliation often requires sacrifices on the part of these innocent people. By contrast, high-tech conventional weapons can be targeted discriminatingly and with minimum collateral damage. Therefore the use of such weapons causes relatively few problems and the retaliatory threat backed by such high-tech conventional weapons is highly credible.

Nevertheless, deterrence backed by high-tech conventional force has

⁷ William J. Perry, "Desert Storm and Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 10 (Fall 1991), p. 66. Also see Paul H. Nitze, "Is It Time to Junk Our Nukes?" *The Washington Post*, January 16, 1994 (quoted in Charles T. Allan, "Extended Conventional Deterrence: In from the Cold and Out of the Nuclear Fire?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1994)).

limitations that could cancel out its strength. First, there is the possibility that high-tech conventional weapons could lose the very credibility that is the source of their deterrence. For all their sophistication, their characters as a tool of conventional force dose not change. Therefore, high-tech conventional weapons cannot completely overcome their shortcoming that the course and result of conventional war is inherently unpredictable and, therefore, the deterrence they pose may, depending on the situation, risk being ineffectual. In addition, while the destructive and killing power of nuclear weapons is universally recognized, it is difficult to convince adversaries of the destructive power of high-tech conventional weapons. Although the effectiveness of high-tech conventional weapons as military strength is based on their high accuracy and discriminating capability, their discriminating capability depends largely on the capability of gathering correct military intelligence. However, as it is not easy for countries to know the degree and extent of other countries' intelligence capability, there remains a danger that the destructive power of high-tech conventional weapons may not be adequately appreciated.

Second, damage caused by conventional weapons tends to be underestimated. Each state has its own "strategic culture" and its own view on military strength, and thus may not fear the destructive power of high-tech conventional weapons as much as the possessor hopes. Particularly, the effectiveness of "intra-war deterrence," or the capability to check a military escalation, remains doubtful. For instance, when an enemy country tries to uses biological or chemical weapons after it is attacked with high-tech conventional weapons, it is not easy to deter the enemy country from using such weapons with the additional threat of high-tech conventional weapons. In other words, unlike nuclear retaliation, conventional retaliation that has a less decisive impact does not give substantial appeal to the provoker, so that it is not easy to build highly credible deterrence. To quote Colin S. Gray, "[n]uclear weapons may compensate for Clausewitzian friction,"⁸ but high-tech conventional weapons may not. Although high-tech conventional weapons thus have several noteworthy advantages, it is hard to say that they can take the place of nuclear

⁸ Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Weapons and the Revolution in Military Affairs," T.V. Paul et al., ed., *The Absolute Weapon Revisited: Nuclear Arms and the Emerging International Order* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 117.

weapons when viewed from the standpoint of deterrence.

The strengthening of high-tech conventional force or so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA) being pursued by some countries could conversely augment the significance and the role of nuclear weapons and accelerate proliferation. This is because, when viewed from the perspectives of states that could not keep up technically and financially with the development of high-tech weapons or RMA, it is highly likely that these states may come to the conclusion that there is no means available to them to counter high-tech conventional weapons or RMA except with the development of weapons of mass destruction.

If the significance of nuclear weapons continues to survive as the foregoing suggests, the remaining choice is to find a way to live with them. Put simply, we have to build an international security environment that enables us to narrow the role of nuclear weapons as much as possible to the following two missions: (1) a last-resort means to ensure the survival of a state and (2) deterrence of the use of nuclear weapons by other nuclear powers. As nuclear weapons have not been used for more than half a century, one may conclude that their role has already been narrowed down to these two purposes. However, if the declaratory policies of the five nuclear-weapon states with respect to their use are any guide, most of them seem to plan to use nuclear weapons for contingencies less dire than the above two.

As regards the legal appropriateness of defining nuclear weapons as the ultimate means of ensuring state's security, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has declared its view in an advisory opinion released in July 1996 on the question concerning the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons. In that advisory opinion, the ICJ concluded that while "... the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.... the Court cannot conclude definitely whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake...."⁹ As far as one can gather from this advisory opinion, even if a state that is at the crossroads of its

⁹ International Court of Justice, Case Summaries, "Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons," Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996. (<http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/idocuments/isummaries/iunanaummary960708.htm>) (November 2, 2001).

survival uses nuclear weapons to rescue itself from such dire straits, one cannot claim such action as illegal under current international law. Of course, advisory opinions of the ICJ are not legally binding, but one cannot deny the moral and political weight that the opinion of the world court of justice carries.

Narrowing down the role of nuclear weapons to deterring the use of nuclear weapons by other nuclear powers is synonymous with building a "no-first use" of nuclear weapons regime. If the pledge of no-first use can be institutionalized, not only will it narrow the role of nuclear weapons to deterring solely the use of nuclear weapons by other nuclear powers but it will also raise the possibility of providing momentum for nuclear arms reduction and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. This is because if the only *raison d'être* of nuclear weapons were to deter the use of other nuclear weapons by other states, it would be logical to conclude that even if all nuclear powers uniformly reduce and then completely scrap their nuclear weapons, they will lose nothing. Moreover, if the five nuclear weapon states under the NPT agree to institutionalize the no-first use regime, non-nuclear powers, in principle, would, as a secondary effect of such a regime, not have to fear nuclear threats or attack. The political and security inequality between nuclear and non-nuclear powers — the largest pending issue under the NPT regime — would be reduced, and the stability and reliability of the NPT regime definitely would be enhanced. In this way, the institutionalization of no-first use of nuclear weapons would go a long way toward nuclear arms reduction and enhancing the stability and credibility of the NPT regime.

Even if the NPT nuclear powers should succeed in establishing a legally binding nuclear no-first use regime, there seems to be no way of verifying the performance or promise of nuclear no-first use. Accordingly, the significance of nuclear no-first use depends on whether and to what extent the international community can remove causes provoking the first use of nuclear weapons. As a start, efforts should be made to abolish biological and chemical weapons thoroughly. This should be done through, among other means, early conclusion of the verification mechanisms for the Biological Weapons Convention and establishing a "no-first use of WMD" regime as a transitional measure. In addition, the international community must make serious efforts to maintain the balance of conventional forces in each region or among rival countries.

Especially in the Middle East and South Asia where *de facto* nuclear powers are located and armed conflicts occur repeatedly, the aforementioned actions and confidence building measures should be pursued even more vigorously than in other regions.

To limit the significance and the role of nuclear weapons, one should not overlook the necessity to maintain and strengthen the NPT, which stipulates both the prevention of proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear arms reduction. This is because the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the build-up of nuclear forces mean an increase in the significance and the role of nuclear weapons. Today, the NPT is faced with several problems that, if left unattended, would threaten the reliability and the stability of the regime/treaty. The issue with the highest priority of them all is nuclear arms reduction of the NPT-permitted nuclear-weapon states, the U.S. and Russia in particular. As noted earlier, there are several factors — security concerns, regional hegemony, and the acquisition of diplomatic bargaining chips — that prompt non-nuclear weapon states to embark on developing and possessing nuclear weapons. Thus nuclear disarmament on the part of the United States and Russia and other NPT nuclear-weapon states will not necessarily dissuade non-nuclear weapon states from developing nuclear weapons. However, it is as well true that non-nuclear weapon states have accepted the ban on the development and the possession of nuclear weapons on the assumption that nuclear weapon states will carry out nuclear arms reduction. Therefore, if NPT nuclear powers overplay the significance of nuclear weapons or neglect to reduce their nuclear arsenal, the reliability and stability of the NPT will suffer.

The obligation to reduce nuclear arms prescribed in Article 6 of the NPT rests primarily with the five nuclear-weapon states. Although the NPT nuclear-weapon states have accepted complete nuclear disarmament as the ultimate goal, so far they as a whole have not been exactly forthcoming in taking bold steps to reduce their nuclear arsenals. The ICJ offered in its advisory opinion an interpretation of Article 6 of the NPT as imposing on the nuclear weapon states not just general and theoretical obligations, but specific, concrete steps to reduce nuclear weapons.¹⁰ At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the five nuclear

¹⁰ Ibid.

weapon states, at the strong request of non-nuclear states, committed to “an unequivocal undertaking ... to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals...”¹¹ Thus the interpretation of the obligations to reduce nuclear weapons as defined in Article 6 of the NPT has become more specific and direct than that made by nuclear weapon states so far. It is necessary therefore for non-nuclear weapon states to watch the attitude they take in coming years on matters related to the reduction of nuclear weapons. At the same time, non-nuclear weapon states cannot afford to remain passive onlookers or merely reproach nuclear-weapon states for non-performance of their treaty obligations. This is because to minimize the significance and the role of nuclear weapons, or to create a security environment conducive to nuclear arms reduction, they too have to grapple with many agenda such as the abolition of biological and chemical weapons and the maintenance of a stable balance of conventional force.

Concluding Remarks

An era called the Cold War that was clouded by nuclear confrontation has passed. This does not mean that the understanding (or perception) of the necessity of nuclear weapons to ensure security of states has disappeared. To be sure, the military utility of nuclear weapons increasingly has been called into question because of nuclear weapons’ inherent self-contradiction that their destructive and killing power is too devastating to be of any practical use. Meanwhile, in the United States, which had its self-confidence boosted by the performance of its high-tech conventional weapons in the Gulf War and the Kosovo conflict, there are people who consider nuclear weapons as a weapon for states that lack technological and economic resources. However, the view that nuclear weapons and deterrence backed by them are the ultimate instrument of security is in common currency and has a strong following. This is vividly illustrated by the fact that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty has not taken effect even though it has been more than five years since it was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Nuclear weapons, however, are detestable weapons in that they, once used,

¹¹ Arms Control Association, “2000 NPT Review Conference Final Document,” *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (June 2000), p. 31.

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indiscriminately annihilate vast numbers of people: combatants and non-combatants, men and women of all ages. And when a large number of nuclear weapons are used, they will no doubt inflict catastrophic destruction not only on warring countries but also on neighboring ones. Viewed in this light, nuclear weapons are “evil.” Even if nuclear weapons are necessary to ensure security, efforts should be made to reduce the dependence on them as long as they are evil. The international community must reduce the danger of using nuclear weapons and relegate them to the backstage of international politics.

(The views expressed in this essay are the author’s own.)